Editorial

Making Your Mark and Constructing Your Field in Global Academia

Eric C. Thompson

National University of Singapore, Singapore

It has been a pleasure to serve as an editor for the *Asian Journal of Social Science* (AJSS) for the past three years. Along with other members of our editorial team, we have been striving to make AJSS an important venue for the publication of a broad range of social science research in and about Asia. During the past 10 years of my nearly two decades at the National University of Singapore, I have been increasingly asked to speak to scholars around the region on how to get published in leading academic journals and how to engage more generally in global academic discourse.¹ Universities across Asia have come under increasing pressure to be “global” research universities as much as they remain important local teaching institutions. These pressures devolve to the university’s professors and lecturers. I am publishing this editorial in our first issue of 2020, in the hope that the comments here may be of particular use to academics in Asia. These are thoughts not simply on how to publish, but on strategies to “make one’s mark” within the international academic community.

What follows comes out of reflections on being part of the social sciences in Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and elsewhere in Southeast Asia for more than two decades. In the 1990s, I conducted my doctoral dissertation research in Malaysia and, since 2001, I have been a faculty member in the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore, which is a department of sociology and anthropology in every respect except its name. I was also a member of the Graduate Studies Committee in the Department for about a decade and Chair of that committee for half of that time. So these reflections come mainly from thinking about how to develop the careers of young scholars at up-and-coming research universities in Asia.

¹ Versions of this editorial have been presented at the: Universitas Negeri Jakarta, Jakarta, Indonesia, 20 November 2019; 10th Malaysia International Conference on Literature, Language and Culture, Melaka, Malaysia, 14–16 August 2018; 8th Asian Graduate Forum on Southeast Asian Studies, Asia Research Institute, 26 July 2013; National Research and Innovation Conference for Graduate Students in the Social Sciences, Mahakota Hotel, Melaka, Malaysia, 7–9 December 2012.

I want to reflect first on the opportunities and challenges facing us in taking the social sciences in Asia to the next level. Across much of Asia, there is a solid foundation on which to build. I want to reflect a bit on what that foundation is and how it will allow for a flourishing of the social sciences and academia more generally in the coming decades. In the second half of this essay, I want to discuss some specific advice and strategies for building a strong presence—again, both collectively and individually—as social researchers; locally, nationally and globally.

1 Social Sciences in Asia Today

This is an exciting time to participate in the social sciences in Asia. We all know that the fastest emerging region of the world is Asia. This positioning provides resources and opportunities for those of us based in Asia that may not have been possible a generation or even a decade ago. I have had the good fortune over the past decade to be involved in academia not only in Singapore and Malaysia, but also in Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and elsewhere. Everywhere I go, I have seen rapid developments taking place at universities and research institutes. And internationally, people are paying attention to the increasing quantity—and more importantly, *quality*—of research being produced in Asia.

A few years ago for example, I attended the International Malaysian Studies Conference at the University Kebangsaan Malaysia. I happened to meet a colleague and friend of mine who works at a major research university in the United States. She was at the book exhibit, excitedly perusing the large collection of recently published books on display. Many of these books, about society, culture, politics, and other issues in Malaysia and Asia more generally, were published by local Malaysian presses. As my friend pointed out, many of these are not available in the United States, yet at the same time they clearly represented some of the most important and most exciting new research for those of us interested in Asian social sciences. And she duly returned to the U.S. with a suitcase full of newly purchased books! She was not the only international colleague at that conference and at other times over the past several years to comment on the increasing importance of local Asian scholarship on the international scene.

This is not to say that there have not been important Asian scholars in earlier decades and earlier generations. In my own field, of anthropology and sociology, such scholars as Syed Hussein Alatas and Syed Husin Ali in Singapore and Malaysia, Akin Rabibhadana and Suthep Soonthornpasuch in Thailand, and

Koentjaraningrat and Taufik Abdullah in Indonesia (just to name a few) have made important contributions not just to Southeast Asian social sciences, but to social sciences internationally. One could name many more important Asian scholars across a range of fields from economics to history. There has never been an absence of local, “world class” scholars.

There is a sense in which, however, previous generations of Asian social scientists have tended to be noted for their research as individual scholars, more so than as collective scholarly communities. In the most recent generation and recent decades, on the other hand, there are at least signs of an increasingly robust development of a scholarly communities of social scientists in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, who have the potential to establish *fields* of expertise and scholarly excellence—rather than simply individual excellence and expertise. What I would like to do then, in the remainder of this essay, is to suggest strategies for making this happen—that is, for making your mark individually and collectively in global academia.

2 **Knowing Your Field and Making Your Mark**

A few years ago, I attended a public lecture given in Singapore by an internationally famous columnist, whose work appears regularly in newspapers around the globe. Stylistically, his talk was absolutely brilliant. I have rarely been to a lecture in which the speaker conveyed his ideas so well. The ideas themselves, however, were absolute rubbish. They made no sense, either empirically or logically.

The event reinforced an important, if somewhat sad truth: It is often more important, and more successful, to convey your ideas brilliantly than to have brilliant ideas. It does no good to have brilliant ideas if you are not able to convey them successfully. I certainly do not want to champion style over substance! But I do want to outline strategies for getting your research published and acknowledged. I am going to assume that all of the readers of *AJSS*, especially those who submit manuscripts to our journal, have brilliant ideas that are worth conveying; what I want to focus on is how to convey those ideas in a way that they will get noticed and for which you will get credit. This is no easy thing.

For better or worse, social scientists everywhere in the world, including those in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, are being brought under the scrutiny of auditing systems based on various rankings of publications and universities, along with other sorts of metrics and “key performance indicators” (KPI). There may be benefits to this sort of scrutiny. There

is certainly a lot wrong with it. But the fact is, it is a system that is increasingly important and will continue to be important into the foreseeable future. It is to your advantage to understand this system and make the most of it. At times, in my opinion and in my experience, this auditing system can be a detriment to good, high-quality, worthwhile research and publication. At times, you will have to make choices and trade off the work that you think is important for the work that will get you credit in the eyes of the institution you work for. That said, I want to focus here on how to make the most out of this emerging research audit-culture.

The most important point I have to make is that you need to think in terms of what *field* does your research fall into? You need to have a self-awareness of the *field* of research with which you are engaging. You need to think about *who* are the researchers with whom you are having a conversation? Answering these questions is by no means an easy, straight-forward task.

When I say that you need to think in terms of the *field* within which your work falls, I do not mean a general discipline—like sociology, anthropology, geography, or economics. I do not even mean some well established subfield within a discipline—such as econometrics within economics or postcolonial theory within anthropology. I mean something much, much more specific. Each individual researcher should undertake the task of identifying with some precision the *field* into which their own research fits. Such a “field” will, in fact, be a relatively small constellations of researchers and research publications.

Every discipline of the social sciences is somewhat different in its publication practices—in other words, in terms of what sort of publications are seen as the most important and valuable. One of the most general divides is between journal articles and books. Some disciplines—notably economics and psychology—have valued short journal articles and largely discount books. Other disciplines—such as anthropology and history—have often seen books as the most important place for major ideas and considered journal articles to be of less relevance (at least in comparison to the value placed on journal articles by economists and psychologists).

In the past two decades, however, there has been greater and greater emphasis placed on journal publication across all fields. And publication in academic journals has become far more important—at least in the audit culture of universities—than any other mode of scholarly communication (not only books, but also conferences or correspondence among researchers). By no means do I want to champion this sort of audit-culture thinking; I think it has some deleterious effects on social sciences—but I will leave those aside for now. Rather, given this reality, how can you use it to your advantage?

First and foremost, identify the key journals in your field. These are in part the most important journals in your discipline, but more importantly they are the key journals in your *field* of specialisation—as *you* construct and construe the specific field of your research to be. You need to get to know the journals that are relevant to your work. And you need to build on the research that is already published in those journals.

My specific advice is this: First, go to the major journal databases—ISI Web of Knowledge and Scopus being the most well known—and familiarise yourself with their ranking of journals in your discipline. This is not a simple or quick task. In fact, it is a major undertaking. It only takes a few minutes to look up the general ranking of journals by discipline within these databases. But it will take a matter of weeks if not months to really familiarise yourself with the wide range of journals and, more importantly, to identify those journals that are central to your *field* of research.

The first cut is to go through all the journals in your discipline and identify which ones your work would fit into. In fact, you should look not only at journals in your discipline, but also in adjacent disciplines. For example, in my own work, I look at journals not only in anthropology, but also in sociology, geography, gender or women's studies, area studies, and some in history and psychology.

I suggest that you identify at least a dozen or, better yet, about two dozen journals that are relevant to your work. You will not be able to do this just by looking at the titles. You will need to read through the titles and abstracts of the research published in dozens of journals. Some journals which, by their titles may appear to be relevant to you will turn out to publish work that does not really suit your methods or research interests. On the other hand, you may find surprisingly relevant journals, particularly when you peruse journals in adjacent disciplines, which may not be so familiar to you or to your supervisors and mentors.

One way in which journals are conventionally, and usefully, thought about is *generalist* and *specialist* journals. In any discipline there are about three to six major “generalist” journals. You should be able to identify what those journals are. You should be able to rattle them off if asked—for example, if you are a social-cultural anthropologist then they would include *Current Anthropology*, *Cultural Anthropology*, *American Anthropologist* and *American Ethnologist*. If you are a sociologist, then *American Sociological Review*, *Social Forces*, *American Journal of Sociology* and *Theory and Society*.

Unfortunately, there is a strong American-bias in this list of leading “generalist journals” and also a strong American-bias in the work and authors that they publish. As an Asia-based scholar, it would be good to familiarise yourself

with important international, non-American generalist journals as well—such as *Current Sociology*, *International Sociology*, *Anthropological Forum*, *Ethnos*, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, and, of course, the *Asian Journal of Social Science*.

There will be many more good generalist journals in any given discipline, but you should always be aware of the half-dozen or so upon which there is general consensus. Specialist journals within a discipline will range into the hundreds! But for any given researcher there will be about a dozen that are most important. The set of journals you identify should include a mix of both generalist and specialist journals.

Once you have identified the dozen or so journals that are relevant to your work, you need to familiarise yourself with the articles within the journal—especially those most closely associated with your work. At this point, it is important that you begin to think seriously about how your work fits into a broader field of scholarship. One of the biggest mistakes that I see among graduate students is that they define their field too narrowly—for example, if they are working on rural-to-urban migration in Malaysia (which was the subject of my own doctoral research), they then confine themselves only to the handful of literature on rural-to-urban migration in Malaysia.

You need to think of your work more broadly than that—for example, how does it speak to issues of rural-urban interactions, including for example literature about Latin America? To migration theory, even if it is about cases in Europe? And to literature not only on Malaysia, but other countries too—for example, neighbouring Southeast Asian countries or countries with similar socioeconomic or ethnic dynamics? Look to construct your “field” not of research that is exactly the same as yours, but research that *your research can speak to* and has overlapping issues with yours.

A task I set my own graduate students is this: To examine at least the last five years of all the journals relevant to their work. Read through the titles and abstracts of *all* the papers published in *all* the dozen or more relevant journals over the past five years.

One extremely important point is to pay close attention to the most recent work. A common problem for junior researchers when writing and attempting to publish their work is that their arguments and theoretical frameworks can appear woefully out-of-date to the reviewers. This can also happen to more senior researchers, as they move further from their graduate studies. So it is a good idea to update or refresh your “review of the field” every five years or so. It is vitally important to understand and to speak to recent ideas in the literature when you are sending your own work out for publication. And the way to do that is to be reading the latest journal publications. So, as you read through the

titles and abstracts, you should be collecting all the relevant articles—or the potentially relevant articles—related to your own research.

The next step is to then read these relevant articles in detail. And here, I want to stress that you should not only be reading the articles for their content and for their findings (though those are of course important). You need to also be reading those articles for their form and their style—of writing, of argumentation, and of methods. For example, if in your own research, you have a rich but relatively small set of qualitative data, pay close attention to how other successfully published researchers make arguments and carry out analysis based on small, qualitative data sets. The same goes of course for those who work with large, statistical samples.

My general advice here is to think in terms of *imitation* and *innovation* when publishing your own work. By imitation, I do not mean simply copying—and of course I do not mean plagiarising!—but every field and every journal has a particular style in which editors and readers expect an argument to be presented. Some, for example, will insist on an extensive discussion of methodology; while others will not. You need to attune yourself to these conventions and follow them when writing up research to submit to particular journals. And of course, in all of this, I am encouraging submission of your work to major journals for publication as the ultimate goal.

As you are familiarising yourself with these conventions, pay special attention to the conventions of the most prestigious, generalist journals in your discipline. The fact is that these journals are inundated with hundreds of submissions every year, of which they only publish a handful. Specialist and less prestigious journals receive far fewer submissions; particularly far fewer high-quality submissions. Thus, the simple reality is that a more prestigious, generalist journal will be more demanding in its expectation that you adhere to the conventions of that journal.

Therefore, the advice for writing up your research for submission to a journal is fairly simple—write it up with close attention to the conventions of one or more of the most prestigious journals in your discipline. Ideally, aim to submit it to one of those journals. But whether or not you publish it in that journal—or even submit it to such a journal—by starting off adhering to the conventions and demands of the most prestigious journals, your article is likely to be looked upon favourably by a less prestigious or more specialist journal even if their conventions are somewhat different.

In this respect, I should note, the *Asian Journal of Social Science* is something of an oddity. On the one hand, we are a generalist journal—but not discipline specific. Our core disciplines are sociology and anthropology, but we publish across a range of disciplines including communications, economics, geogra-

phy, political science, social psychology, social work, and other social sciences. In part because of this, we get a large number and very wide range of submissions, due to which we can only publish less than 5% of all the submissions we receive. When submitting to *AJSS*, authors would do best to follow the style of articles most similar to their own within *AJSS* and/or the style of articles from top journals within their own disciplines.

The goal to work toward is publishing your own work in the most prestigious, international journal possible. In the process I have described above, you will already have constructed—either on paper or at least in your head—a domain and hierarchy of journals that constitute the field within which your research fits. This is something you need to continue to work on throughout your career, but the earlier you start doing it the better. Certainly, it is a process you should engage in by the time you start writing up your research—though even better if you start the task earlier at the point of developing the research itself (for example, when you are writing up a research proposal for your doctoral work or later in grant proposal writing). Once you are at the point where you have enough of your own original material, data, and ideas to aim for journal publication (usually, as a graduate student this means, once you have completed your primary research), then you should start aiming to do this write-up.

At this point, you should narrow your range and focus of journals to the specific ones where you think your research would fit—and this involves thinking about both the scope and quality of various journals. You should aim high—though not unrealistically high. Reflect on the data you have and the sort of argument that you intend to make with it and on what sort of journal into which the article you have in mind would fit. Aim to publish in the best (that is to say, most highly ranked or regarded) journal in which you think your article could reasonably be published. At the same time, have a Plan B (C and D!). That is to say, it is useful to have a second, third, and even fourth choice of journals in mind, to which you can quickly send your work if it is not accepted in your first choice journal.

The reason for this is that the process of publishing in top international journals can be torturously long. In my own experience, for example, the first major article I published was first written in 1999. I sent the earliest draft to one renowned journal, which had it reviewed and rejected it. That took roughly a year. I thoroughly revised and rewrote it over another year and sent it to another top journal. There it was reviewed and I was asked to revise-and-resubmit it. After another round of reviews it was accepted (pending some further revisions), and finally it was published a little over a year later. So, first submitted in 1999 it was finally published in 2003 ... four years altogether! Of course, publication can happen much faster; and this also can depend on disciplines

(anthropology is notoriously slow!). But three or four years from submission to publication in the social sciences is not at all unusual, particularly when aiming for publication in top international journals. The point here is that with a publishing plan, you will be prepared to quickly revise a paper and send it to your second or third choice journal if the first one does not work out.

To summarise up to this point—you need to identify a *field* into which your research fits. To some extent, this entails constructing a field by drawing together a particular set of journals and research papers that all intersect or converge on the specific concerns of your research. In this regard, every researcher's "field" will be somewhat differently configured. This field should not be too narrowly construed. At the same time, it should not be so broad or so vague as a general discipline or general subfield within a discipline. It needs to be a field specific to your research interests, one that you actively construct through engagement with the literature, and one which you know in detail. This is your field of specialisation, and you should practice talking (and thinking) about it with some fluency.

While engagement with the literature is a crucial part of learning your field, a second important equally crucial aspect in constructing this field of specialisation is identifying the *people* in your field. It is useful to think about scholarship as a *conversation*. It is useful to think about journal articles—or books for that matter—as statements made by particular scholars; that is to say, by particular individuals. This is something that I feel I have been rather slow to come around to doing myself in the course of my career. I dislike the academic style of name-dropping—tossing around famous names such as Foucault or Weber or Bourdieu or whoever in lieu of actual engagement with theory or ideas. So what I am talking about here is not cultivating an ability to drop names (though, I have to admit, that is probably a useful skill). Rather, when reading academic articles in your field, pay attention to the arguments and ideas that particular individuals are developing. When you find articles or books that speak to you and speak to your work, pay attention to who the author is and follow up with finding what else they have written and how the article you read fits into a broader body of their work. Do not focus on "big names" but rather on good work!

Understanding other scholars' engagements with the field is important for several reasons. For one thing, you will find that some articles are written by people deeply engaged in a particular subject, while in other cases the subject is not that author's main focus. This is useful to know, because as your career develops, you will want to develop relationships with others who work on similar topics as your own. You may find, however, that some researchers have moved on to other fields or that their interests are not what you expected from a cursory reading of their work.

More importantly, you should identify those researchers with whom you are likely to have ongoing engagements and perhaps even collaborations. In writing up your own research, particularly articles you intend to submit for journal publication, you should think of how your work speaks to those authors who have previously published on the same topic or theme, particularly those who have published in the journal or journals to which you intend to submit your work.

At the most practical level, those are the individuals who are most likely to be called upon by the journal editor to act as peer reviewers of your article. More generally, you should think in terms of working toward engaging in an ongoing conversation or dialogue about your research topic with others who are actively publishing in the field.

The fact that these authors are going to be reviewing your work does not mean that you should be uncritical—but you should think and write in terms of constructive critical engagement. This is where the aspect of *innovation* comes into play. In writing up your research, critique and at the same time build upon the literature you have reviewed. Most importantly, you need to think in terms of what your work adds to the literature that already exists—either empirically in terms of new data, theoretically in terms of new ideas, or ideally both. You need to highlight these points, as reviewers of your work will be looking precisely for this “value added” aspect of the article. In other words, what does this article contribute that we have not already read before? Achieving that—saying something new—is challenging, especially at early stages of your research career; but it is important to always keep that in mind as you are writing for publication.

3 Conclusions

In summary, these suggestions are simple, if not easy. As a scholar in the social sciences, your goal should be to establish yourself in a field of specialisation. If you ask a sociologist, linguist, political scientist, or other disciplinary specialist, they will be able to name various fields of specialisation within their discipline. But, especially for junior researchers, that is a deceptive and misleading way to think about a field of specialisation. In the social sciences (or any sciences), “fields” of specialisation are ongoing processes crafted by specialists. They are not fixed sets of texts or ideas. The “field” as I have suggested above, is produced by two things—authors and the works that they write. As a social scientist, you should think of yourself as actively participating in the construction of these fields of specialisation.

I hope that the ideas I have presented here do not make research and publication sound too daunting! Identifying the field or fields of specialisation into which your research fits is a gradual and ongoing process. It does not happen all at once. Moreover, if you are an active researcher, it is a process that never comes to an end—scholarship develops and your research will develop with it. It is through such active engagement—your active engagement—in varied fields of research specialisation that the social sciences in Asia will continue to thrive and develop in the years and decades to come.