

Welcome to the New Year and to the ASAA Newsletter for January-March 2008. The Newsletter is an informal quarterly report about the workings of the ASAA Council and other issues of interest to our members. If you have something you'd like to be considered for inclusion in future newsletters, please contact the Association's Secretary, Michele Ford (michele.ford@usyd.edu.au).

We'd also like to take this opportunity to remind you that the ASAA represents the interests of the Asian Studies community on a shoestring budget. **If you are behind in your dues, you can become financial again by paying your membership dues by credit card online at <https://www.registernow.com.au/secure/Register.aspx?ID=594>** or by downloading the membership form on the website. If you don't want to receive the Newsletter, please let Michele know.

From the President: Progress on the RQF

On 23 December 2007, the new Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, Senator Kim Carr, buried the RQF, describing it as 'fundamentally flawed'. The Research Quality Framework, which had been devised by the last Education Minister but one, Brendan Nelson, was supposed to escape the problems of measuring quality mechanically (for instance by counting research grants and publications) and to focus on peer assessment of quality. As the RQF took shape, however, it showed signs of becoming an administrative and intellectual nightmare. The assessment process threatened to swallow tens of thousands of hours that might otherwise have been used on real research, and the Framework never came to grips with many different criteria for quality and the fact that there might be legitimate differences of opinion in assessing it.

The Minister's announcement does not mean that quality assessment is off the agenda. Even in the final months of the last government, the focus of RQF planners had begun to shift back to more mechanical ('metrical') measures of quality. This shift has now been endorsed by the new minister, who promises a new approach that will 'take advantage of the existing work that has been done on metrics development but also make sure that robust quality measures are developed for the humanities, creative arts, and the social sciences'. In other words, there is likely to be less peer review and more use of metrics.

The ASAA was caught up in this shift in October last year when we were abruptly asked to prepare a ranking of Asian Studies journals. Journal ranking is a classic 'proxy' for quality. That is to say, it makes the assumption that you can tell how good an article is where it was published, rather than by actually reading it. We were asked to place each Asian Studies journal into one of four quality categories: A* (the top 5%), A, B and C (the bottom 50%). This task was fraught with problems. To begin with, none of us was familiar with more than a few dozen of the more than 700 journals we eventually ranked. Moreover, there are at least four valid criteria for quality: empirical rigour, analytical brilliance, theoretical complexity and policy relevance, and there is no easy way to establish an exchange rate between them. Although our instructions were to disregard impact (number of citations) and status, it was hard to avoid giving big-name journals a high ranking, even when their

'objective' quality was not always unambiguously high. Then there was the fact (attested by market research conducted by the big journal publishers) that we choose the journals we publish in more for the audience we want to reach and for their voice they contribute to the debate, rather than for abstract notions of standing. We were conscious, too, that any ranking risked fossilizing the standing of journals, making it difficult for new journals to establish a reputation for quality. We also had to decide whether to allocate scarce high rankings to high-quality foreign language journals in which Australians seldom or never publish. We received more than a hundred submissions and rankings on the issue, and although the outcome was a compromise we felt that the final ranking which went to DEST just before the election put Asian Studies in as strong a position as any discipline to face the constantly changing character of the RQF.

Now that the RQF is gone, it is tempting to feel that this ranking work was a waste of effort. But the reverse may well be true. If the Child of RQF is more focussed on metrics, then journal ranking is likely to become still more important.

If this is so, then the Association and its members face some important challenges. For the Association, a major question will be whether to take part in the ranking of book publishers. We refused to do so in the last round, on the grounds that the book publishing world was so volatile and its structure so opaque (different series and different offices within the same large publishing houses often have very different standards) that there could be no reliability at all in any ranking. But if metrics come further to the fore, we will need to come up with some alternative. Ideas from members on how we can approach this problem would be very welcome.

For members themselves, one challenge is to recognize the dynamics of the new system and give more attention to citations. In any metrical approach to research quality, the number of citations which each article or book receives is likely to play a central role. The humanities and social sciences have always been at a disadvantage in this respect because our books and many of the journals we publish in do not appear in the Thomson ISI indexes. But the problem is partly of our own making. I am often surprised by how parsimonious Asian Studies scholars can be in citing each other's publications. This parsimony probably arises from the fact that we suspect our own students of padding their bibliographies with books and articles they have not read. But in a world of metrics, we probably need to be more generous and more systematic in supporting each other.

Robert Cribb (robert.cribb@anu.edu.au)

2008 is the International Year of Languages

As we move into a new year, and a new period in Australian political history, it seems particularly auspicious that 2008 is UNESCO's International Year of Languages. Both sides of politics have recognised that Australia's Asian language capacity has been seriously depleted, leaving government departments and the private sector scratching for competent bilingual staff with a deep knowledge of both Australia and

an Asian country. Although Prime Minister Rudd has a strong personal record on the language issue, and the new Rudd government has signalled that it will increase funding for foreign language teaching, the direction these initiatives will take is still far from clear, particularly in the higher education sector. The ASAA lobbies constantly on the language question, but 2008 offers a particular opportunity for influencing the direction of foreign language teaching policy. If ASAA members have information or thoughts to contribute to our lobbying effort on this question in the new year, please contact Michele Ford directly at michele.ford@usyd.edu.au.

Proposed Constitutional Changes

As part of a general review of the Association's operations, the Council has been paying attention to the ASAA Constitution. We have identified a few areas where it seems that changes would be useful, and we will soon be sending members a ballot paper to ask them to approve those changes. The main proposed changes are:

- To allow online electronic voting in ASAA elections and to allow formal communications to members to be sent electronically
- To allow the Executive Committee of the ASAA to conduct its business electronically
- To add a category of Honorary Life membership to the range of membership categories and to limit Associate membership to those who have retired from normal employment
- To add the Publications Officer to the ASAA Executive Committee
- To rename the position of West and Central Asia Councillor to 'West, Central and Inner Asia Councillor' and to rename the position of China and Inner Asia Councillor to 'China Councillor'
- To allow the co-optation of representatives of affiliated associations to the ASAA Council
- To allow the historical records of the Association to be deposited in some appropriate archival repository

Congratulations – Australian Academy of the Humanities, Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia

The ASAA's warmest congratulations to Professor Louise Edwards, Associate Professor Helen Creese and Professor Helen Dunstan, who have been elected as fellows of the Australian Academy of the Humanities and to our own vice-president, Professor Kathryn Robinson, who has been elected a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia. The importance of the Academy has been shown in their engagement in shaping the RQF process to improve its treatment of the Humanities and Social Sciences and these new elections will strengthen the voice of Asian Studies in these fora.

ASAA Biennial Conference

The 17th biennial conference of the ASAA will be held in Melbourne on 1-3 July 2008. Don't miss this opportunity to catch up with colleagues and to hear the latest research on Asia. The closing date for proposal of abstracts is 30 March 2008. Further details on the conference site at <http://www.conferenceworks.net.au/asaa/index.php>

ASAA Elections 2008

Nominations for Council and Executive positions in the ASAA will be called later this year for the 2009-2010. Please consider becoming involved in the work of the Association by standing for a position.

President's Prize

Wasan Panyagaew, 'Moving Dai: Towards an anthropology of people "living in place" in the borderlands of the upper Mekong.' ANU, 2005

Wasan Panyagaew has written a theoretically sophisticated and highly original exploration of Dai identity with excellent ethnographic content that makes light of difficult fieldwork conditions. The thesis an engaging piece of writing and an intellectually ambitious 'ethno-methodological' ethnography. It is a fine thesis in small as well as large ways, a multi-faceted study, in which the writer is almost continuously engaged in exploring and critiquing viewpoints and approaches developed in various contexts.

The author leads the reader through a spatialised ethnohistory of the Dai, an ethnic group situated on the Mekong River in Southern China. The thesis opens with an examination of the confederation of the Lue petty states, known as 'Sipsong Panna', populated by Dai and situated on the middle reaches of the Mekong. The region of which Sipsong Panna is a part was conquered by and divided between the colonial powers in the 19th century and Sipsong Panna itself now forms part of China as the Sipsong Panna /Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan. The thesis focuses especially on Keng Hung, the oldest Lue principality on the west bank of the Mekong, describing how the Dai have struggled to reconstitute displaced lives within their home country in the face of political changes from the late nineteenth century through to the communist regime and within a frame created by changing borders and state formations; organised around pagodas, markets, bridges; rendered dynamic by routes winding in and out and through the territory, and also made violent, by colonialism, wars, and ultimately the Cultural Revolution.

From history Dr Panyagaew goes on to explore 'mobility', mainly through the journeys of Buddhist monks. The thesis describes real and imagined crossings of Sipsong Panna's international borders and the complex notion of homeland. It addresses Theravada Buddhist revivalism and the cross-border journeys of monks and novices to study in northern Thailand. As the thesis argues, this process of Dai cultural revival in Xishuangbanna can be seen as the social production of 'Buddhist space': the making of Dai place. In identifying and investigating new forms of mobility, it also turns to new forms of connectivity by focusing on the ethnography of

a returned Dai family and their Thai restaurant business in the capital of Xishuangbanna. At the same time, it deconstructs and then reconstructs the social formation of Dai popular music, and the cultural production and consumption of this Dai modernity, examined through band concerts and the circulation of this new Dai cultural commodity. The thesis links Thai and Dai, Jinghong and Muang, China and the non-Chinese world, past and present, proving via unexpected travellers – monks and refugees – to be the proximate agent of modernization and international connectedness.

The thesis is classically ethnographic in its use of thick description but it moves beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries, employing, amongst others, strategies of historical enquiry and cultural studies. The accompanying film and songs complement and support the main arguments about the cultural revival and identity-making through the mobility of a touring band performing Thai pop-inspired songs with Dai consciousness-raising lyrics and Theravada Buddhist links. It is a work of vibrant, contemporary anthropology and richly merits the 2007 ASAA Presidents' Prize.

ASAA's Women's Forum

The ASAA Women's Forum is an informal network of people interested in promoting scholarship on women in Asia or supporting women working within Asian Studies. The Women's Forum convenes the "Women in Asia" conference series (the next is in Brisbane in September 2008); coordinates an email discussion list; holds a biennial meeting at each ASAA conferences; and promotes a successful ASAA publication series on Women in Asia.

The Women's Forum website contains further information about the forum's activities: <http://www.capstrans.edu.au/asaawomensforum/>

The Women's Forum Email Discussion List is a moderated listserv open to anyone interested in women in Asia or women working within Asian Studies. Subscribers to the list can contribute news items, comments, requests for information, book reviews, thesis summaries, advertisements, forthcoming conferences, job notices, or activities and seminar notices.

To subscribe, follow the prompts at the following address:

http://mailinglists.uow.edu.au/mailman/listinfo/asaa_womens_forum

If you have any questions about the ASAA Women's Forum website or email list contact: Lenore Lyons (Lenore_Lyons@uow.edu.au).

Australia-Netherlands Research Collaboration

Joint funding by DEST, the ANU and Leiden University has made possible the founding of a five-year programme for research collaboration between Australia and the Netherlands in the field of Southeast Asian Studies. The collaboration, jointly administered by ANU and Leiden, covers all social science and humanities

disciplines and all countries in Southeast Asia. Funding will be available for joint workshops (which must also include Southeast Asian participation), for research travel to the Netherlands by Australian PhD candidates, and for a small number of policy fora. A call for proposals will be issued soon, but further details are also available from the Australian coordinator, Robert Cribb (robert.cribb@anu.edu.au).

Appointments and Promotions

Members of the ASAA are always interested to hear news of the latest appointments and promotions. Please drop a line to the editor (michele.ford@usyd.edu.au) when something interesting happens.