

ECHOSEA

NEWSLETTER

Professor A. J. Reid
Pacific & South-east Asian History
RSPacS

Vol. 2, No. 5 ■ **Economic History of Southeast Asia** ■ September, 1990

■ *Project in the Modern Economic History of Southeast Asia*

Research School of Pacific Studies ■ Australian National University ■ P.O. Box 4 ■ Canberra ■ 2601 ■ Australia
Telephone 062 49 2315 ■ Fax 062 57 1893 ■ Telex AA62694 SOPAC

THE 10TH INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC HISTORY CONGRESS Leuven, Belgium, August 1990

The International Economic History Association, like the discipline it represents, is making limited but genuine efforts to transcend its European origins. All but one of its ten congresses have been held in Europe, and all but three of its 22 executive committee members are European. The exceptions are all American save for the sole representative of Asia — the admirable Akira Hayami. Although Americans were the largest single national group (about 110) among the 1200-odd participants, three quarters were European, with very strong delegations from Holland, Britain, Germany, USSR and Hungary. A sprinkling of scholars from China (6), Taiwan, Korea and India (18) might be seen as tokenism, but more than 50 Japanese would have been a real factor at the Congress even without the exotic excitement provided by their economic historian extraordinaire — Crown Prince Naruhito. It is above all Japan's economic experience, and Japanese scholarship about it, which has forced the broadening of the agenda of the Association and the discipline.

Problems of distance, of language, and of politics still make a genuinely comparative perspective difficult. The laudable decision to invite applications from recent graduates all round the world for selection in a special section of this Congress yielded 26 interesting papers in English or French. All were on European topics except one each on India and West Africa, two on North America and a couple of comparative trans-Atlantic papers.

One of the major preoccupations and problems of past Congresses has been the dialogue between east and west Europe. The events of the past year appear to have been too rapid for Congress planning to adjust to. The faces and ideas from the east were largely the old ones, without conviction, like ghosts from

a vanished past. One hopes that some of the energy which has gone into balancing the first and second worlds may be freed in the future for more attention to the third.

Southeast Asia was extraordinarily under-represented in the attendance at this meeting, with Zaharah Mahmud from the University of Malaya alone appearing to present her paper. It seems unfortunate that more of the sponsorship the Congress enjoyed was not directed to funding attendance from poorer countries, with the result that the Thai invitees dropped out and nobody attended from Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines or Burma.

Nevertheless the agenda of the Congress did make room for Southeast Asian comparisons, occasionally of an illuminating sort. One of the five A-sessions, devoted to "problems of broad international interest", was "The European discovery of the world and its economic effects on pre-industrial society". Anthony Reid was responsible for the Southeast and South Asian perspective on this, though the organization of A-sessions seemed not to allow Congress-goers to get hold of preparatory papers. The summing up of the global issues by Niels Steensgaard and K.N. Chaudhuri was balanced and professional, but the issues were too vast and the players too numerous for an effective dialogue.

Among the 16 B-sessions, devoted to "major historical problems", Hayami had ensured that there was one on "Economic and demographic development in rice producing societies: 1500-1900". Since agricultural change was one of the factors making possible an industrial revolution in wheat-growing Europe, agriculture had also to be examined in rice-growing east Asia. The tendency of rice-growing societies to increase in population rather than productivity has often been held to be critical, and it seemed worthwhile to ask why Tokugawa Japan

(after 1700) was able to hold population steady and increase both agricultural and urban productivity, while China and Southeast Asia developed in different directions.

This was a well-conceived panel, carefully prepared at a pre-conference in Japan at which Van Niel, Kano, and Boomgaard spoke for Java, Zaharah for Malaysia, Sompop for Thailand, and Sakurai for Vietnam, as well as various papers on China, Japan and Korea. Unfortunately, only Kano, Zaharah, and Boomgaard were still there in Leuven, and though Hayami and Francesca Bray and A.J. Latham did their best to focus the discussion, it could hardly be said that the vital issues were resolved. Part of the problem, it must be admitted, was that the Southeast Asianists had trouble keeping their end up, with very little hard information before 1810 except in the case of Vietnam. Hayami's interesting hypothesis, that Japan had produced an "industrious revolution" in agriculture by a system which rewarded increases in productivity, was not universally accepted, and some wondered whether political factors had been too much excluded from the discussion. Nevertheless this panel will undoubtedly have an impact in stimulating more research on the interaction of population, agriculture, and industrialization in rice-growing areas.

Finally, there were 47 C-sessions intended for "new and more specialized subjects", and conducted more like normal conference panels. Here a great variety of topics, approaches, periods and places could be dealt with, though Asia was represented explicitly in very few. One, comparing Russian and Japanese economic development, was heavy political going; another dealt with pre-colonial south Indian commerce; a third grappled promisingly with the question how far the early stage of Meiji industrialization and textile export built on established patterns of east Asian trade. Probably the most imaginative attempt to use a comparative approach to deal with Asian growth, however, was a panel organized by David Good (a student of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) to investigate the relation between rapid growth and regional inequality in three 19th century cases (Austria-Hungary, Prussia, U.S.A.) and three post-war Asian ones (China, India, Thailand, with David Feeny addressing the last). To the passionate

demand of a Chinese economist to know whether increased regional inequality was a *necessary* aspect of rapid growth, the answer appeared to be fundamentally affirmative.

In conclusion, it is only fair to point out that the International Economic History Association appears eager to encourage a genuinely comparative approach to our understanding of economic history. The fact that Southeast Asia plays such a peripheral role in its Congresses is mainly due to the extraordinary weakness of our field until very recently. One hopes that ideas will be forthcoming to ensure a better representation at the next Congress, in Milan in August 1994. Panel proposals should be sent to Prof. Joseph Goy, Centre de Recherches Historiques, EHESS, 54 Bd. Raspail, 75270 Paris Cedex 06 — by 1 February 1991 for A- and B- panels (which require the organizing of a pre-conference in 1993), and by 1 February 1992 for C-panels.

Anthony Reid