

THE FOUNDING OF NZASIA

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University teachers in the Asian field were few and far apart in the New Zealand in the late 1960s. Though the country was increasingly engaged with Asia, its focus was largely on Southeast Asia, where long-standing military connexions were amplified by the educational connexions built up by the Colombo Plan and the arrival of private overseas students, particularly Malaysian Chinese. New Zealand did not recognise the People's Republic of China, nor had Japan yet become a key trading partner. There was, however, a sense that New Zealand needed to know about Asia, and to that the presence of overseas students contributed. So also did the recognition that, as Britain sought to enter the Common Market, New Zealand's economic and political position in the world was likely to undergo a fundamental change.

The universities – then six in number, Lincoln still being a College, though its principal was a member of the Vice-Chancellors' Committee – were in the vanguard so far as perceiving the need to study Asia was concerned, and trying to meet it. Even there, of course, it was a minority interest, competing in more than one sense with non-Asian emphases established in most relevant disciplines. If the staff were few, they therefore tended to evangelise.

That they could form an association to advance the cause – with the government, source of funding, and the community, source of students – did not occur to them, however, until they were prompted by an Australian

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initiative. Then they had to consider whether to become part of an Australasian association – for which there were many precedents, including the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science [ANZAAS] – or to form one of their own. There were arguments both ways. The decision to go ahead with the second alternative partly arose from the difficulties the Australians faced in following up their initiative within their own country. Those led to delay. In the interim the New Zealanders realised some of the problems they would face in approaching their government, if part of an Australasian association. They also realised that if, as seemed likely, the association the Australians proposed was to be federal, they would have difficulty in assimilating their multi-centred activity to a system where state capital and university life were then more or less identified.

Even apart from trans-Tasman jealousies, there were real issues to be faced, and they had to be set off against the limited resources available in New Zealand, even if all the New Zealand Asianists came together. In the event they decided to set up a separate association, hoping, however, to work with the Australian association once it was set up. Over the subsequent years the cooperation of the two bodies has remained largely informal and perhaps, even given the differing interests and circumstances of the two countries, insufficient. Size and resources have certainly remained an issue for NZASIA.

The Australian Initiative

Professor A.L. Basham of the Department of Asian Civilizations at the Australian National University (ANU) wrote to Dr Majed Khan of the History Department at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) on 30 October 1970. A meeting of scholars and members of the general public had decided to form the Asian Society of Canberra, and an interim committee had been instructed to get in touch with the Oriental Society of Australia, based in Sydney, ‘with a view to amalgamation on suitable terms.’ Its president, A.R. Davis, also signed the letter. It seemed possible, it continued, that the Oriental Society would amend its constitution so as to permit ‘the formation of autonomous chapters in the various cities of Australia (and perhaps also New Zealand, Samoa, Papua-New Guinea etc.), governed by a national council and an Annual General Meeting which might be held in different cities in rotation and timed to coincide with an annual conference.’

The 28th International Congress of Orientalists was due to be held in Canberra in January 1971, and it was planned to call a special meeting of Australian and New Zealand scholars interested in the study of Asia during the conference, in order to discuss the constitution of ‘the reorganized Oriental Society of Australia.’ The letter suggested that it would be ‘very helpful if before that meeting the bases of chapters of the Society could be laid in all the cities of the South West Pacific Area.’ Dr Khan was invited, in collaboration with ‘other interested persons’ in his area, to call a meeting and organise an

interim committee which might be represented at the Canberra meeting. That would 'greatly help the formation of a widely representative body, which might do much to promote the study of Asia and provide a focus for collaboration with other countries' [Davis and Basham/Khan, 30.10.70].

The letter reached Khan only in December. If New Zealand had to participate in the proposed society, he felt, it would be better called the Asian Society of Australasia. He also thought there would need to be branches or chapters in Auckland, Christchurch, and Wellington, and perhaps later at Hamilton. He and Dr Tim Beaglehole were planning to attend the Congress and sought the views of others before they left.

A similar letter had been sent to the Department of Asian Languages and Literatures at the University of Auckland (AU). Douglas Lancashire, Professor of Chinese, and his colleagues authorised Dr Margaret South [Chinese] and/or Olaf Tichelaar [Indonesian] and/or Nicholas Tarling [History] to represent them at the meeting. They had reached no firm conclusions on New Zealand's role. Some concern had been expressed, it was noted, 'that the affair rather represents a Canberra take-over bid for a Sydney-based organisation' [Tarling/Khan, 21.12.70].

The meeting was held in the Coombs Building on the evening of 8 January. About sixty people were present, including South, Tichelaar, and Tarling, and also Ian Catanach [History, University of Canterbury (CU)] and Albert Moore [Religious Studies, University of Otago (OU)]. It decided that a committee should draw up a draft constitution, and Tarling was one of its 11 members. That met, under the chairmanship of Wang Gungwu, on 11 January. It considered whether there was a case for two rather differently focused organisations, the Oriental Society and a new body, but the general feeling was there should be 'one national body', fulfilling the functions both of a learned society and liaison with government. It was then suggested that chapters might be city-based and not state-based, and perhaps represented on the Council, and that the association should be 'bi-national'. Further suggestions were to go to a sub-committee, including John Legge [Monash], Basham, Davis, Joyce Ackroyd [University of Queensland], with Wang Gungwu in the chair.

When he returned home, Tarling circulated a letter to fellow Asianists, seeking comments to forward to Professor Wang. At both meetings, he said, there was general agreement that, if New Zealand were involved when the Society was set up on a new basis, its title would reflect that. But was it desirable that New Zealand should be involved? And if so, were there other conditions that should be sought? 'Those of us who attended the Friday meeting generally felt ... [that] there was some advantage in associating with the Australians in the venture, particularly as we in New Zealand are so thin on the ground.' That, Tarling thought, was the prime consideration. 'Among the functions mentioned were an expanded journal, a newsletter and conferences, as well as the encouragement of Asian studies in general in Australia and New Zealand.' If colleagues agreed, then it was necessary to consider what further conditions, if any, were desirable.

Tarling thought that the discussions in Canberra had revealed ‘almost insuperable difficulties’ in reforming the Oriental Society by establishing chapters. There were already organisations in a number of Australian cities with overlapping purposes but different constitutions and forms of membership. The Oriental Society, on the other hand, had Australia-wide, even world-wide membership in its current form, and had attained a degree of international recognition. Chapters would need a degree of autonomy in the various states and capital cities, ‘not only in regard to membership and such matters, but also in regard to the capacity to make public statements or representations to governments.’ In places where there were no chapters, it was thought that individuals should be able to join direct. The ultimate result, Tarling thought, might be the setting-up of a new body, or possibly the creation of a federal body, as in the case of the Australian university staff associations.

Some of those issues seemed relevant to those facing the New Zealanders. ‘Whether any suggestions we make can help to resolve them remains to be seen.’ He was not certain that any organisations currently existed of the type that would form chapters. ‘In any case it may be possible for us to set up or remodel organisations in some cities. In others there may be too few people interested, yet some individuals may wish to belong to the Society in some other way. Again it seems to me that the New Zealand chapters, besides holding individual meetings, might wish to hold a NZ-wide meeting or as a whole make representations to the NZ government or public statements.’

Tarling suggested that branches might be formed in the various cities, through which members would normally join the Society; that members could alternatively join the Society as a whole, paying a subscription that was not less; that the branches in New Zealand, and perhaps those in particular Australian states, could form a chapter of the Society; and that the central Council of the Society should include one representative from each chapter. It was, he admitted, ‘a rather cumbersome proposal’, but it might help to organise the Society in New Zealand, and, so far as Australia was concerned, ‘it will probably be necessary to have some such contrivance if the Society is to be more than federal body’ [Circular letter, 21.1.71].

No one had protested at these suggestions by the time Professor Wang called his sub-committee meeting at ANU on 18 February. At CU Sam Adshead approved, and so did Ian Catanach. The meeting itself agreed to a number of principles, including provision for chapters and direct members. The various chapters were to be ‘allowed as much autonomy as they need to organise local functions of the Society.’ The title would be ‘the Oriental Society of Australia and New Zealand’ [Minutes of a meeting, University House, 18.2.71]. Some members of the sub-committee felt that ‘the more outlying regions, New Zealand, Western Australia, South Australia, Tasmania’ should be guaranteed at least one representative on the Council [Note, 9.3.71].

That suggestion Tarling endorsed, feeling that colleagues would also. ‘In another respect we differ from the other “outlying regions”. We have a

government we may wish to deal with or make representations to. I hope the New Zealand chapters would have sufficient autonomy to do this; or would such activities need Council endorsement?' [Tarling/Wang, 27.4.71].

'The ball is now very much at Bertie Davis' feet,' Wang wrote. 'He has emphasised to us that he needs to iron out some difficulties with his own Council at the Annual General Meeting in June, but we have no reason to believe that he should encounter any serious difficulties now. I feel that most of us have bent over backwards to ensure that we do end up with one strong society instead of several weak ones, and I am sure Bertie appreciates this' [Wang/Tarling, 4.5.71].

Tarling circulated his exchanges with Wang. At CU Catanach did not regard the 'representations to government' aspect as 'very important'. J.J. Saunders, Reader in History, who had earlier argued that New Zealand should go it alone, and had the resources to do so [Saunders/Tarling, 23.2.71], now merely noted 'seen'. At VUW the Asianists stressed that the New Zealand chapters had to have 'sufficient autonomy, perhaps more than Western Australia or Tasmania'. They wondered how far it would be practical for the New Zealand member(s) to attend Council meetings in Australia. Khan thought a federal constitution might be preferable to a unitary one [Khan/Tarling, 17.5.71].

In Auckland, Margaret South, acting Head of the Department of Asian Languages and Literatures, said she had 'always found it difficult to understand how the Oriental Society of Australia even as presently constituted' could properly be regarded as anything but a national society already. Membership was open to anyone in Australia or New Zealand. If persons outside it felt 'unrepresented' they could join, and then initiate any change they saw fit. That said, she and her colleagues agreed with the points Tarling had raised. They suggested, however, that the Council might be elected by the chapters rather than by the total membership.

Tarling relayed these comments to Davis, as Wang had requested. 'One colleague believes that N.Z. should form its own society,' he added. 'Overall I would say that the consensus is still in favour of a trans-Tasman association, but there is much concern to maintain a substantial degree of autonomy' [Tarling/Davis, 2.6.71]. Theo Roy, offering a comment from Waikato, thought New Zealand could not support its own society, but should go along with the Australians, 'preferably with some kind of federal constitution' [Roy/Tarling, 8.6.71].

Davis appreciated 'the general goodwill' that seemed to 'emanate' from all the papers Tarling had sent him. 'As you will appreciate the Oriental Society with all the cooperativeness it can muster can hardly let go of what it has laboriously achieved without some certitude that there is the substance of an organization which will continue its work effectively. So far there is not enough evidence of a number of chapters emerging.' He enclosed a letter being sent to all the Society's members [Davis/Tarling, 13.7.71]. That indicated that the Council and officers could not recommend major alterations of the current constitution 'until it becomes clear that chapters of substantial

membership will be established in a number of centres, that these chapters aims are generally those of our Society and that they will be able effectively to share in its work' [Letter, 12.7.71].

The New Zealand Initiative

There, so far as the New Zealanders were concerned, the matter rested until May 1972, when, as recognition of the People's Republic approached, an international conference on Chinese studies was convened at the University of Waikato, with Dov Bing, of the Subject of Politics as secretary. The Vice-Chancellor, D.R. Llewellyn, pointed to the distinctive nature of the gathering as well as its timing. 'The gathering together of scholars and students with members of the public is something of a departure from traditional conference organization, but in the light of present world events there is clearly great value in providing for more extensive dissemination of knowledge about China. Since the Conference will deal with widely ranging aspects of Chinese society both ancient and modern, it is particularly appropriate that it should bring together scholars, students and laymen.' He was well aware, the Vice-Chancellor added, of 'the need for close relationships between universities and the society in which they exist', and on that account, too, he watched 'with special interest the results of this venture.'

It may indeed be that this conference set a pattern for future conferences on Asian studies in New Zealand. Perhaps one of the problems the Australians were finding it difficult to handle, the participation of lay people, in fact helped to get NZASIA on its way. The wish to inform and share knowledge with them was strong, and their involvement suggested that New Zealand might after all attain the critical mass to set up an association of its own.

That idea was indeed raised at the conference, and following it Tarling wrote to the Asianists in New Zealand universities, suggesting that 'it seemed to some of us there [...] not only feasible but desirable.' If it went ahead, a Trans-Tasman link could still be made, 'should developments in Australia make it practicable.' Meanwhile it would be necessary to deal with some of the issues that the earlier discussions had raised. Should there be chapters or branches in the various cities or should membership pertain to the society direct? Should membership be academic? Tarling himself suggested 'concentrating on university teachers', but that would not 'preclude the holding of conferences or meetings to which interested laymen or schoolteachers might be invited.' Should the society publish a journal? At present, he thought it would be impossible to sustain one, 'academically or financially', but the society should publish some sort of newsletter. He also mentioned an earlier proposal, that a NZ branch of the Royal Asiatic Society might be formed [Circular letter, 23.5.72].

The response was diverse. Most replies, though by no means all, indicated a wish to proceed with the formation of an Asian society of New Zealand. 'There was no great interest in an affiliation with the Royal Asiatic Society [...] There was more enthusiasm for a trans-Tasman link, but it was normally held that the formation of a New Zealand society would not preclude, but rather promote, links with existing or future organisations in Australia' [Circular letter, 10.8.72]. Roosman in AU thought it should be done as soon as possible, given the public interest aroused by the Waikato conference [Roosman/Tarling, 26.5.72]. Reg Hunt at VUW, 'as a foreigner here,' felt that NZ was 'tied in so many ways to outside interests,' that the society should be 'independent [...] No matter how financially insecure!!' [Hunt/Tarling, 22.6.72].

Krishnamurthy welcomed it as enabling those with Asian interests to get together and as a way of 'generating more interest on Asia' [Krishnamurthy/Tarling, 28.6.72]. At CU Ian Catanach took a rather similar line. He rather liked the idea of more trips across the Tasman [Catanach/Tarling, 30.5.72] and valued the creation of a South Asian Studies Association of Australia and New Zealand, set up during the 1971 Congress. But he did not want to put all his eggs in that basket, and he hoped that others would not put all their eggs in, say, an Australasian Chinese Studies Association. 'From the point of view of making the New Zealand public and the government take notice of and pay for more work on all parts of Asia it would be best for us all to team up [...] So, if an Australasian Asian Studies Association is impossible at the moment I don't think we should shed too many tears' [Catanach/Tarling, 26.6.72].

The need to spread the word and to make the most of NZ's expertise influenced the responses to the various questions Tarling had raised. Direct membership on a nation-wide basis was preferred. 'We should not have the remotest hope of sustaining a separate chapter here in Dunedin,' wrote Hew McLeod [McLeod/Tarling, 1.6.72]. Others thought it might not even be desirable to try. 'I think the various Asian studies fraternities in our university centres are still small and united enough,' wrote Henry Chan at Massey University (MU), 'so that the aim of the Asian Studies Society should be to bring us together nationally on a regular basis (every 12 or 18 months) rather than institutionalise the local fraternities' [Chan/Tarling, 28.6.72]. Mike Stenson at AU thought that branch committees could organise local functions. Professor Janaki at VUW thought that local groups might develop informally at first, later perhaps being incorporated formally in the structure [Janaki/Tarling, 3.7.72].

How that membership should be constituted raised a number of questions. In general the answers tended to favour an academic emphasis but not making membership exclusively university in character. Stenson thought there would be real advantage in including technical institute teachers – those teaching Japanese and English as a foreign language – and secondary school teachers of Asian studies and languages. 'The main advantage would be the encouragement of some sense of corporate endeavour and the provision of

links whereby we could be informed about and influence developments in schools and technical institutes' [Stenson, n.d]. Others felt the need to involve interested laymen.

Prof Janaki had 'mixed feelings'. She thought university teachers might be 'too narrow a base to build on in New Zealand conditions.' She believed this was 'complicated by the diversity of interests, regional, countrywise, and subject-wise, of such membership. I should like [to see] the claims of school teachers, librarians, government and art gallery officials and such other seriously interested persons being given favourable consideration.' But she was 'definitely not in favour of a large society in which academic and scholarly concerns are swamped by other factors and interests' [Janaki/Tarling, 3.7.72].

Perhaps, as Hunt put it, the point could be resolved by considering the aims of the society. 'Would it be yet another "academic enclave" or would it perform some service to the public?' [Hunt/Tarling, 22.6.72]. Others thought in terms of criteria for admission. 'If laymen were to be invited to conferences or meetings, which I think desirable,' wrote Rilda Gorrie [Geography, AU], 'it seems to be a little precious not to include them as members, and very often pure "academics" tend to kill "the things they love"'. With wider membership, "academics" could still keep their fingers on the areas of study and Direction of the Society' [Gorrie/Tarling, 26.5.72].

The comments he had received, Tarling told Bing, 'seem to imply on the whole that we should proceed to form an Asian society of NZ, with university leadership, but giving a place to others; with a newsletter, but not a journal; and with trans-Tasman or other links possibly ensuing, but not a necessary precondition.' He wondered what the next step was. The initiative lay with Bing, as secretary of the Waikato conference, or with himself, as correspondent of the Canberra one, or both.

Bing agreed that, given that discussions in Australia had apparently come to a halt, 'it would be sensible to proceed independently to form an Asian Society of NZ,' with links to organisations in Asia, Australia and elsewhere. He thought that membership should not be solely academic, but include schoolteachers, interested laymen, civil servants, politicians, students, and especially businessmen.' There could be three types of membership: academic, staff and students; lay; and institutional. From 'a practical, financial, political and academic point of view,' he thought it vital to include one or two leading businessmen, one or two influential politicians and one or two distinguished laymen on a national council, though the academics should form the majority, and also run the smaller executive. Such a structure, he thought, would 'enable us to lobby effectively if not successfully for research, scholarship and publication funds from Government and Business sources. The voice of an academic body in these matters, is but a voice in the wilderness!' He suggested that the next step was to form a small provisional committee [Bing/Tarling, 7.7.72].

After meeting in Auckland, Tarling and Bing decided that the best way to make progress was to ask a number of colleagues to join them on an interim committee and submit to them draft proposals for a constitution. The

colleagues included Albert Moore [OU], Prof Janaki [VUW], Prof Lancashire [AU], Brian Colless [MU], Ian Catanach [CU], and Prof Bruce Ross [LC]. They were asked to consult colleagues and others in their centres and return comments and suggestions by October. A meeting of the provisional committee might then be held with the aid of a small surplus from the Waikato conference [Circular letter, 10.8.72].

The Constitution

The draft constitution set out of the object of the society: ‘(i) to contribute to the knowledge of Asian polities and civilisations through fostering research by its members or others, through the holding of conferences and meetings, through publications, periodical or otherwise, and in other ways; (ii) to disseminate knowledge of Asian polities and civilisations in New Zealand by holding meetings or conferences, sponsoring publications, and establishing links between specialists in these fields and other educational, cultural and governmental institutions and their members and the mass media; (iii) to establish and maintain contacts with societies of similar interests in other countries in Australia, Asia, America, Europe and elsewhere.’

The word ‘polities’ was sometimes misread as ‘politics’. The reason for using it was to avoid the limitations and the controversies that the use of the word ‘states’ might have occasioned.

Membership would be open to ‘members of New Zealand educational institutions who are involved in teaching or research in any field of Asian studies; and such other residents of New Zealand interested in Asia who are nominated for membership by two current members and accepted by the Council’. Institutional membership was to be available to other bodies and business houses substantially concerned with Asian affairs. The annual subscription for individuals was to be not less than \$10 and for institutions not less than \$100.

The Council was to elect and include the officers – President, Secretary, Treasurer and Editor – and eight other members elected for three-year terms by postal ballot among the members, ‘so that at least one of the members of the Council shall normally be resident respectively in the metropolitan areas of Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Dunedin, Hamilton and Palmerston North.’ The Council was to frame policy, and the President to be spokesman. It was to hold an AGM, with the quorum of 6. Members in particular centres would be able to form branches or chapters ‘for the purpose of holding meetings or discussions or for such other purposes as do not conflict with the present rules or the policy of the Council for the time being’ [Draft].

The responses to this document were largely positive, save in respect of the subscription: \$10 was thought to be too high for a society yet to prove itself. Tarling took account of other suggestions in a revised draft he sent to Byron O’Keeffe of the AU Law Faculty, who agreed to be Hon. Solicitor.

Early in July, 1973, Bing and Tarling were able to send out a revised version of the constitution, an invitation to join the Society, a nomination form for the election of officers, and a form to complete for a survey of expertise. The subscription limit – now down to \$6 – was again criticised, especially at OU. At the end of August voting papers were sent out to 74 potential members, together with a letter from Tarling. That pointed out that the constitution could be adopted at a conference in 1974, but meanwhile it was interim. An interim subscription of \$3.50 would be charged to cover an initial newsletter.

The election was conducted by the academic registry at AU. For only one office was there more than one candidate, that of Treasurer, and John Beaglehole of Waikato was elected. The interim president was Tarling, the interim secretary Bing. Margaret South [AU] was elected editor of publications, and the Council also included Catanach, Janaki, Lancashire, Macrae [AU], Perkins [AU], Ross [LC], and Tichelaar [AU]. Hew McLeod was subsequently co-opted by the interim council.

That meanwhile had got under way the planning for the first conference, held at AU 4-7 July, 1974. The constitution was adopted at a meeting of members on 5 July, subject to the removal of the requirement for an AGM. That, it was felt, would be too costly for the Society to sustain on a national basis, and might simply mean that decisions were taken by a small group in a single centre. Members would, however, meet whenever a conference was held. In 1976 the Society proceeded with incorporation. Its initials were thus NZASSI. No amount of verbal ingenuity could make them into NZASIA, but the constitution specifically permitted that usage, and it has been standard practice ever since.

The Asian Studies Association of Australia, formed in the event one year after NZASIA, held its first conference at Melbourne in 1976, and thereafter the two societies collaborated at least to the extent of holding their conferences in alternate years.