

## Reflections on the 8<sup>th</sup> EuroSEAS Conference, 11–14 August, Vienna

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As a veteran of five previous EuroSEAS (The European Association for South-east Asian Studies) conferences in Hamburg, London, Naples, Gothenburg, and Lisbon, I was greatly looking forward to taking part in the Vienna conference. EuroSEAS was established in 1995 to promote the academic study of Southeast Asia, on the basis that bringing together researchers from across the continent of Europe would be far more fruitful than limiting our main contacts to colleagues from our own countries. EuroSEAS thus set out to counter the structural marginalization that Southeast Asian studies has often suffered in individual institutions and national contexts. Along with the other members of the board, I had already visited Vienna in November 2014 for a site inspection; I had been a member of the program committee; and I had been copied into an awful lot of emails about arrangements. I was well aware of the meticulous preparations made by the organizers Gabriele Weichart and Martin Slama, along with their committee of local colleagues. But none of this had really prepared me for what we all experienced: simply the best organized conference I have ever attended.

It helped that Vienna is a beautiful city and that we had such spectacular venues at each stage of the proceedings: the historic Austrian Academy of Sciences auditorium, with its remarkable ceiling paintings, one of the grandest secular rooms in all of Europe; the main building of the University of Vienna; and, for our conference dinner, the Vienna City Hall. It also helped that we were blessed with glorious weather, basking in radiant summer sun (though I was rather relieved to go back each night to an air-conditioned hotel room).

But the quality of the eighth EuroSEAS conference was ultimately determined neither by the buildings nor by the weather. EuroSEAS is already known as an extremely friendly gathering: There is much less of the hierarchism and exclusivity that characterizes a large professional conference like AAS (Annual Conference of the Association for Asian Studies), no invitation-only receptions, no huddled gatherings of insiders. In short, we are a thoroughly open organization. This climate of openness and friendliness is a mix of the twenty-year history of an organization that was specifically created to break down national boundaries, not to mention disciplinary ones; and an active determination by each successive host to sustain and enhance what we might for want of a better term call the spirit of EuroSEAS. Our hosts in Vienna succeeded admirably in doing exactly that, right down to the festive closing ceremony they scheduled for the final hour of the conference – an innovation that confounded the sceptics amongst us.

It is impossible here to do justice to all that transpired during the week of 11–14 August, 2015 but let me mention a few highlights:

The conference for me began a day before the formal opening, when we held the second EuroSEAS PhD workshop with a group of eight doctoral students from universities across the continent. Using a formula developed by EuroSEAS secretary Henk Schulte Nordholt for the first such workshop in Amsterdam in 2014, the Vienna team ably led by Judith Ehlert hosted an event that provided the participants with some remarkable intellectual exchanges on a wide range of topics including Indonesian politics, the history of the Siamese timber trade, and an ethnography of Philippine families. The PhD workshop was a precursor of things to come.

Ben Anderson's keynote *Alarms of an Old Alarmist* on the opening night of the conference was a session to remember: Not only the auditorium but even the overflow hall was full to capacity, and we found ourselves in the unfortunate position of being unable to accommodate all who wished to hear one of the world's greatest Southeast Asianists give his inimitable thoughts on recent developments in the field. Sadly, his Vienna keynote turned out to be a swan song for Professor Anderson, who passed away unexpectedly in Indonesia on 13 December, aged 79: an enormous loss to Southeast Asian studies.

Ayu Utami's keynote the following morning on *The Spirit of Indonesia: Rasa, Race and Religion*, again delivered to a packed house in the stunning setting of the University of Vienna's *Großer Festsaal*, was beautifully crafted and delivered on the thought-provoking topic of "critical spirituality" as a tool to confront fundamentalist tendencies. Opening EuroSEAS with these two keynote speakers set the tone for the many parallel sessions that followed: A balance of the critical, the deeply researched and the passionately engaged. The highly eclectic program covered a range of topics from archaeology to contemporary politics; from ancient Malay manuscripts to the latest tweets and Facebook pages.

Among the many highlights in the days that followed were three afternoon roundtables on contemporary issues and developments in the region generously hosted by our main sponsor for the conference, *Nikkei Asian Review* (NAR). On 12 August, we had a session on emerging regionalism in Southeast Asia chaired by NAR editor-at-large Ken Koyanagi, while on the final day we had a lively discussion about comparative political developments in the region chaired by NAR chief editor Gwen Robinson. In the wake of the Jokowi's election and the latest Thai coup, was Southeast Asia turning away from democracy, or embracing it? But the most popular of the three sessions was undoubtedly the 12 August discussion of the latest trends in Myanmar, which coincided with the dramatic ousting of House Speaker Shwe Mann from his post as chair of the ruling USDP (Union Solidarity and Development Party). The room was full as Gwen Robinson moderated a remarkable discussion featuring Ardet Thawngmung Kyaw Yin Hlaing, Marcus Brand and Wolfram Schaffar – a session that later featured on Austrian television.

Another important facet of the conference was the lively cultural program, and especially the excellent series of film screenings put together by Ascan Breuer and Rainer Einzenberger. These included the presentation of two of Ascan's own films, *Riding my Tiger* and *Jakarta Disorder*; as well as the Austrian premiere of the Thai documentary *Paradoxocracy*, which has rarely been shown outside the country; and

the remarkable Burmese film *Nargis*. The cultural programme was rounded off by a literary café event with Ayu Utami on the final night of the conference. At the Nikkei-sponsored reception on 12 August, the first ever EuroSEAS book prizes were presented to two well-deserved winners: Philip Taylor (Social Science) for *The Khmer lands of Vietnam: Environment, cosmology, and sovereignty* (NUS Press/NIAS Press 2014) and Mandy Sadan for *Being and Becoming Kachin. Histories beyond the state in the border-world of Burma* (OUP 2013). The creation of these new prizes reflects the wider mission of EuroSEAS to promote the academic study of Southeast Asia.

The Vienna EuroSEAS conference was a highlight both for the very dedicated team of local academics and students who put the event together, and for our organization as a whole. Vienna has set a high bar for those who will come next. I look forward to seeing many of you once again in Oxford (2017) and Berlin (2019).



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Duncan McCargo is Professor of Political Science at the University of Leeds and the President of EuroSEAS (2013–17). His academic work is mainly focused on the comparative politics of Southeast Asia, and he is best known for his fieldwork-based research on the politics of Thailand.

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