

The best of the best

The 2019 ICAS Book Prize (IBP) dissertation competition

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One of the many academic attractions at ICAS 11 will be the announcement of the winners of the International Convention of Asia Scholars Book Prize (IBP) and the IBP Dissertation Prize Awards. The aim of these Awards is to create an international focus for academic works on Asia, thus increasing their worldwide visibility, and since their inception in 2004 they have become probably the most prestigious publication prizes in the world of Asian studies. Both the Book and the Dissertation Awards are organised around broad interdisciplinary bases (Humanities and Social Sciences) rather than traditional geographic or disciplinary compartmentalisations.

The process

The Dissertation Prizes were open to all recent PhD candidates awarded doctorates after June 2016 (with a certain latitude to allow for the processes involved) and who submitted their dissertations to the competition before October 2018. Since that time the Dissertation Judging Committee members, overseen by ICAS Secretary Dr Paul van der Velde and myself, have been assessing the qualities of each submission.

Longlists of 10 dissertations in each of the two categories, the Humanities and the Social Sciences, were posted online in March 2019. From those Longlists, Shortlists of five dissertations in each category have now been selected (see <https://icas.asia/en/icas-book-prize>). The two category winners, selected from the Shortlists, will be announced at ICAS 11, as will the winners of Judging Committee Accolades in each category.

The Accolades draw attention to dissertations that, while not judged the best overall in their discipline, are none-the-less of considerable quality in important areas. At ICAS 11 in Leiden there will be four Accolades in each category, namely a Specialist Accolade; Ground-breaking Subject Matter Accolade; Most Accessible and Captivating Work for the Non-specialist Reader Accolade; and a Chairman's Accolade. Those dissertations chosen by the Committee for Accolades may or may not be featured on the Long or Shortlists, and the Chairman's Accolades in each category are specifically selected from outside the Longlist.

The achievement

Given that, according to Professor Google, less than 60% of doctoral candidates actually complete their PhD (within a decade), the award of a doctorate is a considerable achievement for any individual and their dissertations usually testify to the enormous amount of research work that has gone into them. Given the great variety of dissertation subjects within the Humanities and Social Sciences categories, comparing the quality of these works might seem almost impossible. But the best dissertations do stand out. They inform with their research, stimulate with their arguments, convince with their conclusions and shine with their enthusiasm. While no two judges will ever entirely agree on the best dissertations in any subject area they will certainly recognise a dissertation with those qualities as being a contender for the Awards.

As I previously noted (*The Newsletter* 76, 2017, p.42), the "question of what is an award-winning dissertation is of course a matter of interpretation by the judges. But clearly the best dissertations will have the primary merit of originality, along with scholastic qualities such as depth (and breadth) of research, evidence of intellectual quality, clear and sophisticated arguments, good organisation and presentation of evidence leading to significant conclusions liable to be of interest to the wider field, a consistent and properly considered theoretical and/or methodological framework, and of course it must include due acknowledgement of sources and proper presentation of bibliography, notes and associated scholastic apparatus. They will also have the minimum of typographical errors

and the standard of writing and use of English language will be of a good standard." (Here I should add that while the competition to date has been open only to dissertations in English, we hope to include at least French-language dissertations at ICAS 12 in 2021).

The IBP Awards for the best Dissertation in the Humanities and the best Dissertation in the Social Sciences were instituted with the intention of recognising outstanding doctoral submissions; and just as the ICAS Best Book Awards in those categories recognise the work of established scholars (including private scholars), so do the Dissertation Awards recognise the best work of up-and-coming scholars. The Award winning dissertations – and many of those on the Long and Shortlists – invariably attract the attention of academic publishers, and in due course result in monographs based on the original theses. To be long or shortlisted, is in itself a considerable compliment, as it is to receive one of the Accolades that acknowledge dissertations with particular specific qualities worthy of recognition.

The submissions

The 2019 ICAS 11 Dissertation competition has attracted just over 150 submissions, almost evenly divided between the Humanities and the Social Sciences. That compares favourably with the 126 submissions to the Chiang Mai ICAS 10 competition two years ago. Again we have attracted dissertations from more than 90 universities in just over 20 countries. Around 20% of the submissions are recognised by inclusion in the Longlist and

Accolades, with those shortlisted representing (approximately) the top 7% of submitted dissertations.

One aspect of the process is the insights it gives into areas and subjects that are currently the focus of cutting-edge doctoral research. In terms of nation states, 34 submissions primarily deal with China, 28 with India, 13 with Japan and 11 with Indonesia. Afghanistan, Oman, Vietnam, and (perhaps surprisingly) Singapore, were all the subject of only one dissertation. But more than a dozen submissions dealt with trans-national regions, cross-border issues between two or more states, or with diasporas and migrant labour. Furthermore, there were nine dissertations concerning Asia as a wider region. Central Asian studies, however, were a notable omission, attracting only one submission, and with opportunities for research in the Central Asian 'Stans' rapidly improving, we can hope for an increase in dissertations on this region at ICAS 12.

In terms of subjects, there was a considerable breadth. The popularity of studies concerning more than one culture or nation pointed to recent tendencies in academia to recognise that nation-state borders do not demarcate precise boundaries between cultures and peoples. It also points, perhaps, to the growing Asian diaspora in the Western world and the increasing tendency of Asian students to carry out doctoral study in the West, and for Western students to be attracted to Asian universities. Such tendencies must surely lead to greater inter-cultural understanding, not least in its expression in academic works.

Along with that tendency to study wider cultural areas or areas of cultural interaction, studies relating to museums and to educational issues show a considerable growth. A number of dissertations analysing the impact of Christian missionaries in disparate contexts pointed to something of a revival of that field, albeit viewed through contemporary rather than 'Orientalist' lenses. Reflections on contemporary, or near contemporary issues – such as the 2011 Bangkok floods or the suicide of Tamil Nadu farmers – were also popular. The lack of environmental studies noted at ICAS 10 has been reversed, with the environment (in various contexts) being the subject of a number of submissions. Film studies are much reduced, but those in areas such as gender, organisational studies and the construction of national identities, remain constant.

Upholding standards

Naturally there are excellent dissertations that are not featured among those chosen for the various IBP Lists and final Awards/Accolades. That is a testament to the high standard of so many entries and there is no doubt that many of those not recognised by us will also be the basis for future monographs of considerable impact in their field. In an era where maintaining academic standards faces enormous challenges, the IBP Awards are an important contribution to upholding and advancing those standards.

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2017 Dissertation winners in Chiang Mai at ICAS 10 (Tutin Arganti presenting to Gauri Bharat, and Alex McKay presenting to Lisa Hellman)

