

Publishing with Asia in Focus: Insights and Advice from the Editors

THE EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

We, the Editorial Committee, have been giving some thought as to the meaning of *Asia in Focus*. From the side of our contributors, we have considered: What are the opportunities presented for early-career researchers? How can publishing with us benefit them? From the editorial side, we have pondered: Why are we editors here? What are our concerns about the submissions we receive? What are the highlights during the review process? What further advice can we give to our contributors and readers? Instead of keeping the answers to these questions to ourselves, we would like to share, as we view the responses as useful knowledge that may further assist early-career researchers in their academic careers as well as inform a wider public of the situation scholars are in.

The advantages of publishing with *Asia in Focus*

Asia in Focus occupies an important niche in the broader landscape of peer reviewed academic publishing insofar as it offers good MA students and PhD candidates the chance to publish shorter pieces based on their ongoing work, without compromising on quality. Peer-review and academic publishing are essential parts of scholarly and scientific knowledge dissemination. This is how we as academics share our knowledge with our colleagues and the general public, and how we make sure that the knowledge we share is reliable and not misleading.

Many of the original and interesting ideas students develop in their MA theses are genuinely interesting reads, and their publication can add an extra layer to the authors' experience of the "use" of their studies. However, there are not enough outlets for early career academics; that is, those who are not yet fully established and/or trained as such as what in other countries is requirement – the actual publication of ones work during an MA program – is still neglected in Denmark among other countries. Going through the process of submitting a paper and experiencing peer review (whether the paper gets published or not) is a valuable exercise to test whether or not scientific writing is something a student would like to pursue. For MA students, *Asia in Focus* may be the first encounter with the peer review process and academic publishing, and we make an effort to make this encounter somewhat less intimidating than it otherwise can be.

PhD candidates on the other hand often aim for highly ranked journals with a global reach when they publish. Nonetheless, smaller journals like *Asia in Focus* have great advantages: they provide a good forum for testing out new ideas, for articulating new arguments-in-the-making and, as previous

contributor Arve Hansen (who published in Issue 2) highlights in his feedback below, the readership of the papers is potentially greatly expanded because of the open source format:

A couple of years ago I was fortunate enough to get a paper published in Asia in Focus. I would like to share some thoughts on why other early-career scholars should try to do the same.

For Master students, the opportunity to publish part of their work in an accessible yet highly professional journal is quite unique. For PhD candidates the situation is a bit different, particularly as more and more PhD theses are comprised of published articles. Writing an additional article for a journal that does not give publishing points (although it is peer-reviewed) might not seem worth the effort. Well, I am ready to argue otherwise!

I decided to write an article for Asia in Focus in the middle of a hectic writing period. Academic articles must be concise, and I think most PhD candidates writing publication based theses will experience having to leave out lots of material. I certainly did, and since I had some additional thoughts and data that I really wanted to share, I based my article for Asia in Focus around these. After a thorough round of peer review, the article was published. And that is when I realized that publishing in this journal was an even better choice than I first had thought.

As researchers we want to get our stuff out there and beyond the narrow academic reader base most of us manage to attract. But academic journals are extremely expensive for anyone who is not lucky enough to have access through their institution. And most people on earth do not have such access. Even most academics in the world have limited access to journals. Writing in a serious open access journal can thus potentially reach many people who would otherwise not be able to read our work.

*In addition, the short and accessible format of Asia in Focus articles makes them accessible for non-academics as well. In my case, the result was that **the most read and shared article I wrote during my PhD is the one published in Asia in Focus**. This is probably much thanks to journalists linking to it in newspaper articles, something they would very rarely do with standard academic articles (which, let's face it, they wouldn't even read). And, although I of course want people to read my other stuff as well, I think academics will find that work through the references to it in the article published in Asia in Focus.*

In other words, submit an article to Asia in Focus and get your work out there!

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We view *Asia in Focus* as part of the future. As Arve Hansen succinctly points to above, the numbers of readers are markedly higher in readily accessible media such as professional blogs, open access paper sites, in books that do not cost upwards of 100 USD and outlets such as *Asia in Focus*. We have the opportunity to contribute to academic knowledge and debate in a much more vibrant, accessible, and

democratic fashion than the increasingly corporatized and high access-barrier environment of prestigious journals and publishers allow for.

Key concerns and challenges with submissions

The length of the articles published in *Asia in Focus* sometimes poses a challenge to our authors. There are limits to what one can reasonably achieve in 3,500 words and so it becomes important not to over-promise, or to attempt too much. When reviewing an article for *Asia in Focus* our editors always check whether the arguments that are made are sufficiently substantiated by empirical material and well-grounded in theory. Perhaps the most frequently stated piece of advice from our editorial team in light of the limitations in length is that **contributors should aim for one solidly anchored argument**, rather than trying to drive home multiple arguments that rest on thin empirical foundations. If authors have a lot on their mind, they are of course welcome to make multiple submissions to *Asia in Focus*!

Another challenge is related to the papers' contributions to the scholarly field. For many early-career researchers it can be challenging to **clearly spell out their scientific contribution**. While some may simply not have read widely enough to recognize their contribution, others might feel their paper is too conventional and repeats the findings of famous studies done by experienced scholars. To avoid these situations is easy when you know how, but it requires work. **Every academic article should have a section that reviews the most relevant literature in the field, and its main findings**. This is known as defining the state-of-the-art. Once this is done, it is usually easier to identify and specify one's own contributions, differences and similarities to the studies that have been done previously. Every study, whether Bachelor, Masters or PhD level, has something new and interesting. The novelty might lie in the research design and the hence findings, or in the different geographical area under study, or the informants, and so forth. We are knowledge producers and sharers and at Masters and PhD level, publications should, or rather must endeavor to have academic rigor and *contribute* to the field of study they fall within.

A further issue highlighted by our Editorial Team is the importance of having work proofread by a native speaker and writer of English (and always try to use a person with an academic background, preferably in your field). Language checking is a vital part of the writing process for any writer, whether they are a native speaker or not. When we write, we are highly focused on content and less focused on correct grammar, sentence structure, spelling and such ... and so we should be! However, if we would like *other* people to read our work, then these aspects must be given attention because **language editing is about improving the readability of a paper, it is about making your message as clear and comprehensible as it can possibly be**. If a reviewer cannot understand or, even worse, misunderstands and misinterprets something you have written because of poor grammar for instance, your exciting, valuable and brilliant contribution to the field may never see print. In spite of stating in our guidelines that papers must have been proofread before they are submitted, we continue to receive many submissions that have very clearly not been checked and corrected which is worrying. We cannot emphasize enough how important a thorough language check is for your chances of getting published and for your future career. As one editor wrote:

My biggest frustration in the review process is to eventually reject a very important piece of research just because it is not written and framed with the consistency and coherence required in an academic publication.

Often authors have become so intimate with their work that they forget the person at the receiving end – the reader. Even if the reader is familiar with the literature and the theoretical discussions presented in a

text, they have hopefully not been exposed to its chief argument before. A reader is not inside the author's mind, and cannot follow his/her thoughts without proper aid. Authors therefore should be very focused on taking the reader by the hand, and gently leading them through the argument of their text. This is another reason to stick to the 'one point, one paper' approach: clearly state the single most compelling argument or problem that ties the entire paper together. The focus of the study, the methods of data collection and analysis, the theoretical underpinnings and implications should be blatantly clear and the analysis and conclusions based thereon should be convincing. Our advice: follow the basic instructions given in the Style Guide and the formal requirements on the Call for Papers. Ultimately, these sections have purpose and they all help to communicate your research in the most reliable, understandable and comprehensive manner.

Lastly, one of the worst frustrations for any editor is when we have a well-grounded suspicion of plagiarism. **Plagiarism is unacceptable and something which must be avoided and circumvented under all circumstances**, which is why reference systems were invented. Previous research is there to be used, and as our careers progress we find different and increasingly sophisticated ways of presenting other people's findings and ideas in our own work but always with a reference to the source. If there is no reference, then a reader is falsely led to believe that these are the author's words and ideas; this single act puts into question the author's credibility and ethics, and completely undermines the entire research field.

Being on the *Asia in Focus* Editorial Committee

In general, being on the Editorial Committee and being exposed to such a wide range of exciting and interesting work, getting familiar with brand new research, reading about well-documented fieldwork from new and known geographical areas inspires us. We are inspired by the enthusiasm and diligence with which authors pursue their research, by the wealth of talent there is out there, and we also get inspired to learn more about a given topic, method or theoretical approach we may be introduced to or reminded of.

The receipt of the paper is in a sense the beginning of a relationship – a relationship between members of the review team and between the Editorial Committee and the author. The process of giving and receiving feedback on a piece of research is an essential integrated aspect of the serious task of knowledge production and dissemination, and makes for a more purpose-driven and meaningful academy.

These are times of great uncertainty and the pressure to perform is immense: pressure from outside and also the pressure we put on ourselves, and so becoming or being a budding scholar is far from easy. That said, we want to encourage you to believe in yourselves, to work hard, and to keep at it. There will be times when you receive feedback that may seem highly critical and harsh, and other times it will be more palatable and easier to digest. No matter how it is received and perceived, take all of it on board and use it constructively. In the end, as scholars it is our duty to contribute to society as a whole by producing solid, reliable, well-grounded knowledge, and the feedback and critique we receive greatly assists the production process.

We look forward to reading your work!

The Editorial Committee