



APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting, Busan, Korea, November 2005. With kind permission APEC. www.apec.org

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IIAS
International Institute for Asian Studies

NEWSLETTER

Transnational flows and the politics of dress in Asia

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The carnival of colour that accompanies the annual summits of Asia Pacific Rim leaders in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) group is a unique event of political fancy dress. This invented tradition recorded in the annual formal photographs requires all participating political leaders to wear clothing deemed typical of the host nation. The public sharing of fashion across cultures suggests a willingness to consider the world from an alternative perspective - walking in another's shoes - even if only for a very short period.

If indeed official photographs capture self-representations, then the pageant of leaders from different countries all attired in one 'national dress' is a visual display of group solidarity. But it is also a contemporary example of the political uses of dress - the sea of smiling faces adorned in a 'uniform' obscures differences between the economies and geo-politics of the many nation-states that are members of APEC. For one photo moment, 'national dress' (often reinvented for the occasion) pays homage to the host nation and is symbolic of the transnational 'nation' of APEC.

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Mina Rocés and Louise Edwards' theme 'The Politics of dress' tracks the fluctuation in Asia's dress and its impact on political life. pp. 1 - 13

With the eyes of the world on Pakistan, Sanjeeb Kumar Mohanty offers timely insight into Indo-Pak peace efforts in South's Asia's changing security environment. p. 15

Portrait: Jason Toh, Curator at the National Museum of Singapore, delves into the archives and shares photographic panoramas by German and Chinese photographers in Singapore. pp. 26 + 27

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APEC leaders in Vietnamese traditional costumes at the APEC Economic Leader's Meeting, Ha Noi, Viet Nam, November 2006. The 2006 APEC Leaders photographs are reproduced with the permission of the APEC. www.apec.org.



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Before the 1990s, few scholars regarded dress as part of 'hard core' politics. Explanations of the globe's diverse political histories have largely ignored the importance of dress as an expression of political identity - this is no less the case in studies of the countries of Asia. This gap is surprising since political elites of these particular regions have been astute interpreters of the semiotics of dress in their programmes of self-representation and their efforts to legitimise access to political power. When nations first came to be imagined in Asia the invention of national dress became part of the essential accoutrements of 'invented tradition'.¹ And later, as the governments experimented with dictatorships and democracy, authoritarian rulers and democrats alike invoked dress as a symbol of their visions of the 'nations' they claimed to represent. Political leaders have likewise used dress to create more subtle political constituencies - such as those based on locality, language, class, ethnicity, party affiliation or religion. These created constituencies could be mobilised and publicly recognised through distinctive deployment of their particular dress markers. Groups that sought access to previously denied political power, such as women, the colonised and minorities, used changes in their dress to announce their public political aspirations. In Asia, dress - incorporating clothing, hairstyle, footwear, body adornments and headwear, and various states of undress - has served as an important signifier of ideological values and political aspirations as well as a fundamental marker of 'us' and 'them' in struggles for political power. Thus, a detailed analysis of the manner in which dress is mobilised is crucial to building a more complete understanding of formal politics.

This special issue of *IIAS Newsletter* is based on a new book on the politics of dress in Asia and the Americas.² The articles focus on how political elites and political activists represented themselves and crafted national and political identities through clothing and bodily practices. We examine the histories broadly, from the period of first interactions of indigenous people with colonial or imperialist powers - to explore how these particular elites manipulated vestimentary practices in order to negotiate for a higher status, not just in the arena of local or national politics, but in the global hierarchy of nations. As dress historians we are acutely conscious of the fluctuations in fashion - the sorts of attire that hold symbolic capital constantly shift through time and space. We track these fluctuations as they analyse the semiotics of dress in political life. Moreover, we pay particular attention to the role that the gendering of dress plays in politics. Inevitably we grapple with dress as a visual marker for status, identity and legitimacy - how dress or undress includes or excludes individuals or groups from political power, citizenship or prestige.

The authors of this special issue engage with one or more of the following four themes: First, they problematise 'national dress' in Asia by critiquing the binary division between Western dress and national dress, and locating its development in the long history of adopting and adapting clothing styles from internal and external influences. The authors ask here: where is national dress located? Is it with indigenous peoples or ethnic peoples, peasantry or *mestizos* (mixed race)? How has it been fashioned and refashioned and which

body of citizens does it claim to represent? Second, the contributors unpack the grammar of the elite's attempts at power dressing - their attempts to exude the gravitas of a scholar or the brute force of the soldier, or to access the support of Western allies, or even to claim equality with the colonisers. Third, they explore the gendering of the politics of dress, particularly the shifts in women's inclusion and exclusion from citizenship of the body politic. Here we reveal how the battle between the sexes for political spaces has been expressed in bodily practice - with women manipulating their physical appearances in a bid to claim the right to exercise political power. We also show that women's appearance in 'national dress' was more than a simple sequestering of the female in a romanticised 'traditional' past. Appeals to tradition became powerful forces for political change, and national dress often served to advance radical causes. Finally, since we see dress as a form of 'text' that could be interpreted by both wearer and audience, some of our authors discuss how political elites personalised and popularised particular forms of attire in their attempts to fashion themselves as icons of particular political programmes - for example, as identities with nationalist, religious or class significance. Needless to say, audiences may differ in their interpretations of these particular custom-made clothes, and based on these interpretations choose to accept or reject these personalised costumes.

The six case studies include countries from East Asia (China and Japan) and Southeast Asia (Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, and Burma). Through the case studies we demonstrate how dress has been an important part of national politics. We explore clear connections between dress and the self-representations of political individuals and groups who fashioned themselves sartorially to forge unique political identities. These regions present unique scope for exploring the transnational and transcultural aspects of the manner in which dress intersects with politics. Political activists in many countries of Asia have been significant drivers of change in creating hybrid political identities. For example, these new identities may simultaneously recognise multiple layers of different cultures inhabiting the same territory, or elevate sartorial symbols of dispossessed minority populations to signifiers of national status. In sum, the nations in the case studies which follow have a long history of dynamic interactions with international and domestic political constituencies in their mobilisation of dress as a signifier of political sentiment.

With thanks to Jan van Rosmalen, KITLV, for the Indonesia and Burma photographs.

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1 Hobsbawm, Eric and Terence Ranger (eds). 1992. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Canto.

2 Rocas, Mina and Louise Edwards. 2007. *The Politics of Dress in Asia and the Americas*. Sussex Academic Press ISBN 978 1 84159 163 4. This is the first book in the Sussex Library of Asian Studies Series



The Amsterdam School for Social science Research (ASSR) and Asian Studies in Amsterdam (ASiA) are proud to announce the launch of the Wertheim lecture website at <http://www.iias.nl/asia/wertheim/>. All previous Wertheim lectures will be available in pdf format for public reference and class use.

The Wertheim lecture was initiated by the ASSR in 1990 in recognition of W.F. Wertheim's major contributions to the European tradition of historical-sociological research on modern Asia. Starting 2006, the annual Wertheim-lecture is jointly organised by the ASSR and ASiA. The ASSR (www2.fmg.uva.nl/assr/) is a national research school and a research institute of the University of Amsterdam where social scientists cooperate in multi-disciplinary research. ASiA is an initiative of the Board of the University of Amsterdam and the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) in Leiden. ASiA's goal is to stimulate, facilitate and broaden research activities on Asia in Amsterdam, and to make the outcomes and insights of research accessible to a wider audience.