Greetings by the Vice-Rector of Heidelberg University, Prof. Dr. jur. Thomas Peiffer

Dear honoured guests and cooperation partners
Dear Members and Staff of the Cluster of Excellence Asia and Europe in a Global Context: Shifting Asymmetries in Cultural Flows
Dear Colleagues
Ladies and Gentlemen

Our university is proud of this Cluster of Excellence and has the greatest hopes for it. After being successful in an open competition without any quota reserved for the humanities and social sciences, the Cluster and the University as a whole now face an even more daunting challenge: Namely, to live up to our own bold and daring expectations.

These are in two realms, research and structural change. This is the first annual conference in which the Cluster will present some of its research results. The shift in research perspective from an approach defined by the nation-state to a perspective that understands all human activity as willing or unwilling parts of vast transcultural flows is an enterprise that is as important and timely as it is risky. No single individual is able to amass the linguistic, cultural, historical, methodological and knowledge competences required to deal with such transcultural flows. It is the strength of this Cluster that it brings together a nearly unique combination of scholars on Asia and Europe, the modern world and ancient history; on texts, art, moving images, and archaeological finds; and with methodological specializations ranging from philology to anthropology, from history to archaeology, from medicine to history of science, from political science to sociology and media studies.

The Cluster has been able to attract a number of younger and senior scholars of renown and promise who have individually developed a transcultural focus. Among them, I am happy to say, women scholars form a very sizeable part. They all will help to bring about what is needed for this enterprise to succeed, a pooling of competences and resources, and cooperative work. It has developed a Ph.D. program to train a next generation of young men and women for whom a transcultural approach is a given. And there is no question, the higher the quality of the results produced by the Cluster the greater the attractiveness of this approach is going to be for scholars still wedded to well-established scholarly fields.

As we can see, even when strictly talking about the research projects of the Cluster, we already are talking structural change in the organization of scholarly work. But there is more. The Cluster set out to help bring the humanities and social sciences structurally into the twenty-first century. This is not an enterprise of an easy afternoon. It involves shifts in the curricula as much as the very challenging development of modularized new study programmes that will be able to draw on the strengths of the different fields. A strategic debate on transculturality has now been started at this university. The faculties concerned have inserted a strong statement of purpose into their “Structure and Development Plans.” In this statement they commit themselves to – and I quote – ‘promote structural change in the humanities’ and social sciences disciplines that takes into account the challenges of a globalized world. For this purpose they have formed a Joint Committee for Transcultural Studies…..They will support an approach that understands transcultural interaction as a normal core feature of all phenomena in human societies past and
present, and integrates in their analysis methodologies in the cultural and social sciences that have been developed in different disciplines."
The university leadership strongly encourages this debate and will do its best to make it part of its strategic orientation.

Time is breathing down our necks. The German government some months ago decided to fund a second round of the Excellency Initiative. In the middle of an economic downturn this was a daring and important decision, highlighting a commitment to the strategic importance of research. The German Research Foundation DFG last week announced the time plan for this second round. It includes an option for an extension of funding for the Clusters of another five years. By early 2011 a decision will be made which of the existing Clusters will be invited to submit an application for extension. It will be based on things achieved - or in visible progress - in research and structural change. This is a bit more than a year from now. The university wants you to succeed in this and will do all it can to facilitate and support your work. But there is only so much we can do. The first review of the research harvest which you are starting today is a great and important moment. I wish you success, new insights, critical challenges, and a boost to the energy with which you are throwing yourself into your work. You and we will need it.

Talk of the Acting Director, Prof. Dr. Rudolf Wagner

The Cluster is now completing its second year. The basic structures have been set up. With our strongly international orientation we have been successful in attracting a very fine group of scholars for newly established professorships that have been designed to link the different fields within the framework of the cluster. Four of the five professorships have been filled, and the new colleagues are with us today. For the fifth – in Buddhist Studies – negotiations have started and I am happy to welcome Dr. Kellner today who will have a look for herself during the next days what dangerous field she might be trotting into. The positions of the junior research group leaders have been filled and the groups are working with great energy. But even if the trees want calm, the wind won't let them. So the first among them Dr. Schenk, just accepted an offer for a professorship. But he will continue to work with the Cluster. Two groups of Ph.D. students have been selected and we are proud to say that the energy and inquisitiveness of the Ph.D. students in the Graduate Program as well as the research projects has been instrumental in keeping us all going. Workshops, conferences and talks are following each other in rapid succession. The Heidelberg Research Architecture has progressed to the point that the raw building now stands, but it is now waiting for people to move in. The first steps towards developing programs of study with a transcultural focus have been taken. This is good, and we owe much thanks for the dedicated work of the people in the Cluster's and the University staff who have made this possible and real.

We are now in the middle stretch of the running of this cluster. The annual review, which we start today, has the purpose of assessing where we are, where we are going, and how we get there. The thrill of the start is receding and as we are racing full speed the eyes start focusing on the final stretch. And, as the vice-rector said, time is breathing down our necks. The government decided in the middle of a precipitous financial downturn, to stick with the plan of
making a bold and strategic investment into the parched fields of academia. This includes a second round of the Excellency Initiative, which in turn includes the option of an extension of the existing clusters for another five years. The evaluations of the existing Clusters will have to start twelve months from now so that by early 2011 decisions can be made which Clusters will be invited to apply for extension. We may complain that there is a flaw in the original design, because it takes a while to get such an enterprise going, and barely we are done with this, the time is approaching for results to be evaluated. Some of you who have played racket sports know that a racket has a sweet spot. If the racket hits the ball in this spot, control over speed and placing is optimal. Some rackets are designed to have larger sweet spot, the Clusters of this first round are designed with a very small sweet spot during which optimal research conditions prevail, soberly speaking twelve to eighteen months out of five years. A success in the extension of the Cluster for another five years would give us a hugely enlarged sweet spot. This would allow us to fully develop our approaches, to foster solid growth of a young generation of researchers for whom transcultural studies is the daily routine not a weekend escapade, and to develop and test study programs with a transcultural focus. In short to achieve the structural aims of this Cluster besides the research aims. In other words, it will be crucial for us to succeed in this competition. Bluntly speaking, this will only be possible if twelve months from now the viability of our approach is visible in tangible research results of high quality and innovative power. The approach we have chosen in this Cluster is not mainstream staple fare, and comes with the thrill and danger of a high risk enterprise. There are many colleagues in well-established traditional fields who are waiting to see what we can come up with. I sense no hostility, but rather a basic and growing willingness to test a transcultural approach. But the case of the Cluster hangs on its coming up with results that are so attractive, convincing, innovative and sophisticated that even the most hesitant colleagues will be attracted. The leaders of the research areas, of the projects as well as the leading bodies of the Cluster altogether have a huge responsibility here to encourage, help, push and themselves take the lead.

The annual conference this year has been conceptualized and organized by Christiane Brosius and Roland Wenzlhuemer. This has been a challenging and energy-consuming task, and we owe them deep gratitude for their work. They have suggested “Flows of Images and Media” as the umbrella topic for this year. We are all looking forward to review this first harvest of some of our efforts.