

# 2022 Symposium: Exploring Asia's innovation spirit

Saturday, 17 September 2022



UNIVERSITY OF  
**AUCKLAND**  
Waipapa Taumata Rau  
NEW ZEALAND

**NEW ZEALAND ASIA**  
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## Conference theme

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### Exploring Asia's innovation spirit: Asia Savvy 2022 Symposium

The 2022 Asia Savvy Symposium welcomed students to attend the first in-person event since the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. This year's theme focused on the rise of Asia's innovation spirit with it outperforming the West in many sectors, having vast investments into research and development, a younger population and a fast-growing economy.

Three panellists from industry give their insights into what motivated them to pursue their ideas and how innovation was key to their success, sharing their tips on how to develop an innovative mindset. They also reflected on what New Zealand can learn from the innovation spirit of Asia.

In the spirit of the theme, students were invited to submit a poster with their thoughts on **innovation and how it has shaped Asia's society**. Shortlisted candidates were invited to give a 10-minute on their posters with suggested topics including:

- What drives innovation in Asia?
- Asia's innovation systems are often directed by the state. Is the state a key actor to explain the region's innovation success?
- What can New Zealand learn from Asia's innovation spirit?

Judges reviewed the posters, awarding prizes to the top writers. The best poster prize was an iPad.



# Presentation summaries: Exploring Asia's innovation spirit

## Introduction and opening address

### Natasha Hamilton-Hart



Natasha Hamilton-Hart, Director of the New Zealand Asia Institute and Professor in the Department of Management and International Business at the University of Auckland, welcomed everyone to the 2022 Asia Savvy symposium. She acknowledged the work of the student leaders who had brought the symposium about and the enormous amount of time and energy involved.

Since it started in 2011, the annual Asia Savvy symposium has sought to develop the capacity and confidence of New Zealanders in operating in Asia. Natasha explained the importance for New Zealanders of understanding the wider region in which we live and expressed her hope that the students present could go on to act as 'connection points' in our relations with the region.

Reflecting on the transition toward a post-Covid era, Natasha expressed her sense that after the disconnection of the last three years, we are now feeling increasingly connected again. She concluded with the hope that this symposium inspires us to look outwards once more.

### Emily Talbot



Emily Talbot, Asia Savvy Student Committee Lead and Final Year Arts and Commerce student at the University of Auckland joined in welcoming the audience and in acknowledging the work of the student committee, the NZAI team, and the speakers, in bringing about the symposium.

She expressed her hope that the symposium would inspire the audience to 'fuel your inner innovator' and make the most of the opportunity to connect with likeminded students and professionals.

Emily went on to introduce the theme of the symposium, 'Exploring Asia's innovation spirit', commenting on the huge implications that the rise of Asian economies over the last 50 years pose for regional development. Today, with innovation in Asia fast outpacing the West and dominating the global scene, Emily concluded that young people in New Zealand would be

wise to look toward Asia for opportunities in innovation and business.

## Keynote Speakers

### Antje Fiedler



Antje Fiedler, Deputy Director of the New Zealand Asia Institute, started off the Keynote address with the note that "As an academic I could have a whole course on innovation in Asia, but we only have half an hour!". Antje shared the following insights relevant to the development of Asia's innovation system.

Antje began by commenting on the diversity of the Asian region, noting that while it is difficult to generalise about a region with so many differences in language, religion and culture, there are nonetheless some commonalities. One of these, she explained, lay in the Developmental State, where in comparison to many western countries, governments in Asian countries from Singapore to South Korea pick 'winners' by supporting companies and funneling investment into targeted key markets. This state-led approach has enabled Asian companies to dominate high tech industries and leapfrog western competitors.

While compressed development in Asia has led to rising inequality, there remains a strong focus on 'frugal innovation', where companies compete to provide low-cost tech solutions to social issues like road construction and healthcare.

Antje noted that the consumer dynamics can be quite different within Asia, and that in some countries a culture of 'saving face' could be a barrier towards innovation as it promoted caution and stigmatized risk taking. Despite this, there is an increasing pace of change in Asia that New Zealand businesses often underestimate, and attentive customer service 24 hours a day is increasingly necessary for NZ companies to stay competitive.

Finally, Antje spoke of the freedom and entrepreneurship in such markets. She explained how countries like Vietnam and China have challenged the traditional western assumption that economic prosperity naturally leads to political freedoms and advised New Zealand businesses to be mindful in how politics can affect business.

### Mitchell Pham



For Mitchell Pham, a serial entrepreneur who has spent decades working with and in Southeast Asia, New Zealand businesses seeking to interact with the region need to understand a simple formula: 'Presence + Engagement = Relevance'.

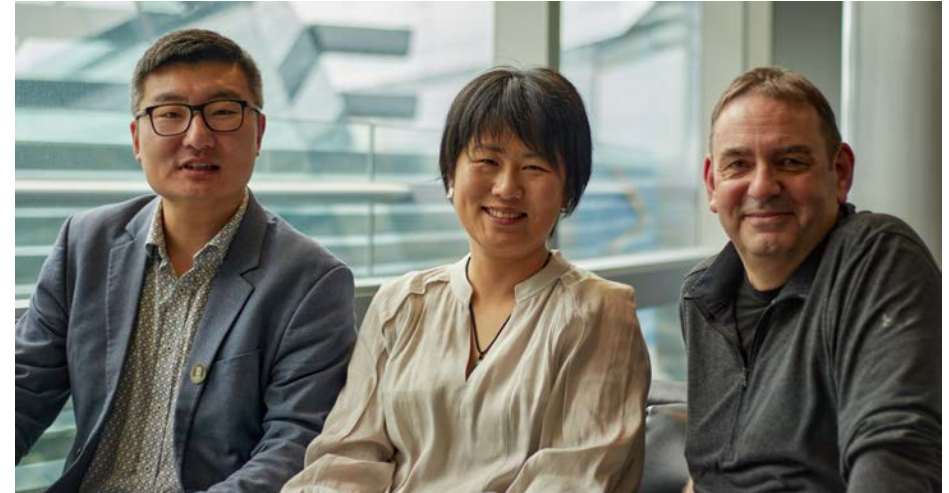
Mitchell built on Antje's point around the diversity of Asia to focus on what unites the Asian market. He talked about the high level of digitalization in Asia, emphasizing the rate of digital update in Vietnam above 100%! He noted the consequent high appetite of businesses in Asia for digital tools and services, explaining that businesses need to understand their customers' wants and needs.

He paid special attention to the Vietnamese market, commenting on the developed innovation ecosystem, the access to talent in programming and other hi-tech areas, and the development of Vietnam as a regional hub for innovative fields such as EdTech, FinTech, AgriTech and HealthTech. He drew a parallel with the domestic tech market in New Zealand, pointing out that tech is currently our fastest growing industry, as well as a key enabler of productivity in our other industries.

Mitchel then commented on the relationship between New Zealand and Asia and the way that it can benefit both parties, seeing Asia's challenges as New Zealand's opportunities. He noted that sometimes it can be easier to develop new technology in western countries that already have specialized expertise in certain sectors, such as New Zealand with AgriTech, but that equally, companies can find an advantage in the less heavily regulated markets in Asia. He ended the Keynote with the observation that, while New Zealand is renowned for our 'DIY culture', perhaps it is time to move past this tradition, and get better at working collaboratively with international partners.

## Panel Discussion: Showcasing success stories

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The panel for this year's symposium was composed of:

- Patrick English, Director of Taimoana Consulting, Executive Director of the NZ China Council and former New Zealand Consul General to Guangzhou, China.
- Dr Mian Wu, Managing Director of Alllink, scholar, entrepreneur, and investor.
- Daniel Wang, Co-founder and Executive Director of Ebaytown China and Southern Pacific Foods.

The panel was introduced and moderated by Max Johansson-Pugh from the Asia Savvy Student Committee.

## Patrick English



Patrick English took us on his journey from doing a Masters in International Management in New Zealand, to serving in Malaysia, Shanghai, and Guangzhou for New Zealand Trade and Enterprise.

In his speech, he focused on the importance of leveraging New Zealand's expertise in agriculture and primary industries to build relationships across Asia. A strong believer in science and technology, he also sees the enduring need to maintain expertise in food and primary industries, observing humorously: 'I love tech, but I don't know how many people have eaten their phones'.

Patrick framed the issue in terms of New Zealand's strengths, reminding us, that as a country of 5 million people, we make enough food for 40 million and enough dairy for 95 million. He noted the natural compatibility with partners in Asia of our focus on primary industries, focusing on Japan in particular as a country with very few people working in the countryside and an extremely low percentage of productive land (28%) to support their population of 120 million.

Patrick discussed the importance of a shared value of science and technology as a 'common language' that New Zealand and Asian countries can share. He drew on his experience representing the NZ Ministry of Primary Industries in Japan, where 'scientific diplomacy' had enabled them to improve trade relationships by first building educational and scientific relationships. In particular, targeting a 'local

gatekeeper', the Field for Knowledge, Integration, and Innovation (FKII) program run by Japan's Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, allowed them to create strong connections between five universities, dozens of corporations, and the NZ and Japanese governments.

In his conclusion, Patrick emphasized the importance of collaboration and communication for New Zealand as a small market seeking to engage with the broader world.

## Mian Wu



Mian Wu is a scholar, investor, and entrepreneur. She discussed her journey from being a PhD student in International Business to becoming Director at Alllink, a company partnering with Chinese tech giants like Tencent, Alibaba, and Huawei.

Mian began her story by telling us of her decision, in the last year of her PhD to change her thesis topic and to start from scratch. In particular she described humorously the 7-hour conversation that she had with her supervisor, in which she was told that she was 'too young and too naïve'. In fact, Mian notes, this is a good thing to hear from someone – when you hear this you know for sure that you are innovating!

Despite the panic from her supervisor, Mian rewrote the thesis and was published in top journals. This achievement concluded, she decided to start a business as a 'supermarket for digital platforms' for consumers in Australia and NZ.

Mian offered the advice that if you want to innovate, then you should have a look at what others are doing. When she was first setting up the company, she visited China, Singapore and Australia to see what was happening in these markets and learn from business models overseas. Then she returned, bringing what she had learned back to New Zealand.

She spoke of the difficulty of the comparatively slow pace of technology in New Zealand and the suspicious attitude that NZ banks have towards emerging technologies. In particular, she recalled the challenge of setting up a FinTech bank account in NZ, and of needing to prove that her start-up company did not make money!

Mian ended her speech with the observation that 'when you talk about Asia, you can't avoid Confucius'. She recalled the proverb, 'a wise man or woman is harmonious but different', applying it to the business world to explain that, while in the field of emerging technologies it is important find a niche in which you can compete, it is equally necessary to work within the system and make the most of collaborative relationships.

## Daniel Wang



Daniel Wang, a self-avowed 'smooth peanut butter guy', wasn't sure what to do after graduating with a Masters of Commerce from the University of New South Wales in 2008. So he decided to take 18 months to travel through Asia and Europe to visit friends and learn about food and culture.

Daniel shared the philosophies he developed during this time, that 'what you eat makes you who you are', and that different combinations of food are responsible for different cultures across countries. His experiences on this trip, among them the delight of introducing friends in Italy to a rice cooker, as well as trying a pure vegetarian diet in India, led him to think about food in a different way and started him on a journey of creating a company in the food trade (FMCG) industry.

As co-founder and executive director of Ebaytown and later Southern Pacific Foods, Daniel was able to develop his passion of growing international business between New Zealand and China, particularly in the food export industry. He described the process of leading Pic's Peanut Butter strategy in China and his involvement in online and offline channels prior to and during the pandemic.

As the largest producer of peanuts in the world, he reflected that, at first, selling a peanut related product to China was considered crazy. However, by finding a niche market of premium and health foods, by targeting the baby food market in particular, and by employing targeting advertising through Chinese platforms such as Weibo, Douyin, and Little Red Book, Daniel was able to take Pic's from an unknown brand to the #1 Peanut Butter in China!

## Asia New Zealand Foundation



BoBae Wilson, Project Coordinator at the Asia New Zealand Foundation introduced the mission of the Asia New Zealand Foundation of 'equipping New Zealanders to thrive in Asia'. An organization established in 1994, the Asia New Zealand Foundation is a non-profit that seeks to help Kiwis to gain knowledge, connections and confidence in Asia, through business and entrepreneurship programmes, internships and media and sports engagements.

BoBae next introduced Kahu Tapsell-Bennett, a University of Auckland MBA student who had recently participated in an Asia New Zealand Foundation internship in Singapore. Kahu recalled the experience in terms of its 'positive impact on her innovative spirit', describing the professional and cultural confidence that she had developed as a result. Kahu also spoke to the importance of the connections she developed in Singapore for her future career and the opportunities for work in the international space that she received following the internship.

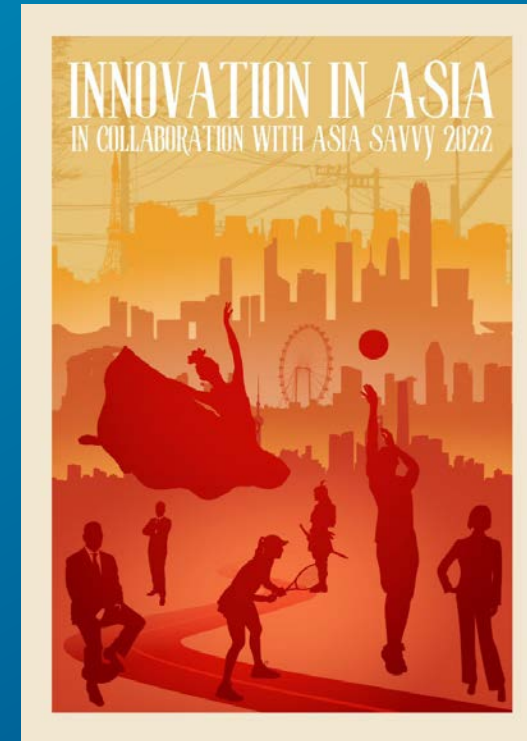
## Wrap Up - Natasha Hamilton Hart

Natasha wrapped up the symposium by thanking the speakers, audience and student committee for making Asia Savvy 2022 possible. In her reflection on the kōrero of the day, she drew upon threads from each of the different speeches to form a broad conclusion. Rather than the stereotype of a genius on their own in a basement, in fact innovation in Asia is a process of cross-pollination, where you watch, listen and learn from others. It is up to New Zealanders to seize new opportunities for learning and exchange as borders start to open again. She concluded by encouraging the students present to continue thinking about the Asian region and to be on the lookout for opportunities to collaborate and learn.



## Poster presentation

This year **Aimee Lew**, a Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science Student with the University of Auckland presented her winning poster to the audience explaining the concept in her abstract below.



### Extended Concept Description

This poster encapsulates the broad and diverse faces of innovation in Asia. In the background, a mesh of telephone wires symbolises technological innovation.

Four different cityscapes, each one a major regional economic hub, embody Asia's rapid development.

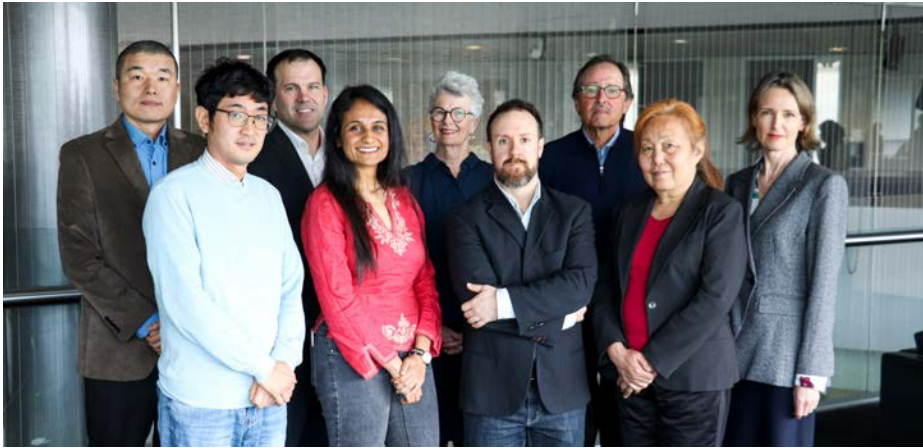
The silhouettes of a samurai and a Chinese folk dancer hold space for Asian arts and culture; two athletes for innovation in high-performance sport; three businesspeople for the booming financial and corporate sector.

The colour palette uses red and off-white (in lieu of white) because these shades are the most common on the national flags of Asia, and the visual inspiration comes from Japanese shadowboxes, a recreational form of papercraft and origami.

Aimee was congratulated on her excellent poster and awarded first prize of an iPad as the winner of the student poster competition by Natasha Hamilton-Hart.



## The New Zealand Asia Institute



The New Zealand Asia Institute (NZAI) was established in May 1995 as a research institute of the University of Auckland. It has been hosted by the University of Auckland Business School since 2009. The Institute aims to foster better understanding of Asia among New Zealanders and to increase awareness of Asia in this country.

The mission of the NZAI is to:

- Undertake, support and disseminate research that addresses the needs of New Zealanders for improved understanding of contemporary Asia.
- Provide visibility and leadership for the development of research expertise on Asia within the University.
- Contribute to building the capabilities of New Zealand business and government to develop productive relationships in Asia.
- Contribute to developing Asia-relevant awareness, skills and knowledge among students.

As part of the Business School, the NZAI supports the School's strategic focus on knowledge of international business. Our focus on Asia recognizes the importance of this region in economic and cultural terms, and the need to better understand this dynamic region.

The Institute is proud to have supported the Asia Savvy student conference since 2011. Through bringing together and engaging students from across New Zealand, along with businesses and community leaders, we hope to create and sustain a platform for engagement with Asia.

## Acknowledgements

NZAI acknowledges the generous support from sponsors for this year's conference:

- Asia New Zealand Foundation
- Ubiq
- University of Auckland Business School

The Asia Savvy committee thanks Antje Fiedler, Dinah Towle, Mai Pham and Tim Lawler for their valued contributions towards developing the conference along with the ambassadors who volunteered their energy and time towards making the conference a success.

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