

# A conversation in Asian studies The H-ASIA story

Scholars are a talkative lot; we thrive on conversation. Our lives are made up of conversation. To paraphrase Thomas Erickson, in conversation we create, develop, validate and share knowledge, and in the give and take – questions and answers, misunderstandings, corrections and elaborations – we find means to unpack, share and explicate complex subjects.<sup>1</sup>

Frank F. Conlon

FOR THE PAST FIFTEEN YEARS, one conversation among a growing community of Asia specialists has been sustained by H-ASIA, the Asian studies and history network of H-NET, a world-spanning consortium of scholarly lists concerning humanities and social sciences online. The H-NET mission has been built upon a vision: of creating and enhancing international, electronic communication within communities of scholars, teachers, advanced students, and related professionals and of facilitating the electronic transmission of information by those committed to research, teaching, learning, public outreach, and professional service in the humanities and social sciences.<sup>2</sup>

H-ASIA was launched in 1994 with 12 members in 2 countries (US and Japan); today its membership numbers over 4700 members in 68 countries from Argentina to Vietnam. Most members post items only occasionally, but we know from other comments that many 'listen in' and, as one member put it, 'feel as if I have a lot of valuable colleagues on whom I may call, and from whom I learn a lot.' In other words, H-ASIA fits the general definition of a 'community of practice' – a term born in cognitive anthropology and adopted by the field of knowledge management to depict a cluster of practitioners who, by sharing learning, expand their community and enrich their own knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

While a major characteristic of H-ASIA posts involves gaining and sharing knowledge with distant colleagues, many posts are devoted to calls for papers for conferences, symposia and edited volumes, notices of member publications, notes on new teaching and research resources, book reviews and – a much used feature – job notices. For persons at major universities and centres of Asian studies, probably many of these sorts of resources are available close by from colleagues and research collections. However, most Asia specialists are not at major centres, and H-ASIA has provided a means to overcoming the 'tyranny of distance.'

For example, the Calls for Papers give isolated scholars a greater chance at participation in events that were formerly often noted in quarterly newsletters received by post well after the deadlines for submission of proposals. H-ASIA has played a role in formation of conference panels, and has served as a medium for greater inclusion of Asia-related papers and panels at disciplinary conferences. There is also a degree of democratisation in our process. While we limit membership to academics – both faculty and graduate students, researchers, independent scholars, librarians and bibliographers – we generally post only with reference to name and institution. Our members do not invoke the distances of 'status' in their willingness to share information or to offer comments.

An important distinction for H-ASIA is that it is moderated by a team of volunteer editors who evaluate proposed posts, tweak subject lines and, in some instances, encourage participation in discussions.<sup>4</sup> While one might imagine an editorial task being one of preventing 'flames' and inappropriate posts, somehow over the years, members of H-ASIA have evolved their own sense of civility – editorial interventions are few and far between. The H-ASIA team is always prepared to welcome new volunteers for editing, book-review editing or new web-based related activities that will emerge in the future.

The 'threads' of discussions may involve only a few posts or many; some stimulate participation from only one or two members, others stimulate lengthy debates. A sample of discussion subjects may give a sense of content: textbooks on human rights in East Asia, the control and use of alum in Ming China, ethnographies of 'failed' development projects, comfort women in World War II, introduction of tobacco into India, the controversies of the Smithsonian exhibit on Hiroshima, the career of the quotation about 'destroying a village in order to save it' in the Vietnam War, Gavin Menzies' book on Zheng He (Cheng Ho) 1421 and its critics, and ideas and sources on the teaching of the partition of India.

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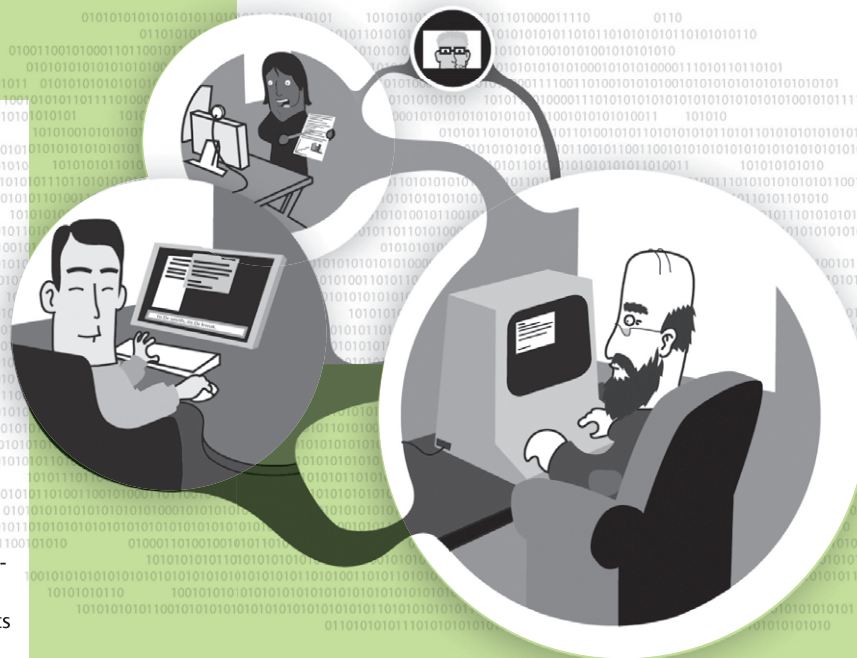
Because H-ASIA's members dwell in virtually every time zone of the globe our conversations are, by nature, asynchronous. Gratification is not instant, yet I believe this contributes to a more measured and thoughtful participation by members. What is clear is that H-ASIA serves to overcome various 'tyrannies of distance' – our numbers are growing particularly in Asia. Beyond physical distances there also are status distances. Without setting it as a goal, the H-ASIA team has contributed to a democratisation of knowledge and scholarly communication, where participants' rank and status are irrelevant. Some years ago in response to a survey, one member said of H-ASIA, 'it helps me feel connected to a broader intellectual community in my field. I can keep abreast of publications, conferences and jobs, and what issues are most contentious among scholars.' In continuing to meet such expectations, H-ASIA has flourished thus far for 15 years – its editors and community will hope to continue evolving as a useful and humane link among scholars around the world.

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H-NET Home Page: <http://www.h-net.org/>  
H-ASIA Home page: <http://www.h-net.org/~asia/>

#### Sources/notes

1. Thomas Erickson, 'Persistent Conversation: An Introduction' *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 4:4 June 1999. <<http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol4/issue4/ericksonintro.html>>
2. H-NET Mission Statement <<http://www.h-net.org/about/mission.php>>
3. Etienne Wenger, (1998), *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998
4. Current editorial staff currently includes, besides Frank Conlon, Kate Brittlebank (University of Tasmania), Ryan Dunch (University of Alberta), Linda Dwyer. (Salisbury State University), Andrew Field (CIEE, Shanghai), Sumit Guha (Rutgers University) and Ming-te Pan (SUNY-Oswego).



## How to join H-ASIA

1. Send a post (with subject line empty) to [listserv@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:listserv@h-net.msu.edu) with the message

SUB H-ASIA Your first name Your surname, your institution

[e.g. SUB H-ASIA Al Einstein, Univ of Southern North Dakota].

(Note that the comma appears only between your surname and your institution)

2. This post will generate an automated acknowledgment containing a request for subscriber information which must be completed and returned to our subscription editor. (The return address appears on the request form.) When that form has been completed and returned the subscription editor will add your name to the H-ASIA list.

Searchable logs of over 35,000 H-ASIA posts may be consulted at <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=lm&list=H-Asia>

## Getting Published: A companion for the humanities and social sciences

Gerald Jackson and Marie Lenstrup, 2009.  
NIAS Press: Copenhagen.

Book review by Julian Millie

Most academics will aspire at one time or another to writing a scholarly monograph. It is not surprising, then, that a body of 'how-to' literature has appeared to assist them. *Getting Published* is the work of two enterprising publishing insiders with much experience in the field of academic publishing: Jackson is editor-in-chief of the wonderful NIAS Press, while Lenstrup runs a consultancy business for academic publishers. This attractively written book takes us through the process of production of a scholarly monograph, commencing from the planning process and concluding with delivery.

The book will be of great use to first-time writers and especially scholars who wish to convert their thesis into a book. For these scholars, the chapters on book-planning and thesis conversion in *Getting Published* are, I think, essential reading. But experienced

academics will also benefit. Chapter Two, entitled 'Planning your book', served as a useful checking exercise for my own current writing project, reacquainting me with a number of realities of academic publishing. Apart from that, readers will appreciate the up to date discussions on issues of relevance to academic writing more broadly. These include a description of the pros and cons of e-publishing, and an account of the effects of on-line access on the economies of journal publishing. I had a number of revelatory moments: the discussion of the differing economies of hardback and paperback publishing gave me a greater understanding of some contemporary practices of the academic publishing industry.

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The book is written in a second-person frame, addressing the reader as if she were a writer undergoing the publishing process. This feature gives the text an accessible, relaxed feel. This is a good choice by Jackson and Lenstrup, as the subject matter is one that is likely to cause some anxiety to academics, who are being called upon to be expert in increasingly varied registers of writing: different challenges are posed by theses, books, grant applications and general media pieces. These distinctions create pressure on academics, especially on academics recently emerging from the doctoral process. These people have thorough training in methodology, scholarly method and research skills. Writing is merely something they have had to do in order to materialise

this. It is the same for reading. Even though their research experience will in most cases have given them a vast competency in reading difficult texts, they are never required to think critically about reading. I was completely unprepared for an editor's simple instruction that I should 'write a text that is readable for a general reader'. This was a figure with whom I had to consciously familiarise myself, and I still have only a vague idea of who he is. *Getting Published* surveys such problems, providing an important discussion largely avoided in academic training.

*Getting Published* caused me the occasional flash of anxiety. It stimulated glimpses of a repugnant figment of my own imagination: the can-do academic able to perform high-quality research that is then transferred directly to prose so clear that 'your mother could read it' (the old chestnut!); who will effortlessly enter into a contract with his or her choice of marquee publishers; and who is able to draw infatuated media attention of the academic and normal worlds to their publications. This person appeared in my mind's eye when I read the authors' injunction for us to not be shy about promoting our work; 'Grab every opportunity to broadcast the merits of your book to the academic community and the world at large'. The figment also popped up when I read the authors' implication that, in the interests of clarity, the sentence 'High-quality learning environments are a necessary precondition for the facilitation and enhancement of the ongoing learning process' was inferior to 'Children need good schools if they are to learn properly'.