

Wading through a field of books

Asian Studies is a very broad field. A fairly obvious statement, but at no point does this become more apposite than when boxes and boxes of books contending for the ICAS Book Prize start arriving by courier. As a member of the jury for the Book Prize at ICAS 9 in Adelaide, I started to receive books at my office in late 2013. The final package arrived just a couple of months before the July 2015 conference. Over this period I developed a highly advanced system for organising the books; namely, piling them on the floor with spines facing up – like a library stack that has lost its balance. New packages would come and I would reorder the pile, at first arranging by country focus, then discipline focus, then (when procrastinating and putting off the completion of my own writing) by colour of the spines. Books would come and go from my office floor to home to conferences to fieldwork; some ended up being read through episodes of insomnia or jetlag, some during my daily commute, and while waiting for various appointments to arrive. No matter how much I read the pile on my floor grew.

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COLLEAGUES AND STUDENTS would come into my office puzzled as to why I didn't put books on the shelf. They would ask other questions too – why is a book on 'monasteries in Mongolia' next to one on 'beer in Japan'? I didn't know you researched concubines? Who would have thought red was so popular for book covers? Over the period I became a one-person clearinghouse for new books on Asia. I would grab a colleague and drag them into my office and fling a book in their face: "have you seen this?" A particular book would remind me of a colleague working in another country I had not seen for a while, or someone I met at a conference, or a former student – giving me a perfect reason to get in touch and mention the new title. My PhD students would stick post-it notes on books they wanted when I was finished. One colleague asked if they could have a particular book to give to their spouse for their anniversary! I found new scholars to approach. I scrawled down names of authors I wanted to keep in mind for a book series I am involved with. I cited some of the books I was reading for the prize in my own writing. I passed on others to colleagues for use in courses they teach ...

And then one day the books stopped arriving. The joy of discovery was replaced with the challenge of actually long-listing, short-listing, and writing citations with my fellow jury members. Throughout the process I had judiciously added titles to a wooden crate: the 'long-list crate'. However, when it came time to select 10 books I found my long-list crate contained 29. This was halved with some tough love (and a few regrets!), some negotiating with my fellow jury members got us to an agreed 10, and a few weeks later we agreed on 5 for the short-list – all of which deserved the main prize. Awarding accolades made it possible to bring some that had been in that long-list crate back into the frame, which made me sleep a little easier.

The field of books

The metaphor of 'the field' is apt when gazing at over 200 books on the floor over a period of many months. Asian Studies is a very broad field; the edges of which are almost impossible to see. The submissions for the ICAS Book Prize (IBP) affirmed this. Indeed, the only thing that united the books on topics as diverse as 'post-Suharto media' and 'alcohol and drug culture in colonial Manchuria', was that their subject matter was based somewhere, sometime, in this idea called Asia.

My experience on the jury brought three things about the current state of the 'field' into focus. First, Asian Studies is alive and well. The scholarly quality of the books submitted for the prize was astounding. Over the last two decades (or even longer) the idea that there is a crisis in the humanities and social sciences has gained traction as departments close, funding is cut, and rankings-obsessed institutions track metrics and citation rates. Indeed, conversations among scholars in affected fields can rarely ignore crisis talk, even if the conversation started out as an innocent discussion about 'Myanmar film stars'. The quality and originality of the books submitted for the IBP provide an alternative narrative about the state of humanities and social sciences, especially with regard to Asian Studies. Books are being written; lots of them. Scholars are writing them, many of whom have jobs in universities and research centres that give them the time, resources,



and support to write alongside their other commitments. This does not mean 'crisis averted', rather the quality of this scholarship needs to be used as evidence and to be considered as part of the defence of the disciplines and fields under threat.

Second, books have persevered as a form of presenting research and as a reason for doing research in the first place. Books, especially sole-authored monographs – which constitute the majority of books submitted for the IBP – take years of dedicated research, committed writing, review and revision, and patience with the production process. They also take dedication and time to read – time that is shrinking under the demands of contemporary academic life. As the costs of

production also increase and publishers seek out a guaranteed return on their investment in a book, some authors are wary that the pursuit of a book contract involves some compromise towards current trends, course adoption, and simplified scholarship. However, what becomes clear from the books submitted to the IBP is that publishers are prepared to push the boundaries into new areas – new topics, new scholars, new series, new conceptions of Asian Studies.

Books offer a form of presenting research like no other, and with many of the top university presses seeking to maintain scholarly quality, while also enabling open access to titles, the field is undergoing a further shift, one that may catch on across the publishing spectrum. Furthermore, books remain such a crucial way of becoming known in a field. There is something about the material form of a book – even if in a PDF – the cover, the blurb, the endorsements, the depth of analysis and detail, that stays in the head of a reader, a fellow author, or a jury member in ways that other forms of research writing are unable to replicate. To put it another way, a great book (or 2 or 3) does amazing things for the reputation of a scholar in Asian Studies.

Third, the boundaries being pushed are – by and large – empirical. On the one hand this is unsurprising as the only thing connecting the vast range of titles in the IBP is their empirical focus somewhere and sometime in Asia. On the other hand, most books submitted staked their claim to originality on their empirical contribution. This is not to suggest that there is no fascinating conceptual and theoretical innovation taking place, but to suggest that shifts in conceptual and theoretical thinking is led by breaking new empirical boundaries rather than the other way round. Empirical content in the books ranged from the conventional focus on places, peoples, and periods, to work that put human-animal relations, commodities, mobilities, and memories at the centre of analysis, and used this to reflect back on how we understand people, places and periods – including the idea of Asia itself.

Benefits of judging and being recognised

Serving on the jury also made me reflect on my own writing. As a recipient of one of the IBP Accolades at ICAS 8 in Macau, I often found myself looking at the 200 books for ICAS 9 and wondering what had made mine stand out for the jury last time round. Was it the opening few pages? The cover? The blurb? Was it chapter 6? Did they even get all the way to chapter 6? Being on the 'other side' this time made me think about the ways my previous book would have been discussed, debated, put on and taken off various long and short lists, recommended, and most importantly, read. Read by jury members who may not have otherwise read it. Receiving an accolade certainly boosted the profile of the book, especially to a broader Asian Studies audience – further enabled by the book being open-access, meaning those who heard about it did not have to commit to buying it in order to read it.

During the period I was on the jury I was completing two new monographs: both within Asian Studies. I often went back to the book that received the accolade at ICAS 8 and used it as a kind of blueprint. Though the content was certainly different, there was value in considering its approach: what had worked and was it replicable? It also helped that I was surrounded (physically and mentally) by new books. Even though my writing was in my own particular discipline and sub-field, I was often influenced by the style, approach, and structure of the books I was reading for the IBP. Sometimes they would trigger an idea I hadn't considered, or a new way of thinking about my own projects. In addition, seeking a new book contract was noticeably eased by my previous win; the accolade assured the publisher that I could deliver a book that would have appeal to a broad Asian Studies audience, even if the content appeared at first glance to be quite specific.

Finally, the experience on the jury reiterated the importance of the publishers. Production, editing, and promotion of titles – the fact the books were even submitted to the IBP in the first place – are such vital components of taking high quality scholarship to a broader audience. At ICAS 9 in Adelaide I met staff from many of the publishers who had submitted books and we chatted in detail about the authors and the titles I had enjoyed. A press that knows their authors and their projects in that level of detail is a tremendous boost to Asian Studies scholars; that level of detail has certainly influenced the choices I have made about my own publishing and advice I give to my PhD students, postdocs, and friends when they ask about their manuscripts. When it comes to books, quality – rather than simply speed, size and/or scale – matters.

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