

## **A memory of SEACME and EARCOME 1978 – 2013**

*by Lee Peng Yee (Singapore)*

### **The beginning**

This is a brief record of the thirty-five years journey of regional conferences on mathematics education in Southeast and East Asia. First, let us recall when it started, how it started, and why.

The year was 1978. The first Southeast Asian Conference on Mathematics Education (SEACME) was held in Manila, the Philippines. It was the time of Math Reforms spreading around Southeast Asia. The conference attracted over one thousand participants. So many activities took place before and after the conference. It is said that even if the conference did not take place, the effort of hosting it would have been worthwhile.

The Manila conference was initiated by Yuki Yoshi Kawada (Japan), ICMI Secretary 1975-1978. ICMI stands for International Commission on Mathematical Instruction. The author was the broker on behalf of Southeast Asian Mathematical Society (SEAMS). He met Kawada in Tokyo 1976. The hosting of the conference was agreed upon at a dinner party hosted by Bienvenido Nebres (the Philippines) when the author made a stop in Manila on his way home from Japan.

The fact that the conference was well attended showed that there was a great interest in the conference. There were plenty of issues to be discussed, in particular, teacher training and textbook writing due to the Math Reforms. ICME-2 was held in Exeter, England, 1972, where ICME stands for International Congress on Mathematical Education. There were only two participants from Southeast Asia attending the conference. In fact, ICME-1 was mainly a European affair. ICME-3 was held in Karlsruhe, Germany, 1976. At the time, it was not easy for people from Southeast Asia to attend such international conferences. Furthermore, topics discussed at such conferences were often not the topics of our concern. Also, those that are of our concern may not be of interest to the participants in the international conferences. Therefore it is meaningful to hold regional conferences. Over a period of thirty-five years it has been proven that there is also a need to do so.

### **SEACME**

After the success of the first conference, SEACME-2 was held in Kuala Lumpur 1981 and every three years thereafter going round the cities in Southeast Asia. It went on for twenty-one years. In 1999, SEACME-8 returned to Manila. See Appendix for a complete list. Though they were regional conferences, basically they were planned and run by the host countries. The formula is: SEACME is a national conference with regional participation. More precisely, the hosts organized the conference, named the theme, and then shared with the Southeast Asian countries. The formula worked well for all these years.

The series did not necessarily go to a place better prepared for hosting the conference. We took the conference to a place that needed it. It helped the host to level up with the neighbouring countries. This indeed is an objective of the regional conferences. It provided a platform for exchange and a network for cooperation.

Here are some memories. We did bring visitors from far-away countries to come to our conferences. Zbigniew Semadeni (Poland), a mathematician writing books on topology, spoke on primary school mathematics at SEACOME-1. Ubiratan D'Ambrosio (Brazil) has also been invited to one of our conferences. He is known for his being awarded ICMI Felix Klein Medal in 2005. We always involved school teachers. SEACOME-3 at Hat Yai was another good example of school teachers coming together and working for their common interest.

The conference held in Hanoi helped attract more Chinese participants to come to the conference. Zhang Dianzhou (China) was there. Wang Shouren (China) and Gong Sheng (China) were invited to SEACOME-2. Chinese presence was visible only at the later conferences EARCOME-4 and EARCOME-5.

There were other memorable events. The model method was first made public by Kho Tek Hong (Singapore) at SEACOME-4. More than once the conference received the strongest support from the host country. The Sultan of Brunei declared 1990 the year of mathematics. The governor of East Java, the mayor of Surabaya, and the rectors of three local universities in Surabaya hosted the dinners every evening during the conference, and one dinner with songs and dances.

This is the best-attended series of conferences under the sponsorship of Southeast Asian Mathematical Society (SEAMS). Another series, also initiated by SEAMS, is Asian Mathematical Conference (AMC). The first AMC was held in Hong Kong 1990. At the time, Hong Kong was a part of the Southeast Asian community.

## **EARCOME**

The first East Asian Regional Conference on Mathematics Education (EARCOME-1) was held in Korea 1998. The conference site was at Korea National University of Education. The conference set the format of the programme for other conferences that followed. It was organized under the leadership of Park Han Shick (Korea) and Lew Hee Chan (Korea) with the support of their team. In fact, there were two pre-EARCOME, namely, ICMI-China Regional Conference on Mathematics Education, one in Beijing and another in Shanghai. See the appendix.

It was due to the great efforts of a few individuals that made the first ICMI-China conference possible. Other than Zhong Shanji (China) and Ding Ershen (China), who were the host, we should mention Hiroshi Fujita (Japan) and Jerry Becker (US) for their unfailing support. Japanese gave their strong support in the way of participating. There was a delegation from Taiwan. It was the first time for China to make connection in mathematics education with the international community. The second conference was held in Shanghai. There was a long list of prominent speakers at the conference, including one from India. In particular, there was a delegation of Australians. It was supposed to have another conference in 1997. It did not materialize. So we moved on to Korea.

In 2002 at EARCOME-2, the series of SEACOME was merged into EARCOME and henceforth the combined series carried on as EARCOME till now. It was a natural extension from Southeast Asia to East Asia. We can see that the new series was more research orientated, more international, and it had a regular group of supporters. Also, there were new faces and an opportunity for more participants from the host country.

It is of interest to put on record that EARCOME-3 (2005) and EARCOME-4 (2007) were announced at the same time. Since there were two tenders, an arrangement was made that both were accepted and one followed another.

In 2013 at Phuket, we saw a conference mature and comprehensive after a journey of thirty-five years. More can be said about SEACME and EARCOME. However the author recalls only some of the events from his memory.

Every conference has published proceedings. It would be a worthy exercise if we can do an analysis, some would call it meta-analysis, of the invited lectures and presented papers in the conferences. It would provide a reflection of the development of mathematics education in the region.

## **So far**

So far so good. SEACME went through a cycle of seven countries in Southeast Asia. It was held once every three years since 1978. In 2002, it merged with EARCOME at the Singapore conference.

In early days, the one-man site committee had to go round the cities in the region to secure a host. In recent years, there are more countries tendering for the conferences than there are conferences to be tendered. SEACME is basically a regional conference. However EARCOME, in a bigger scale, attracted more participants from the region and also internationally. Furthermore, the structure of the conferences pattern after that of ICME, and yet with a regional flavour. It establishes a forum for mathematics educators, teachers, and other interested parties in the region and beyond. It also complements the international conferences. The conferences always involve school teachers.

For many things that happen now, one can often trace back to early conferences where the contact was made, and the collaboration followed. For example, the contact made at the Shanghai conference 1994 resulted in PMRI in Indonesia. See Lee (2014). PMRI stands for Realistic Mathematics Education in Indonesia, where P in PMRI means pendidikan (education in Indonesian).

After thirty-five years of SEACME and EARCOME, what does the author see in future? We can think of the following three items.

Hopefully the conferences will tour around more cities in East and Southeast Asia, including the greater Mekong sub-region.

Research in mathematics education is connected more closely with development. In other words, it is research not only in mathematics education but also in mathematics education in practice.

More mathematicians participate in the conferences as in the conferences of early days.

*It remains for the author to thank Maitree Inprasitha (Thailand) to invite the author "to say something" about the EARCOME at Phuket in 2013, resulted in the current written version. The author will leave it to other researchers or research students to write a more comprehensive report or thesis on SEACME and EARCOME in due course.*

## References

Lee, P.Y. (1992). A glimpse of SEACME, ICMI Bulletin 33, Dec 1992.

Lim-Teo, S.K. (2008). ICMI activities in East and Southeast Asia: Thirty years of academic discourse and deliberation. Available under *Short Talks* at <http://www.unige.ch/EnsMath/Rome2008/>

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## Appendix List of conferences 1978 - 2015

1978 SEACME 1, Manila, the Philippines

1981 SEACME 2, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

1984 SEACME 3, Hat Yai, Thailand

1987 SEACME 4, Singapore

1990 SEACME 5, Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei

1991 *ICMI-China Regional Conference on Mathematics Education, Beijing, China*

1993 SEACME 6, Surabaya, Indonesia

1994 *ICMI-China Regional Conference on Mathematics Education, Shanghai, China*

1996 SEACME 7, Hanoi, Vietnam

1998 EARCOME 1, Chungbuk, Korea

1999 SEACME 8, Manila, the Philippines

2002 EARCOME 2 cum SEACME 9, Singapore

2005 EARCOME 3, Shanghai, China

2007 EARCOME 4, Penang, Malaysia

2010 EARCOME 5, Tokyo, Japan

2013 EARCOME 6, Phuket, Thailand

2015 EARCOME 7, Cebu, the Philippines

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