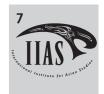# Enabling Intra-Asian Conversation

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Although the mass media tend to focus on tensions in East Asia, across the Taiwan Straits, between China and Japan, and of course in the Korean Peninsula, there is in fact much constructive intellectual interaction within the region. While much debate goes on within each country between its public intellectuals and intellectual publics, there are many thinkers in each country who wish to communicate across national and language barriers. A particularly lively field where there is vigorous academic exchange is the study of popular culture as the topic increasingly demands a transnational perspective.

## Gatekeepers

Although some scholars are impressively multi-lingual, it is inevitable that English is the predominant medium of communication for such cross-border endeavours. English is not just used as a *lingua franca*. It also provides, in a certain sense, a neutral linguistic territory. But while the language might be characterised as neutral in one sense, it also brings with it a strong directionality because of the particular available mechanisms for disseminating academic work written in English. That directionality (towards the Anglo-American Centre) is a result of the domination of the English language academic media by large publishing houses and by the values, perspectives and interests of the Anglo-American scholars who tend to control the publishing programmes, both books and journals, of those publishing houses.

Of course, in most cases there are local language media for publishing academic work. But because of language barriers and because such media tend not to have international distribution, they do not reach interested scholars across the region let alone globally. So there is an enforced dependence even for intra-regional dissemination on Anglo-American publishers.

However, the biases of these publishers make it difficult to publish work on the popular culture of the East Asian region, and so the dependence on them to provide channels for international communication in English inhibits research on popular culture and inhibits research cross-fertilisation within the region. The problems raised by this dependence on the Anglo-American publishers can be categorised as issues of contextual information, of approaches, of cultural perspectives, and of language.

For example, if a regional scholar has written an analysis of a television programme from one of the countries of the region, the gate keepers of the American or British journal are going to have problems in understanding his or her exploration of something about which they have no knowledge. They are therefore likely to reject the article. If they do not, they are going to require substantial additional descriptive material that will seem unnecessary for regional readers. This difficulty was nicely encapsulated from an Australian perspective by Meaghan Morris when she described 'sweating to get an article on Rugby League past American referees'. Given that publication length is always severely constrained, the demand for such additional material to explain context effectively excludes some of the analysis that is the main purpose of the work.

More seriously, the Anglo-American gate keepers will want articles to address intellectual questions of interest to them and their colleagues. Thus the analysis, not just the facts, is forced into a particular strait-jacket that may not fit the phenomenon being investigated or the interests and aims of the author and his or her regional readers. This is a hurdle for authors, but also a substantial barrier to the development of new theoretical ideas by regional scholars. If they wish to explore questions or adopt approaches that do not have traction with Anglo-American scholars, their articles will be rejected.

Perhaps overlapping the previous issue, but nonetheless distinct, is the question of cultural perspective. While some scholars have been trained in American graduate schools and to a considerable degree socialised into the Anglo-American academic machine, many will have been trained in their own countries, or other countries of the region. They will bring to their research and writing viewpoints and ways of thinking that are alien to those of the Anglo-American tradition. Of course this also applies to the deep-seated attitudes and values of their countries that they bring to their work. Again these assumptions, ways of thinking and values will pose problems of comprehension for Anglo-American reviewers who will try and force the papers into a value set with which they are comfortable.

A fourth perhaps lesser point is the stringent requirements of standard English that many journals impose on their contributors. There is a strong movement to recognise that there are many variants of English and that one may be no more right or uniquely acceptable than another. African-American perhaps led the way in forcing recognition that there may no longer be one received form of the language. But even if one does not accept the fracturing of English, the requirement of standard English places just one more impediment in the way of scholars for whom the language is not their first.

So there is the paradox that regional scholars need the *lingua franca* of English but the publishing outlets for work in English set requirements for submissions that subvert the intellectual programmes of regional scholars. The obvious solution is to establish regional English publishing outlets and the main purpose of this article is to report on a transnational effort in this direction. But first, I will allow myself some special pleading by saying that dealing with this paradox is Hong Kong University Press's primary mission: to offer global distribution of works in English, but without forcing those works into an Anglo-American intellectual and contextual mode. But economic realities permit us only to be receptive to some subjects, so a truly transnational endeavour is called for.

## Going transnational

Under the intellectual leadership (and driven by his energy and connections) of Professor Chen Kuan-hsing of the National Tsinghua University of Taiwan, a group of regional scholars and publishers have been meeting to endeavour to shape a truly transnational publishing project. The precise form of the scheme is still under discussion and so what follows is very much my own vision of how this might work.

As well as providing the needed outlet for regional works, I see an important value in nurturing independent minded publishing houses in every country. Whereas this is not an issue in most of the large countries of the region which have vigorous publishing industries (albeit in the national languages), it is a serious concern for some countries within and on the periphery of the region. This is an important issue in other regions and thus it is important that this East Asian scheme be designed to nurture local publishers, because I see this endeavour in East Asia as a prototype for a wider scheme (or schemes) that enables the sharing of academic work around the periphery without central mediation (and shaping).

The simple idea then is for a publisher, having originated a work, to offer it as a digital file to a network of receiving publishers, each of whom can choose whether or not to take the work. If they do take it, they can tailor the way it is published to the needs and purchasing powers of their own customers. Aside from the originating publisher, others bear no first copy costs. Therefore what might well be uneconomic for a publisher faced with the full costs of publication can be viable with smaller sales and/or lower prices for the receiving publishers. In addition, the scheme requires a simple and standard process for determining rights and royalties to be paid to the originating publisher. Terms need to be generous for the receiving publishers because most sales within a single country will be small. But terms can be generous because sales made by a receiving publisher in its country will usually be incremental sales, not substitutes for the export sales of the originating publisher.

Returning to the primary objective, the need is to obtain for each work in English written by a regional scholar the widest distribution within the region. The network of publishers means that in each national (or sub-regional) market the book is being handled by a publisher who knows that market, its needs and how best to reach the relevant readership.

This does not preclude distribution in the US, UK etc, but it does make those markets less crucial and therefore permits scholars successfully to publish work without bending and shaping it to the requirements of Anglo-American publishers, gatekeepers and scholars. Whether our final structure will be something like this or not, the fundamental purpose is to create a way for regional scholars to cross national boundaries and engender transnational intellectual discourse.