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 Ericson, 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. ¹

Frank F. Conlon

FOR THE PAST FIFTEEN YEARS, one conversation among a growing community of Asian specialists has been sustained by H-ASIA, the Asian studies and history network of H-Net, a world-spanning consortium of scholarly lists serving 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 of facilitating the electronic transmission of information by those committed to researching, teaching, learning, public outreach, and professional service in the humanities and social sciences.²

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 anthropological 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.³

While a major characteristic of H-ASIA posts involves gaining and sharing knowledge with distant colleagues, many posts are developed in dialogue 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 current and major universities and centers of Asian studies, probably many of these sorts of resources are available close by from colleagues and research collections. However, most Asian specialists are not at major centers, and H-ASIA has provided a means to overcoming the ‘tyranny of distance.’

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.⁴ While one might imagine an editorial task being performed by a professional editor’s simple instruction that I should ‘write a text that is 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.

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 experts in increasingly varied registers of writing: different challenges are posed by these, 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 competence 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’.

Because H-ASIA’s members dwell in virtually every time zone of the globe, their conversations are 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 getting 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 us 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-ASIA Home page: http://www.h-net.org/"/
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Sources/notes
4. Current editorial staff currently includes, besides Frank Conlon, Kate Brittlebird (University of Tasmania), Ryan Dunch (University of Alberta), Linda Deyoer (Salisbury University), Andrew Field (CIEE, Shanghai), Sumit Goi (University of Singhoteo & Pan (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 anthropological 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.⁴

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