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Global Conference on Economic Geography
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In December 2000, the National University of Singapore (NUS) played host to the first ever “Global Conference on Economic Geography”. The conference was organised by the Department of Geography, NUS, in collaboration with economic geography study groups of Association of American Geographers, Royal Geographical Society-Institute of British Geographers, Institute of Australian Geographers, International Geographical Union and Commonwealth Geographical Bureau. Blackwell (publisher of the *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*) also allocated significant financial resources to the running of the conference as well, supporting two journal related events – a *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* plenary session and tea, and an *Antipode* plenary session and evening wine and cheese social. The journal *Economic Geography*, published by Clark University, also sponsored a plenary session and wine and cheese social.

The conference was initiated because of feelings within the Department of Geography at NUS that there are few opportunities for “economic geographers” (broadly defined) to engage in genuinely global dialogue. In the context of globalising tendencies in the world economy, such dialogue is increasingly important for it facilitates the development of knowledge, and the establishment of international collaborative relations for both teaching and research. Such dialogue also requires economic geographers to face head on, the complex issues of vantage point and ethnocentric bias. The issue of vantage point and ethnocentric bias is a particularly troublesome one for geographers working in Asia, and in the tropical world more generally, given that the vast majority of geographical literature is produced in the North, regardless of geographic focus (Yeung, 2001). Given this state of affairs, we believed that the timing was appropriate for a “global” conference on economic geography. Furthermore, given economic geography’s role as a key sub-discipline in Geography, we felt that it was time to discuss and debate current research agendas. Finally, we sought to create an event that contributed to the rethinking of the relationship between the sub-discipline (within human geography) and the wider social science community; a “project” invigorated by the recent collection *Geographies of Economies* (Lee & Wills, 1997), and the American Association of Geographers Economic Geography Specialty Group’s initiatives (details available at <http://www.ucc.uconn.edu/~wwwgeog/agecon.html>).

In organising the global conference on economic geography, we had three specific objectives, as stated in the promotional “call for papers” that was disseminated via multiple channels at a global scale from 1998 onwards:

- The conference will provide a forum for constructive cross-regional dialogue among economic geographers from all regions and countries. Such dialogue is critical for the advancement of the subject.
- The conference will provide an opportunity for economic geographers from outside Asia to interact with geographers and other interested social scientists from within the host region. While acknowledging the Anglo-American influence in much of the recent work in economic geography, we recognise that there is a considerable stock of knowledge in the Asian region that contributes to our understanding of regional and global economic geographies. In short, the conference will enhance the global *interdependence* of networks of economic geographers.
- The conference and its associated activities will enable economic geographers from outside the Asian region to experience (first-hand) the dynamics of economic transformations in Singapore and Southeast Asia. Through carefully designed field trips, both within and outside of Singapore, the conference will offer insightful educational experiences that can be brought home for the benefits of students and institutions.

Suffice it to say the conference was relatively successful. We were pleased with the registration numbers (196 academics, approximately twice as many as expected), and people genuinely seemed to enjoy and learn from the field trips, the plenary and regular conference sessions, and the social events that ran throughout the five days in Singapore. Indeed, at times, one felt that this was a truly global affair, with people from countries like Indonesia, Sweden, New Zealand, and Brunei in dialogue during the sessions, or sharing a lunch-time table of Singaporean food, itself a hybrid of Malay and assorted Chinese and Indian cuisines. Table 1 profiles the country base of the conference participants.

TABLE 1. COUNTRY OF WORK OF CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS

Country of Work	Number of attendees
Australia	19
Austria	2
Bangladesh	1
Belgium	1
Brunei	1
Canada	15
China	2
Denmark	5
Finland	6
Germany	14
Hong Kong	3
Israel	1
India	2
Indonesia	6
Ireland	2
Italy	2
Japan	5
Malaysia	7
Netherlands	3
New Zealand	6
Norway	9
Portugal	1
Sri Lanka	2
Singapore	34 (16 academics)
South Africa	1
South Korea	1
Sweden	9
Taiwan	1
UK	29
USA	24
TOTAL	214 (196 academics)

The papers themselves were organised into 12 themes, many of which ran over several sessions. The themes were: Culture and Ethnicity in Economic Geography; Development Geography; Dynamics of Urban and Regional Development; Economy and the Environment; Finance and Economic Geography; Geographies of Global Capitalism, Geographies of International Trade and Investment; Geographies of Transitional Economies; Innovation, Learning, and Communities of Practice; Labour Geographies; Rural and Resource Economies; and Virtual Economies. Given that over 150 papers were scheduled for presentation, it is impossible to summarise the nature of the topics that were presented. Fortunately the official conference web site will be maintained for some time at <http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/geoywc/econgeog.html> and interested readers can download the full conference handbook which includes abstracts of all the papers that were presented. It is important to note, however, that the quality of the presentations were of consistent high quality.

Apart from the individual papers, plenary talks were given by Ash Amin (Durham University), Katherine Gibson (Australian National University), Chua Beng Huat (National University of Singapore) and Trevor Barnes (University of British Columbia). In brief, Amin spoke about theorisation of the spatialities of globalisation. He made a strong case for shifting emphasis in the discipline away from the currently dominant discourse of scalar and territorial relativisation, towards relational processes and network forms of organisation that defy a linear distinction between place and space. A revised version of his insightful paper will be published in *Environment and Planning A* in 2001. Trevor Barnes’ talk focused on the “performances” that have helped to constitute the sub-discipline of economic geography, especially in the Anglo-American world. Using the cases of two classic texts - George Chisholm’s *Handbook of Commercial Geography* published in 1889, and Peter Haggett’s *Locational Analysis in Human Geography* published in 1965 - Barnes highlighted the interdependent relationship between human (the geographers) and the non-human (their texts) in the transformation of the dominant nature of geographic thought at particular times. Barnes’ paper will be published alongside Amin’s in *Environment and Planning A*. Chua Beng Huat, in a talk rich with regional flavour and a good dose of humour, focused on the contested nature of the “Chinese diaspora” concept. His talk grounded the discussion in an examination of complexities within what can problematically be termed a Chinese cultural economy (Chinese “pop” music to more specific). A revised version of his paper is included in this issue of the *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*. Katherine Gibson’s plenary talk was designed to further some of the ideas that were laid down in the now classic text by J-K Gibson Graham (1996), *The End of Capitalism (as we knew it): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*. In her talk, titled, “Performing the Diverse Economy: Explorations in the Asia-Pacific Region”, Gibson applied a poststructuralist perspective on development issues in the Asia-Pacific region. She drew upon recent fieldwork in Hong Kong, the Philippines and Papua New Guinea in an attempt to “animate” what she calls “post-development economic” futures that are not necessarily capitalist in nature. As she noted these are futures that “engender a sense of enchantment and a vision of virtual possibilities. In conversation with the NGO *Unlad Kabayan* or the transnational corporation New Britain Palm Oil Limited, glimpses of new economic subjectivities for migrant workers and oil palm small holders have been sighted, and the possibility of different, more equitable and diverse economies have become tangible”. Gibson’s paper is likely to be published in the journal *Antipode*.

Apart from the papers, three field trips were organised. The first field trip was to Johor, Malaysia, and it was organised by Tim Bunnell (NUS). Johor is Peninsula Malaysia’s southern-most state and forms part of the Singapore-Malaysia-Indonesia Growth Triangle. The southern part of the state has undergone dramatic urban expansion and economic transformation since the mid-1980s. The fieldtrip was designed to give delegates an overview of state economic development as well as in-depth insights into key industries. The second field trip was titled “Exploring the Diverse Industrial Landscapes of Singapore” and it was organised by K. Raguraman (NUS). This fieldtrip began with a bus-ride to the Jurong Town Corporation (JTC) in Singapore. Officials there provided a brief presentation on the evolution of the industrial landscape in Singapore over the past 30 years. This was followed by a guided tour of various industrial sites in Singapore, including business parks, science parks and other planned industrial estates. The aim of this field trip was to give participants an opportunity to appreciate the changing character of industrial land use in Singapore. Finally, the third field trip was titled “Industrialising Indonesia: Economic and social dimensions of rapid development on Batam” and it was organized by Philip Kelly (York University, Canada). Batam Island is located south of Singapore in Indonesia’s Riau archipelago. Over the last decade it has seen very rapid growth in population as migrants have come from across the country to work in industrial estates and other new employment opportunities. While industrial estates and commercial developments are burgeoning, many social problems, such as housing provision, remain unresolved. The fieldtrip involved a 45 minute ferry ride to the island and visits to the Batam Industrial Development Authority, the Batamindo Industrial Estate, the factory of a multinational corporation located in the industrial estate, and a “squatter” settlement currently being formalised.

In the end, the conference exhibited the potentials and pitfalls associated with organising relatively open and ideally “global” conferences in the discipline of geography (Olds, 2001). While not perfect, this conference, set in the tropical city-state of Singapore, helped to reinforce the need for the continual critique of geographic knowledge that is dominated by the Anglo-American world, at least with respect to the English language, and of the need to engage in face-to-face discussion in a diversity of locales.

References

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