

Choosing the right publisher

Is it wise to invest a lot of time and effort in completing a manuscript without first soliciting a commitment from a publisher to turn it into a book? Perhaps not. A well-written book proposal, a specimen chapter and the author's curriculum vitae is all that most publishers require to indicate their interest in a project, and it may indeed be enough to allow them to make a decision. Quite a few presses are happy to offer a contract to publish an as-yet-unwritten work, their position being safeguarded by a catch-all clause in the author contract that allows them to cancel publication if the work when submitted does not live up to the expectations raised by the book proposal and/or does not receive the backing of peer reviewers. For the author, such an agreement offers a measure of security, an incentive to invest time and effort in the manuscript, and the best chance of getting the material published while it is still fresh.¹

Marie Lenstrup

THERE IS NO ONE RIGHT PUBLISHER for a particular text, so how do you go about deciding which press to approach first about your next book project? One fruitful way is to use a three-stage process. The first step is to identify all the possibilities, the second step is to narrow down the field using a range of criteria, and the third step is to prioritise the candidates. That way, you will be making a well-informed decision about who to offer your work, and should the first choice not be sufficiently interested, you will already know who is next in line.

Identifying the candidates

First, find out who is publishing in your field simply by identifying the publishers with more than one recent book (a) on your own bookshelves, (b) in your subject category at your university library, (c) in the reference lists of books to which you would like to compare your own work, and (d) in the reference list of your own manuscript. You can broaden the results by finding a well-known book on Amazon or Google Books and then searching for other books with the same subject tags.

Next, check who exhibits at the main conferences in your field, either by making the rounds at the next events (which also allows you to pick up contact details and perhaps chat to a couple of editors) or by visiting the websites of the associations organising the most important events in your academic calendar.

Lastly, you may want to find out who is eager for new material, by reviewing book catalogues and by visiting publishers' websites to see how prominently they present their sections of material for authors. In other words, which publishers make it easy for a potential author to get in touch?

Whittling down the list

The next stage is to chip away at the long-list to create a short-list of those presses that best suit your needs, circumstances and perhaps your ethical/political position. This involves asking a range of questions about what type of publisher you would prefer to work with to see if any of the candidates can be discounted. Not all the points discussed below will matter to each author, but these are the basic considerations that should be relevant.

Academic acceptability. Is it essential for you that the press is recognised in the academic world as a guarantor of the scholarly quality of their books? Will you need to present your book as an academically validated element of a job application or research assessment? If so, you must eliminate from your long-list any publishers that do not operate a peer review process.

Commercial press or university press. Do you want a scholarly commercial publisher or a university press? While ultimately the former is motivated by profit for its shareholders, it must guard its reputation for academic quality even more assiduously than a university press since it does not have the reputation of a parent university to fall back on. On the other

hand, although university presses are now expected to produce a reasonable level of income to cover their costs, they still have more flexibility in their financial expectations than do commercial publishers.

Size of list and of staff. Do you want a large publisher where you are likely to receive 'the standard treatment' or a smaller publisher where the service could well be more personal? Small publishers tend to be quick on their feet when the right project comes along, but may stumble with resource problems both in terms of staff and money. Large publishers, on the other hand, are far better resourced and able to offer a smooth (if perhaps bland) service.

Ivy-league, or hungry new-comer. Do you want a prestigious publisher? A precondition for getting tenure at many American

universities is publication of a set number of books at certain, major university presses, even if they do not necessarily specialise in the author's field. On the other hand, a famous university press is probably the hardest place to get a book proposal accepted, simply because this type of press receives so many proposals that they need only accept the very best. A less famous press is perhaps more likely to focus on giving the author good service, and the younger the press, the more it must focus on building up a reputation for good author relations.

Global player or international networker. Large publishing houses often have departments in several continents, while many smaller houses aim to duplicate this global reach by joining forces and distributing or co-publishing each other's books. Does it matter to you whether the same business entity is responsible for everything, or do you prefer a publisher who works through many local channels? Indeed, you may find that publishing through one of the minor partners in an international network may be the easiest way to get on the lists of their more 'important' collaborators.

Innovative or mainstream list. Does it matter to you whether a press is mainstream in its publication programme or whether it strives to publish books at the forefront of research in your field? You can get a sense of this both by looking at the subjects of recently published books and by going through the names of recent authors. Among those whom you recognise, are there for instance many newcomers or mainly a large contingent of older, established professors?

Value added. Judging both by the appearance of their books and by their reputation among existing authors, what benefits will the various publishers on your long-list bring to the table? How much effort do they put into the editorial work? Are all manuscripts copy-edited and all typeset pages proof-read by the press, or do they expect the author to either pay for or undertake this work? Are previous books attractively laid out and well presented? Do the presses generally achieve good review coverage for their books, and do they appear to put sufficient efforts into marketing and promoting their books?

Subject specialist or ubiquitous presence. Would you prefer to publish with a press specialised in your area of study, or do you think a narrow focus can be a downside? While a specialist press may have a work similar to yours in production or already published that could discourage it from taking on a competing work, it is also worth considering that the narrower the subject focus of a press, the better it must know its subject.

Speed of publication. How important is it that your book is published quickly? Speed must often be achieved at the expense of quality, so is speed really of the essence – for instance,

Quite a few presses are happy to offer a contract to publish an as-yet-unwritten work, their position being safeguarded by a catch-all clause in the author contract that allows them to cancel publication if the work when submitted does not live up to expectations.



do you work in a field where the scholarship develops very fast, or it is imperative to have a finished book in time for a research review or job application? You can reasonably expect the production work on a book to take some 9–12 months in total. If a press offers to do the job significantly faster, you should review their commitment to quality. Likewise, if a press estimates publication will take significantly longer, one might question their commitment to author care.

Price policy. Different price policies point to different commissioning strategies, and to different markets. High prices are generally applied where books are aimed primarily at the library market, or where the perceived global readership is so small that each copy sold must produce a good gross income. Some prices may seem at first absurdly high, but when you look closely at the books, the pricing may not be so unreasonable after all. On the other hand, if you aim to write a book with wide appeal or perhaps with potential for textbook adoption, then you must be sure to offer it to a publisher who is willing to produce an attractively priced paperback edition.

Distribution arrangements. The North American market is hugely important to sales of English-language books, so you must ensure that any non-US publisher you are considering either has a good presence in the area, or works through efficient local distributors. Likewise, if your book deals with a particular country or part of the world, make sure it will be readily available to customers there.

The final choice

By the time you have considered all these points, there should be no more than a handful of publishers left who fit your ideal profile. How do you prioritise where to send your book proposal first? This is probably the time to let personal preference play its part. Have you met editors or other press staff at academic conferences, and did you find them professional and easy to get on with? Have you had any other prior contact with one of the presses that can give you a leg up? Do you have colleagues who have published with anyone from the short-list and who are willing to share their experiences to help you decide? Indeed, can you perhaps draw on a colleague who has published a successful book to introduce you and your idea to the editor with whom they worked?

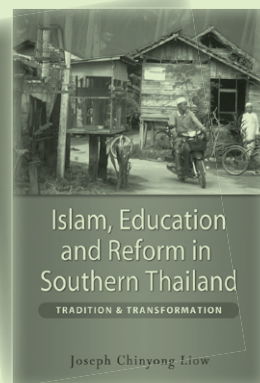
When the time comes to approach the publisher of your choice, it might be a good idea to mention that there are sound, considered reasons behind your decision to contact this particular publisher rather than one of their many competitors. Good publishers receive a large number of book proposals, most of which are entirely self-centred in their efforts to describe the great qualities of the manuscript on offer. If you were to expend just one little sentence on telling the editor what you think are the great qualities of this particular publishing house, this alone would make your approach stand out from the crowd. And that, ultimately, is what it is all about.

Marie Lenstrup
Asian Studies Book Services
The Netherlands
marie@asianstudiesbooks.com

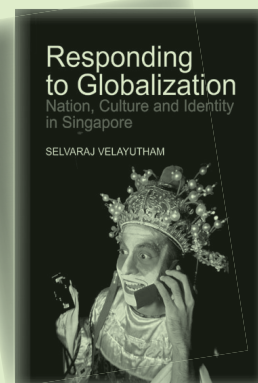
Notes

1. This article is based on material from *Getting Published: A Companion for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, by Gerald Jackson and Marie Lenstrup, published 2009 by NIAS Press, Denmark. See p.10 of this newsletter for a review of the book.

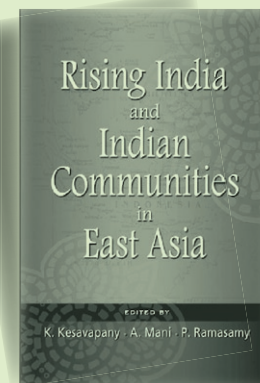
BOOKS FROM ISEAS



ISLAM, EDUCATION AND REFORM IN SOUTHERN THAILAND: TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION
Joseph Chinyong Liow
 978-981-230-954-9 US\$32.90 (hc)



RESPONDING TO GLOBALIZATION: NATION, CULTURE AND IDENTITY IN SINGAPORE
Selvaraj Velayutham
 978-981-230-420-9 US\$25.90 (sc)
 978-981-230-421-6 US\$39.90 (hc)



RISING INDIA AND INDIAN COMMUNITIES IN EAST ASIA
K Kesavapany, A Mani and P Ramasamy, editors
 978-981-230-868-9 US\$69.90 (sc)
 978-981-230-799-6 US\$89.90 (hc)



INDONESIA: TOWARDS DEMOCRACY
Taufik Abdullah
 978-981-230-365-3 US\$43.90 (sc)
 978-981-230-366-0 US\$49.90 (hc)

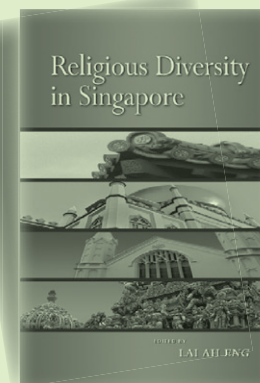
To Order

INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
 Pasir Panjang
 Singapore 119614

Tel: +65 68702447
 Fax: +65 67756259
 E-mail: pubsunit@iseas.edu.sg

bookshop.iseas.edu.sg



RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN SINGAPORE
Lai Ah Eng, editor
 978-981-230-753-8 US\$49.90 (sc)
 978-981-230-754-5 US\$69.90 (hc)

A famous university press is probably the hardest place to get a book proposal accepted, simply because this type of press receives so many proposals that they need only accept the very best.

Publishing sessions at ICAS 6

The conference includes two panel sessions focusing on different aspects of publishing. At the time of writing, the exact time and place of these events has not yet been determined, so please consult your ICAS 6 programme for details.

Electronic Publishing and Scholarly Communication in Southeast Asia
Convener: Dr Paul H Kratoska, NUS Press, National University of Singapore

Digital publishing offers the prospect of reaching vast audiences across Southeast Asia, including staff and students at academic institutions where libraries suffer from severe funding shortages and inadequate storage facilities. Within the region, electronic publishing remains limited, although it is becoming increasingly clear that publishers in the region need to look beyond traditional publishing arrangements in order to survive. Moreover, if Southeast Asian publishers fail to engage with digital publishing, the dominance of North American and European academic publishers will increase over time.

The panel will bring together academic publishers and librarians to discuss the state of electronic publishing and the academic book market in Southeast Asia. Although publication is central to their careers, many scholars are unaware of issues relating to academic publishing, and the panel will provide information on current trends in a fast-changing landscape.

Publishers' Clinic for Young Scholars
Convener: Marie Lenstrup, NIAS Press, The University of Copenhagen

Specialist Asian studies publishers invite you to a session focusing on practical advice and trouble-shooting for young scholars (pre- and post-docs, and their supervisors) who aim to have their work published in book form by an international publisher.

In the first part of the session, there will be presentations on subjects that should be of interest to all potential authors, such as how to prepare a book proposal and present it to a publisher, how presses handle the peer review process and editorial decision-making, and how to understand and negotiate a publication contract.

The second 'clinic' part of the session is open for the audience to bring up questions and concerns relating to their specific projects. The panel will aim to answer these questions clearly and at the same time extrapolate from the specific issue to more general concerns affecting many, most, or all (potential) authors.

The precise composition of the group of publishers had not been determined at the time of writing, but the aim is to include both Asian, North American and European presses in the mix, and to have both privately owned and university presses represented.