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ICAS 8

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ICAS 8 and the Rise of Asia

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The rise of Asia has become a defining feature of the 21st century. The impact of Asia comes in two regards, material and epistemological. From the outset, the growing economic affluence and political influence of Asia is changing the historical landscape of our age. This is most observable with the increasing share of Asian markets in the world economy, the development

of a multi-polar international order, and the increasing pressure on global environment and resources. Equally far-reaching is the theoretical significance of Asia. The current development of Asia is challenging many of our conventional understandings about political and economic life. Our familiar ideas about the state and market, rule and governance, nation and identity, network and hierarchy, and so on have shown major limitations in capturing the complexity and hybridity of the Asian cases. There is a need to refine our conceptual lexicons in order to grapple with the idea of Asia.

The International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS) constitutes a major forum for such epistemological adventure. It is a premier gathering of scholars of Asian Studies around the world. Since 1998, ICAS has taken place in different parts of the world, including Leiden, Berlin, Singapore, Shanghai, Kuala

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ESTUDOS ASIÁTICOS

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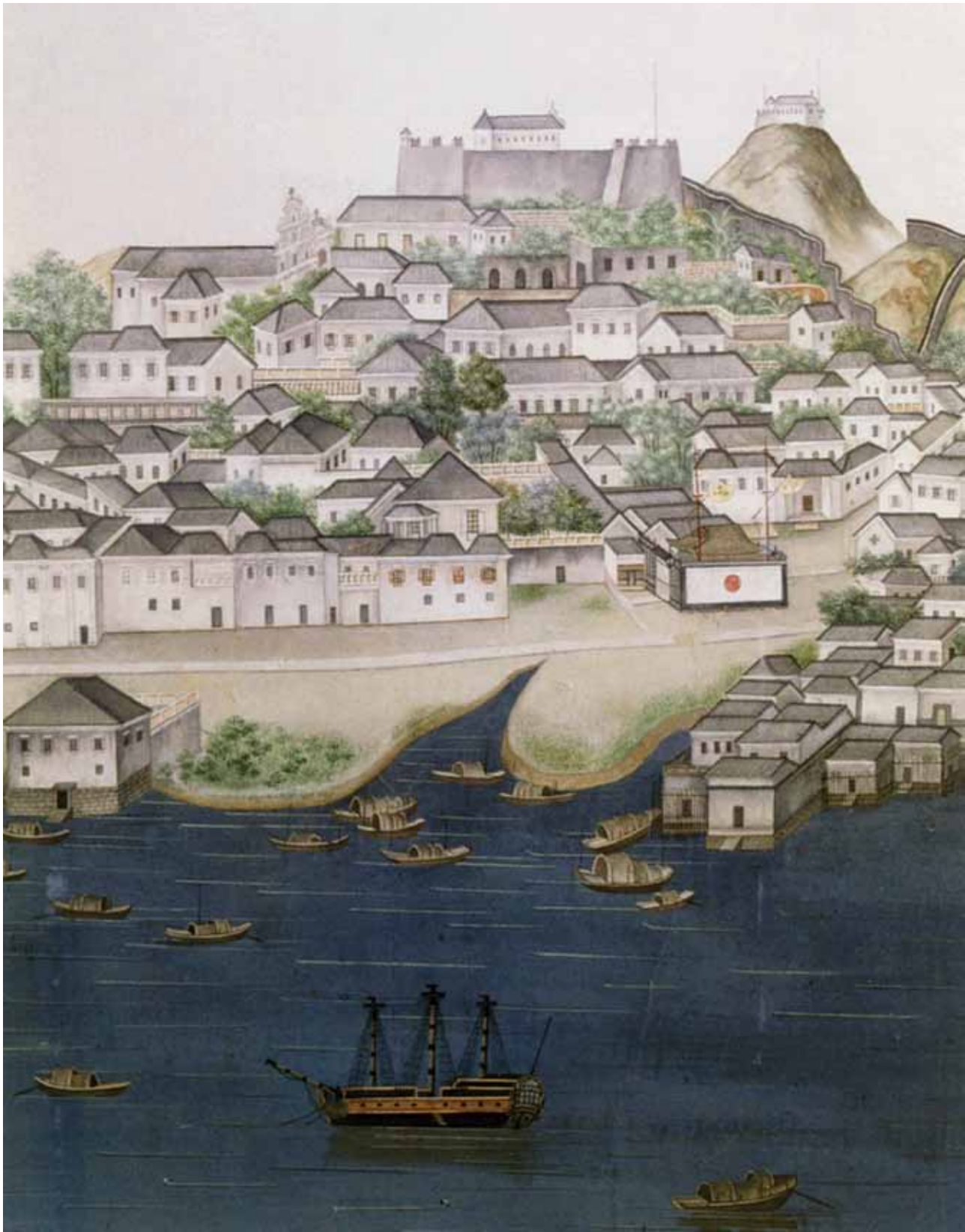


Lumpur, Daejeon, and Hawaii. Its eighth convention (ICAS 8) was held in Macao in June 2013. Unlike other conferences of Asian Studies where the majority of participants come from the United States and Europe, ICAS is a unique platform with the most diversified cross-continental representation and with the majority of participants coming from Asian countries. New ideas and research findings are unchanged not only among researchers who study Asia but also among scholars who live in Asia. This is important because so far the conceptual lexicons and theoretical tools used in social sciences and humanities have derived almost exclusively from the West. Although these theories and methods have been applied throughout the world with considerable success, their limitations are increasingly apparent, especially in a place like Asia with its long indigenous traditions of organising social relations, its own norms about power and order, and its legacies of implementing rule. As Asian countries emerge to become prominent players in the world, there comes a point when we recognise that the region has something

to offer in the development of social knowledge. In this regard, ICAS plays an instrumental role in this process.

In brief, taking Asia seriously means more than addressing its growing economic and political influence. It also requires us to reconsider the theoretical significance of Asia. The rapid transformation that has taken place in many Asian countries during the last few decades represents not only a radical experimentation with grand reform in human history but also a living laboratory in which social scientists of nearly all disciplines can observe social change and human action from different theoretical perspectives. In this process, even a casual observer will not fail to notice the limitations in our current understanding of Asia. Such limitations, on the one hand, come from the inadequacy of our existing conceptual vocabularies in describing institutional forms and social practices which deviate from Western categories. Examples abound: the blurred boundary between the public and private domains; the overlapping positions and multiple roles assumed by ruling parties, government bureaucrats, and business conglomerates; the ambivalent structures of ownership in enterprises; and the fluid relationship between institutional linkage and personal network. On the other hand, our existing theoretical perspectives also have problems in accounting for numerous paradoxes in Asian politics and societies. For instance, everyday political life in many countries is tightly controlled and yet the electoral regime is open and competitive; nationalism as a unifying ideology runs high in many countries despite the prevalence of strong parochialism and separatism; and market liberalisation has been undertaken with great determination amidst the establishment and strengthening of state monopolies.

These deviations and paradoxes have excited and inspired researchers of different disciplines: testimony to this is in the overwhelming enthusiasm for the call for papers in ICAS 8. The Asian case provides an ideal breeding ground to refine existing theories and to develop new ones. In particular, the time-space compression experienced by countries such as China, India, South Korea, Vietnam, and now Burma, in their radical reforms during the last decades offers a unique opportunity to study some of the most important issues of our time. These include questions of institutional change, social transformation, market reform, ethnic conflict, environmental hazard, national security, urbanisation, migration, political control and



Chinese artist, late 18th century, Macao: a panoramic view of the Inner Harbour.



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ASIAN STUDIES



resistance, social marginalisation, inequality, etc., to name a few. The reform process has been plagued with problems and impasse while at the same time filled with innovative solutions and unexpected consequences.

Many of these questions have been taken up at the panel discussions during ICAS 8. The mega event took place in Macao on 24-27 June 2013. It was co-hosted by the University of Macau and the Macao Foundation. The rich cultural heritage and the strong historical legacies connecting East and West made



Macao an ideal place to host ICAS 8. Macao was the first as well as the last European colony in China. The interaction between the Chinese and Portuguese traditions for more than four centuries has left Macao with a unique blend of cultural diversity, modernity, and cosmopolitanism. Altogether more than 1200 participants from 56 countries and 600 higher institutes of learning took part in the event. The importance of this event to Macao is manifold. First, it brought fresh knowledge and perspectives to Macao through the exchange with researchers in such areas as urban development, migration, and cultural heritage. Second, it underlined the emergence of Macao as a regional hub, by showcasing to the international academic community the relevance of Macao in knowledge creation and dissemination. Third, it helped propagate the cultural richness, economic diversity, and social vibrancy of Macao to the rest of the world.

What was more important was the exchange of new ideas and up-to-date research findings during the panel discussions. More than 250 thematically organised panels took place during ICAS 8. They clustered around such themes as culture and heritage, globalisation and transnationalism, migration and connectivity, regionalism and urban development, and social and economic transformation. They were attended not only by academics but also by government officials, museum curators, NGO activists, journalists, business leaders, and members of the general public. It was a rare opportunity during which scholars and practitioners across different continents and regions gathered together to explore local and global problems.

This special issue represents a small selection of papers presented during ICAS 8. It serves as a testimony to the scholarship generated during the conference. The majority of the papers will find their publications in journals, edited volumes, and book monographs. Wherever they are going to be published, they constitute part of the epistemological project invigorated by the rise of Asia.

Such ideational kindling will be no less provoking than the emergence of an economically powerful Asia. After all, the global order is not only shaped by the rise and decline of material powers but also by the way



Planisphere by Lopo Homem, 1554 (Istituto e Museo di Storia della Scienza, Florence).

we perceive and theorise our political and economic existence. This will be a key challenge for the next generational of scholars in the new epoch. While scholars working in many areas have been searching for a new way forward, it is anything but straightforward. One of the major problems is the limitation set by our own analytical language. We need to be able to communicate and exchange our ideas. At the moment we use English as our common analytical language. The problem is that even the most basic terms such as society, rights, citizen, authority, etc. are endowed with layers of meaning deriving from European histories. When we use them to analyse other societies we inevitably import the historical traits hidden behind those terms. Avoiding this trap is tricky, because if we abandon terms like power, community, enterprise, and so on in our discussion, we will end up with a conceptual void.

This is certainly not an obstacle that can be easily overcome. That is why continuous dialogue between Asia scholars is indispensable. And this underlines the role of ICAS in such dialogues. By hosting ICAS 8

Macao contributed to building new knowledge about Asia and the global order. Over time Asia should be able to develop its own social theories, methodologies, and concepts applicable not just to Asia, but also in analysing the West. In doing so we will have a more nuanced perception of the world, one which is more historically and culturally sensitive. It will also be a more pluralistic and less hegemonic understanding of humanity. ^{RC}

