

Annual Meeting of the Southeast Asia Library Group

Chair of Critical Development Studies – Southeast Asia, University of Passau, 26–28 June 2025

Report by Jana Igunma and Holger Warnk

The Annual Meeting and Conference of the Southeast Asia Library Group (SEALG) took place this year at the University of Passau in Lower Bavaria, Germany, being hosted by the Chair of Critical Development Studies – Southeast Asia¹ in this beautiful city for the first time. Professor Martina Padmanabhan, Dr Friederike Trotier and their team delivered a fantastic three-day event, with their invaluable organisational support ensuring those taking part had a lovely time during their stay in Lower Bavaria. At this year's meeting, participants from Austria, Cambodia, France, Germany, Indonesia, Myanmar, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Norway, the Philippines, Switzerland, Thailand, the United Kingdom and the United States were present both physically and virtually. On the afternoon of Thursday, 26 June, the meeting started with David Gibis leading a guided tour through the Historical Jesuit Library² of Passau, which holds fascinating collections of pre-nineteenth century books, sculptures, globes, ethnographica and also a small *Wunderkammer* ('curiosity cabinet') museum.

Friday morning began with a guided tour of Passau University's Central Library³ by Hafsa Idrees, who showed attendees its Southeast Asian collections and closed stacks. Thereafter, the presentation of papers started: Martina Padmanabhan gave a welcome address and introduced to the audience the Chair of Critical Development Studies – Southeast Asia and its history. This was followed by the first presentation by Juliet Olivar, Candy May N. Schijf and John Louie Zabala from De La Salle University in Biñan, Laguna, The Philippines. Their paper *Mapping voices: A scoping review and bibliometric analysis of Filipiniana oral histories* highlighted the importance of oral history in the Philippines, in particular for research on migration and labour, identity and social movements, or war and historical traumata. The next paper was presented by Cindy Nguyen from the University of California, Los Angeles, US (but joining the group fresh from fieldwork in Cambodia). Her talk on *Bibliotactics: Libraries and the colonial public in Vietnam* showed the

1 <https://www.sobi.uni-passau.de/en/southeast-asian-studies>

2 <https://www.staatliche-bibliothek-passau.de/historische-jesuitenbibliothek/>

3 <https://www.ub.uni-passau.de/>

importance of libraries in colonial times in French Indochina and their relationship to power as vehicles of colonial propaganda, being one of the most frequently used state institutions to that end.

The second presentation by Candy May N. Schijf on *Bridging the digital divide: A self-assessment of digital equity in Philippine school libraries* drew attention to an oft-overlooked and under-researched collection: the school library. In her preliminary interviews with 47 school librarians, mainly but not exclusively from Luzon, she investigated their efforts at bridging the digital divide in terms of policy and practice; also elaborated on were problems of infrastructure as well as the lack of suitable digital materials in Philippine vernacular languages – in particular, Bikol, Cebuano, Hiligaynon, Ilokano, Waray and many others. The next speaker was Wimonsiri Hemtanon from Mahidol University International College, Bangkok, Thailand. Her talk on *Contested heritage and community access in Banglumpoo, Bangkok, Thailand* highlighted tourism-driven development, engagement by residents and civil society activists, as well as the problems of documenting these changes for future researchers as regards the capital's oldest district. Friederike Trotier of the University of Passau, in her talk titled *Researching and teaching Southeast Asia at a German university: Role and expectation of library collections*, reflected on her changing role as a library user first as a student at her alma mater and now as a lecturer who has to introduce undergraduate students to academic literature with the aim of increasing their interest in the Southeast Asia region.

This was followed by two papers on Shan collections from Burma now held in the UK. The first was delivered by Jotika Khur-Yearn from the Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London and explored *What SOAS collections tell us about Shan Studies*. A handful of other places in the world aside, Shan Studies would be carried out mainly at SOAS by European researchers of a colonial and/or missionary background from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, which explains the existence of a number of Shan manuscripts in SOAS Library. Maria Kekki gave a talk about *The Shan Chevening Fellowship at the British Library* (where she works), an award which allowed, among others, professional Shan poetry composer and reciter Myo Thant Linn (Sai Hlaing) to carry out research on Shan collections located both at the eponymous institution and elsewhere in the UK. The next presentation was by Stephanie Willi on *Decolonization of the collections and archives of ETH Zurich*, addressing her and fellow staff members' efforts to that end. Their endeavours include identifying problematic areas, raising awareness and dealing with challenging terminology. She demonstrated processes from acquisition and cataloguing to presentation and archiving by giving examples from several collections in Zürich. Annabel Teh Gallop, also from the British Library, analysed several eighteenth- and nineteenth-century *Lists of 'lost' Malay manuscripts* – that is, a number of said texts whose whereabouts are unknown. These lists came from Dutch East India Company predicant George Werndly, Madras army officer Thomas John Newbold, Malay author, printer and translator Abdullah Munysi, missionary Thomas Beighton and a certain 'Inchi Mohamed'.

Ane Husstad-Nedberg spoke on *A new collection? Status of the Southeast Asian manuscripts at the Oslo University Library*. The existence there of such manuscripts came as a surprise to many participants, since the University of Oslo has not once over the years offered a Southeast Asian Studies programme while Norway never had colonial ties with Southeast Asia. They were in the library's catalogue for about 70 or more years and consist of one paper and 16 palm leaf manuscript(s), identified as Burmese (8), Cambodian (6) and the remainder in Thai and certain unidentified languages. The next paper by Cam Sharp Jones, from the Visual Arts section of the British Library, introduced the audience to *The Southeast Asian visual art collection of the British Library*. Several collections were acquired or donated from well-known personalities like Stamford Raffles, Thomas Horsfield, William Marsden and Frederick Harrop; they consist of paintings, drawings, photographs, prints, furniture, sculptures, weapons, textiles and other items. A special mention was made of the Doris Duke collection made up of items from Myanmar and Thailand.

The next two presentations focused on Southeast Asian library collections in various Chinese and Indian languages. Virginia Shih spoke on *Breathing new life into the Sinophone Southeast Asia Studies Collection at the University of California, Berkeley: Challenges and prospects*, in highlighting what is the only Southeast Asian Studies collection in the US with Chinese-language expertise. The collections held at Berkeley cover a wide range of topics on the Chinese of Southeast Asia; among the major challenges here are the identification and acquisition of relevant materials, particularly difficult in mainland Southeast Asian countries. Holger Warnk of Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany, then presented his paper on *Some notes on publishing and printing in South Asian languages in Malaysia and Singapore*. He faced similar challenges in his search for publications in Indian languages; those discovered were mostly in Tamil, but materials in Bengali, Malayalam, Punjabi and Telugu also feature. More and more Indian publishers in Malaysia and Singapore have closed down in recent decades, meaning there is a risk of overlooking publications by these minority groups.

The next presentation was by Pwint Phyu Maung, an MA student at SOAS who had also previously completed an internship at the British Library. In her talk on *Burmese illustrated manuscripts: The collections of the British Library*, she focused on Burmese folded manuscripts (*parabaik*) as representations of monarchical power, religious devotion, courtly tradition and as documents of significant historical narratives – ones originally acquired by British administrators, envoys and missionaries. The final paper was presented by Sopheaktra Suon, also an MA student at SOAS and also someone who has previously interned at the British Library. He spoke about *Recent development in cataloguing Khmer manuscripts at the British Library*. Of the 26 Khmer manuscripts on palm leaves, mulberry paper or Western paper found at the institution in question, he took a closer look at 11 manuscripts and was able to identify at least one female scribe. Further examples highlighted text from the *Reamker* epic and colophons in other manuscripts.

After the many paper presentations, SEALG came together again on Saturday for its Business Meeting. The minutes from the previous Annual Meeting were approved, then reports on activities and initiatives carried out in the past 12 months were presented by our members and representatives of participating libraries. Jana Igunma spoke about the SEALG blog⁴ statistics from the past 12 months. Finally, the issue of the SEALG Archive, currently stored in the offices of the British Library, was discussed. It was agreed that it should remain in the UK since SEALG was founded there. Jotika Khur-Yearn agreed to enquire whether the SEALG Archive could be transferred to SOAS London's own academic holdings.

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4 <https://southeastasianlibrarygroup.wordpress.com/>