

# ACADEMIC PUBLISHING TODAY



ICAS 5, Kuala Lumpur, 2-5 August 2007



## FROM THE ICAS SECRETARIAT

The International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS) is a meeting place for academics from all over the world to discuss new insights in Asia Studies in a multidisciplinary context. Members of other spheres of civil society are challenged to get involved in the debates, and we hope to encourage young academics, in particular, to get involved in the panels and roundtables. ICAS has grown into the largest biennial Asia Studies event worldwide. It is also the only major, regular Asia Studies event to take place in Asia. On average, the number of participants is fifteen hundred. For details see [www.icassecretariat.org](http://www.icassecretariat.org)

This ICAS insert to the *IIAS Newsletter* tracks developments in academic publishing in the field of Asia Studies.

Are you wondering how to keep up? *New Asia Books* is a website which enables you to stay on top of new titles in the field of Asia Stud-

ies. Do you dream of winning the ICAS Book Prize? Read the interview with the Chairman of the IBP Reading Committee. Are you hungry? Use this insert to keep your snacks hot!

### ICAS Secretariat

Prof. Wim Stokhof  
**Secretary General**  
Dr Paul van der Velde  
**Secretary**  
Josine Stremmelaar, MA  
**Executive Officer**

P.O. Box 9515  
2300 RA Leiden  
the Netherlands  
T +31-71-5272227  
F +31-71-5274162  
[icas@let.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:icas@let.leidenuniv.nl)  
[www.icassecretariat.org](http://www.icassecretariat.org)

## Who Wants to Buy Your Book?

**Dayaneetha De Silva**  
*Fireflybooks, Malaysia*  
[fireflybooks@gmail.com](mailto:fireflybooks@gmail.com)

It may seem to readers of this Newsletter who have been desperately trying to get their work published, that there is some kind of secret society of Asia Studies publishers, with just a few gatekeepers who have secret handshakes and give the nod to one title while surreptitiously burying another for no discernible reason.

You may have struggled painfully with reshaping your doctoral or master's thesis based on advice from supervisors, examiners, and kind colleagues. You may have read the writing on the wall, have counted the dead (fellow researchers' theses lying in crypts, or the dreaded reject piles), and be envious of the lucky few. In general, you will not have been trained to write directly or elegantly - to express ideas without the props of extensive referencing, for instance. After all, the whole exercise of researching and writing a thesis has

very little to do with the finished product being an exciting read, or having broad, cross-disciplinary appeal.

Mindful of the generally disproportionate impact your first publisher will have on your academic career, you start touting around your book proposal, aiming as 'high' as you can - established, prestigious US or British university presses or, more realistically, a good, commercial institutional or regional press. After a polite acknowledgement, you

very little to do with the finished product being an exciting read, or having broad, cross-disciplinary appeal. In fact, it is probably languishing in some peer reviewer's reading pile, under her or his own backlog of marking, writing or research. And the rejection, when it finally comes, rarely tells you much about why this particular publisher cannot take on your book or what you could do to improve your chances of getting it published. Most publishers have little time to give you personal feedback and advice, and peer reviews are often not written with a view to making helpful suggestions.

*"Thank you for submitting your manuscript. Unfortunately, we are no longer taking on monographs by unknown Southeast Asianists, unless they are about why fishermen from failed states may turn their boats into explosive devices or touch in some significant way upon the lives of Tibetan Buddhist nuns."*

may have to wait for weeks for a reaction, and then, if you are fortunate, you will be asked to submit chapters or the entire manuscript. After you have submitted your material, it may disappear from sight for several months, seeming-

If you are lucky, a senior or commissioning editor will follow through and support you in making revisions or finding an alternative publisher, but this is becoming rare. Financially challenged and poorly staffed, publishers are too

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# New Website: New Asia Books

busy preparing those manuscripts that they have accepted to spend much time on those that they have rejected. Publications with separate funding or institutional links often have to take priority, which doesn't make it easy for publishers to hold on to at least some degree of independence. Even established scholars and their seminal books can get less than the care and attention their work deserves before, during or after publication.

The entire system seems overstretched, unkind, and under-productive – but not, generally, for lack of competence or from any ill will. There is just so much slippage between what could be and what actually is, and we are all hostages to the economics of book publishing.

## What is to be done?

But economics only explains part of the malaise in academic publishing on Asia, and in particular that on Southeast Asia. There is room for much more imagination and collaboration, more bridging between languages, more writing against the grain.

We need more readers, writers, good editors, translators, book collectors, erudite librarians, bibliophiles, book designers, publishers, specialist and general booksellers. We need to buy more books and sustain the entire spectrum of the culture of the book. We need to publish more intellectually engaging, accessible and productive books on 'Asia'. We need to inject more boldness, brilliance - and fun - into publishing on Asia. Here are a few places where I think you could begin:

### Write better book manuscripts

- Go through your notes carefully: there may be something that captures the spirit of your research and would make a far better book than a reworked thesis. There may be someone you interviewed or discovered who deserves an entire biography, images which could be annotated and published, one thesis chapter that could be expanded to book length, or...
- Writing is difficult, writing well is a craft and an art, a lifelong learning process; you should be prepared to work hard at your writing
- Please: don't produce another edited volume. They suck up time and funding and are generally a waste of energy: 90 percent of them are hastily put together as a postscript to a conference or workshop, need a huge amount of editorial work to be turned into books, and then hardly anyone buys or reads them. The vast majority could more fruitfully be published electronically

### Support your colleagues' efforts

- If you are asked to peer review a manuscript, set aside time to do this as soon as you can, within reason. If you are too busy, let the publisher know right away. And when you produce your report, try and make it useful for the author by giving clear recommendations on revisions and changes you think are needed
- Promote the work of other scholars,

buy their books, use them in your teaching, review them in major newspapers as well as in specialist journals

### Support those outside the mainstream

- Discover and approach publishers in India, China, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Europe – there are scores of great (small) publishers struggling to survive in countries other than the United States and the United Kingdom
- Try to insist on affordable paperback editions of your book. And try to find ways to make sure some copies are donated to poorer institutions, libraries and researchers in the region you write about

### Support publishers in general

- A polished book is a collaborative effort and needs a good publisher and an experienced editor, working with a painstaking typesetter and designer, perhaps an indexer, an efficient printer, interested marketing people and booksellers. Consider it your job as an author to support them all
- Get involved in editing, translating, book binding and publishing
- Read for pleasure and rediscover favourite writers, read outside your field, read (and write and publish, if you can) in languages other than English
- Buy more books for yourself and as gifts. Order and buy from publishers' backlists and from smaller and specialist bookshops rather than just sourcing everything from chainstores and large online stores

And above all, challenge the status quo, spread the word, and (just occasionally) switch off the TV and the PC and the iPod-and just read.

### Thomas Voorter

Internet Coordinator IIAS, Leiden  
info@newasiabooks.org

Two years ago, IIAS (International Institute for Asia Studies) used the ICAS 4 conference to announce the creation of a website for new publications in Asia Studies. Now we are pleased to say that the *New Asia Books* website will be launched at the ICAS 5 conference.

*New Asia Books* makes it much easier for academics to identify, evaluate and purchase new publications in their fields. The website lists academic books published on Asia in the preceding 12 months (using rich data obtained from Nielsen BookData, a major bibliographic data provider), and it encourages academics, including authors, to review and comment on the books listed.

### Adding value for the academic community

This unique site focuses exclusively on new books, with no listing older than 12 months, and shows only titles that are currently in print. The site is aimed first and foremost at academics and students within Asia Studies, but we believe it will also be useful for non-specialist, non-academic research and for the informed public.

The idea behind the site is to free academics and students from time-consuming and potentially unproductive searches for new material. A book search on a site such as Amazon will throw up a long list of responses relating to books published several years ago-books that an experienced academic will either already have read or have made an active decision not to read. *New Asia Books* presents the user only with exactly what is necessary: a list of new and recent publications in the field.

*New Asia Books* also provides a platform for book reviews. We aim to be the first to publish reviews of new titles. All too often, there is a long gap between the time that a book is pub-

lished and when the first reviews appear. It is by no means unusual for 12, 18 or even 24 months to pass between publication and the first review article. Authors wait with growing impatience, and book buyers are left with little guidance about which titles to purchase or recommend to their university libraries. *New Asia Books* plugs this gap. We provide a forum for site users and authors to write quick reviews and comment on new titles in a true community dialogue. We believe this is a particularly useful way of sharing early experiences with potential new textbooks.

### Ensuring high-quality data

*New Asia Books* can always be relied upon to contain the very latest information. Regular users of web-based book sites know that while many organisations have created attractive and user-friendly sites, many fall down in the longer term because site owners cannot invest the time to keep information up-to-date. *New Asia Books* avoids this trap as each search response page is created directly from our database, and the database is fully updated at least once a month.

Publishers are invited to join as *New Asia Books* partners. Partners will have password protected access to the site, enabling them to update and add material to the title records in the *New Asia Books* database. Each partner has a profile page where all contact and direct ordering information can be listed. *New Asia Books* partners are entitled to an upgraded service, with a clickable logo linking to the partner's profile page. This feature makes it easy for site users to move from searching to purchasing, and gives publishers an opportunity to present themselves directly to their audience. *New Asia Books* partners can also link to web-based book sellers on their product pages. The cost of joining as a partner is available on request.

To find out more about how the site works and how you can ensure that your book gets a comprehensive and prominent listing, visit [www.newasiabooks.org](http://www.newasiabooks.org) or send an email to [info@newasiabooks.org](mailto:info@newasiabooks.org)