

Perspectives on Asian Studies

A Conversation with *The Newsletter's* Regional Editors

Paramita Paul

Paramita Paul: I love how you all indicate things that we've been working on also in the last couple of years – ways in which *The Newsletter* has expanded to include other parts of the world, ways in which we're trying to connect to other areas, to rethink Asian Studies, and to rethink how we understand Asia. We'll turn to those issues in a minute, but let me first talk a little bit about our working process. In a given issue, "The Region" section includes submitted collections from your institutions based on a rotating schedule. As guest editors, you select and curate the articles such that by the time we at IIAS receive them, they're already well developed. I'm curious to know: how do you go about curating your collections? In particular, how do you decide on a theme for a given issue?

Terence Chong: I go by topicality – what's current and what's unfolding. We have three regional programs, and they look at politics, they look at economics, and they look at sociocultural issues. These issues are usually cross-border, trans-border issues. In addition to these regional programs, we have five country study programs: Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Thailand. And so, these country study programs look at the domestic politics of each country. How I go about choosing articles is that if, say, the most recent Thai elections took place, and we have researchers who have been working on analyzing the outcomes of Thai elections and the voting patterns, I think, "Well, this is something the European readers would be interested in." Then I would gather a few of them together and curate something around that issue, on the topic of Thai elections. Or, for example, the Indonesia elections will be taking place in February next year, and that will be a major project for us as well. I would think that European audiences would be interested in understanding how votes have been mobilized, whether or not social media has played a role in mobilizing the votes, if political Islam has triggered certain kinds of responses to certain candidates. These are issues that would be interesting, and I would gather a few researchers together and talk about what would be interesting for a reader who may or may not have a good understanding of the Indonesian landscape. So making things clear and simple but not simplistic, so that people can have a quick read and understand whatever they can in that short section that we provide.

Paramita Paul: Would you say you are responding to current issues in your collections?

Terence Chong: Yes, definitely. When Philippe Peycam first approached me to contribute to *The Newsletter*, I was a bit hesitant. I mean, I'm a big fan of *The Newsletter* and I had been reading it for many years and knew it's very strong on history, culture, gender studies, literary works and all that. But my institute deals with contemporary Southeast Asia, and we deal with elections, religion and how it intersects with politics, migration issues,

and unfolding economic issues. So, I was just wondering how contemporary Southeast Asia will fit into a more literary kind of treatment of Southeast Asia, which *The Newsletter* is really good at doing. But I think over the last few issues working with Philippe and yourself, we've managed to find a nice niche to place a contemporary perspective of the region, a small slice of Asia in *The Newsletter*.

Paramita Paul: Ilhong, can you tell us a little bit about your working process? Your background is in archaeology. How does that work when you look for articles and collections? How do you collect and solicit work?

Ilhong Ko: Well, as regional editor, I try to keep my identity as an archaeologist down to the minimum. Because at SNU Asia Center we have so many researchers covering all regions and all disciplines, what we do is we select the themes with the input of the researchers based at the Asia Center. Usually, during informal chats we will talk about the most recent issue and then brainstorm about themes that have yet to be dealt with, but then which are quite very relevant to present-day concerns. For example, we have dealt with COVID-19 and Myanmar. Then, what is really important is that we try to think of themes in which it is very important to provide the different perspectives coming out of the different countries of Northeast Asia. So we talk about experiences of 'the other' in Northeast Asia, or about the borderlands of Northeast Asia, or Northeast Asia's engagements with the Middle East. We try to allocate pieces to the different countries comprising Northeast Asia so that the different perspectives can be presented to the wider public.

Lena Scheen: Just like Ilhong, I try to not have my own preferences because I really am in contemporary studies. For the issues, because we do "China Connections," it's really about China in connection to the rest of the world, so we also have more historical issues. We also have the Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai. The people from that center are who we work with on these issues. We have postdocs at that center, so we also really involve them to ask what kind of themes they think might be a good idea. I always collaborate with one of the postdocs so that they have an opportunity to do this type of work. I find it really important to stress this idea of Asian Studies being done in Asia, so that's also in the themes that we chose. And it's not just themes in Asian Studies being done in Asia, but it's also, "What kind of research is being done in Asia at the moment?" For example, if there is an important conference in Asia at the moment or if there are important institutions, we try to highlight those. I do think that, as simple as that may sound, it does give new perspectives or other perspectives that are not heard enough, in my opinion.

Paramita Paul: Edwin and Cathy, do these processes sound familiar to you?

Edwin Jurriëns: There are many similarities. In general, our strategies are very mixed. Sometimes, we put out a call for contributions. Occasionally, people come to us with ideas. Usually, we contact people based on their contributions to recent events such as public seminars, conferences, PhD research, postdoc research. We try to have some diversity in terms of geography or thematic focus. Normally, we have at least one contributor from the Asia Institute, or the Faculty of Arts, or the University of Melbourne. As our section is called "News from Asia from Australia and the Pacific," we also try to engage with colleagues from other universities and other cities. However, this is becoming a little more challenging considering people's workloads and their institutional loyalties and obligations. But also, with having Cathy on board, as the editor of the *Melbourne Asia Review*, we will probably look more into sharing our contributors and our content across the two platforms, also to extend the reach of our articles across readerships.



Above: Cover of "Asian Studies in global perspective," a special supplement section of an early edition of *The Newsletter* (NL2, p. 33).



Above: Nineteenth-century map of the district of Tingkir, Indonesia, created by Javanese mapmakers and subsequently re-printed in *The Newsletter* issue #95, p. 6-7. (Source: Nationaal Archief)

Cathy Harper: I'll just say something brief because I've been involved in two editions of *The Newsletter* only, but they were on media of religious morality in Indonesia and Asia and Asians in Australian politics and society. So both of those have been about current issues and were relevant to contemporary matters.

Paramita Paul: Let's take a couple of minutes to talk about "The Region" section in *The Newsletter*. As you know, you are contributing to one of many sections, but one that was designed in particular to explore how Asian Studies as an academic field, but also Asia as an object of research, gets implemented and imagined differently in different geographical, disciplinary, and political contexts. For example, what Asia signifies and evokes in Singapore is likely different from what it means in Melbourne or Seoul, or what it means here in the Netherlands. It is a broad question, but how do your institutions delineate and approach the study of Asia?

Lena Scheen: It is a difficult question, of course, and it comes really to the core of what I appreciate so much about IAS and *The Newsletter*. I can only echo everything that has been said before, and I think it is not a coincidence that the five editors that are here now share so much of their views because these are such important points. Responding to your question, I wanted to come back to what Ilhong was saying about language. I think this is a really important point that I also want to stress because these are all aspects wherein you can see how much Asian Studies is still colonized. I know this is a buzzword, like 'interdisciplinary research' and 'decolonization,' but these are

very important things that we often say we do but don't really do. What do we view as Asia? Which countries do we include? Do we look at it politically? You would be surprised how often, even within academia, these are still contested topics. So, when we talk about Asia, what are we actually talking about? But it also really becomes about who is talking, who is doing the research, and where we are doing the research? As an American institute that is based in China, we're constantly confronted with these questions, and they are not easily answered. So it is so important that we have all these different perspectives – in a genuinely diverse way – being heard.

Paramita Paul: Cathy and Edwin, you earlier made an interesting remark when you said that your contributions to *The Newsletter* firmly place Australia in Asia. So I'd love to hear what you think about your approach to the study of Asia and how that works for you? How do you feel about your collections and your approach to Asia in your contributions?

Cathy Harper: The contributions that Edwin and I have worked on together have largely been voices from Asia or Australia on Asia, even if some are located in Australia. They're voices from Asia, but some of them have been in Australia. I know it's not as simple as just publishing voices from Asia, but I think it does help problematise what "Asia" is because then it becomes something that's not necessarily located somewhere else. It's within "non-Asian" nations, and becoming or already is embedded in "non-Asian" cultures. That's what I find most interesting about the collaborations we've worked on. For example, the one we did on Asians in

Australia, it's this really complicated notion of: What's Asia? What's Australia? Who are Asians, and who are Australians?

Edwin Jurriëns: There's the institutional context, but there's also of course the geography and the social and political context. There is this closeness and to some extent familiarity between Australia and Asia, especially through migrant communities in Australia and especially in a place like Melbourne. In our institute's staff, Australians are actually the minority. So, it's really interesting to see how colleagues bring their educational backgrounds, their life experiences, their professional experiences, and also their languages all into this mix. It's very rewarding, and we can learn a lot from each other. At the same time, even within our faculty I suppose, but definitely within the broader academic world, I think there's still some prejudice or misunderstanding about Asian Studies or Area Studies, as if it's solely defined by geography or language or colonial or Cold War legacies – or even worse, that it's not a true discipline in its own right. The source of this misunderstanding is definitely not the lack of disciplinarity, but more the very fluid, never fixed, always changing, and – by definition – intersectional nature of it. So it's really not about delineating the boundaries of a continent, states, cultures, languages, or societies. It's really about this multi-layeredness, about letting different types of knowledge speak through each other and transform each other.

Paramita Paul: Ilhong, I have the same question for you, but I would like you to focus on what you would say is the most important value of having these different views and perspectives on Asia.

Ilhong Ko: I think I can answer that question in relation to a huge research project that is taking place at SNU Asia Center right now. Around 2020, the Asia Center received a huge grant from the Korean government to explore the concept of mega-Asia. This is for seven years, and we are currently in year four, and I am part of this research group. Basically, what we have been doing is to propose the need to adopt Asia itself as the unit of analysis, because if we do so, then this will allow previously unrecognized, indirect connections between distant regions and countries within Asia to be explored – for example, between the Korean peninsula and the Indian subcontinent. If we just look at bilateral or unilateral relationships between the two countries, there is very little that can be said in terms of connections in the past. But if we look at Asia itself as the unit of analysis, we can then focus on the indirect network links, and that shows how Asia was very connected in the past, and it gives us a basis to talk about how Asia can be connected in the present. I think it is important, because if I look at the different contributions from different issues of *The Newsletter*, you see patterns that appear that can be recognized in other regions. That, I think, is a very important aspect of looking at the different regions and the research coming out of the different regions of Asia together.

Terence Chong: How we imagine a region depends not just on the histories and the location you're in, but also on harsh realities like funds and what policymakers deem to be important. During the heyday of Area Studies in the 1970s and 1980s, we saw great investment in, say, Indonesian Studies, and American universities were really big on

Southeast Asian Studies. More recently, the funding for these studies have kind of dried up. So, there's this waxing and waning in terms of interest. And it's really important for us as practitioners and as students and scholars of Asia and Southeast Asia to kind of fly the flag and keep things going and try to convince the world or our funders that what we are doing is important – not just to say it's important, but to show why it's important.

Paramita Paul: We hope that these kinds of initiatives – "The Region" pages, *The Newsletter* – create a larger Asian Studies community across the world. Do you think that that's the case? And if so, what do you think is the value of that sort of ongoing collaboration as opposed to, say, occasional conference meetings?

Ilhong Ko: I suppose the important thing would be that it makes things easier to continue the discourse, because if it's a one-off conference that takes place every year, you have really intensive chats, then a lot is just left there at the conference venue, and maintaining links is quite difficult. If you have a kind of continued workshop program, it makes it easier to continue the discourse, and then we can build up from what has been said in the previous section. I think this makes things much more productive.

Lena Scheen: If I can add to that, of course, I agree very much with that. I think the main difference is also a conference is more like hearing each other's research, hearing what others are doing, while here it's really about collaborating. These initiatives – like *The Newsletter* and also our modest contributions to that – lead also to collaborative research, at least that's what we hope. Doing research together is very different from only exchanging what we are individually doing, right? One is a conversation, and the other is where you genuinely have to apply that other approach, or at least bring those two approaches into conversation within a research project. I think that's why this is really crucial and important.

Paramita Paul: We all have the experience of living and working in bubbles, but another aspect of *The Newsletter* is that it is widely read. So beyond our own communities, this is a way to reach out to the general reader interested in Asian Studies or thinking about Asia, to talk to them about current topics, to invite them to share their ideas with us. In that sense, we are definitely reaching out of several bubbles into a wider world.

Edwin Jurriëns: I think it really helps with creating a home for Asian Studies where we really can get to know each other, to get to know people with commitment to the field, and to develop these collaborative and ongoing initiatives that are not possible with a conference, and also what Lena referred to: to facilitate sort of intergenerational exchange as well, thinking about new generations of students. It's really important to treasure and nurture a community like this because it definitely takes more than one generation to build it.

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