

## *Editorial*

*Modern Asian Studies* was first published in 1967. It was a manifestation of the enthusiasm for ‘area studies’ which swept academia in the mid-twentieth century. This in turn was prompted by a recognition in Western scholarly and other circles of the importance of understanding the history, languages, and cultures of the world beyond North America and Europe. Such knowledge was desirable in its own right, adding to the sum total of human experience and achievement, but, as societies and economies became increasingly interwoven, it was believed to have significant practical value for dealing with problems of business and trade, politics and diplomacy, the migration of peoples on an unprecedented scale, and fears and anxieties as differing cultures and religions came into contact with each other.

In Britain, the government responded to the advice of committees (peopled mainly by academics) that a special effort was needed to promote the study of the non-Western world. Following the lead of the United States, select universities were funded to establish specialist interdisciplinary ‘area studies’ centres that would introduce knowledge of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Soviet Union into undergraduate courses and, more particularly, into postgraduate research. Cambridge University Press, among other publishers, helped to drive this agenda forward by setting up new monograph series and new journals that focused on Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. *Modern Asian Studies* was part of this wider initiative.

The journal did not, of course, enter an empty space. There were already specialist academic journals covering particular countries or regions of Asia, and there were many long-established disciplinary journals that published research on Asia. So the question was how to make *Modern Asian Studies* distinctive. Some of the existing journals were firmly rooted in philological and classical civilization traditions, so it was clear that *Modern Asian Studies* should draw on the social sciences—history, geography, economics, sociology, political science, and social anthropology. But even here there were dominant players in the marketplace—particularly the *Journal of Asian Studies*, owned by the American Association of Asian Studies, with its large and varied

membership of teachers and scholars. It covered the whole of Asia extremely well, publishing short essays, some of which announced new findings and many of which synthesized the fruits of recent research; it had a comprehensive book review section, and an annual bibliographical issue that was an indispensable research tool for anyone working in any discipline with an Asian subject in mind. A new journal, based in Britain, could not compete with this—no matter how enthusiastic the support from the new centres of Chinese, Japanese, Southeast Asian, and South Asian studies that had been established in the universities of Leeds, Sheffield, Hull, and Cambridge respectively.

These glimpses into the journal's early history explain some of *MAS*'s distinctive features. First, is its marked bias towards South Asian history, which met a real need. From 1963, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* had begun to make an impact in India, but at the time its circulation outside India itself was still very limited. In contrast to history, other subjects, such as anthropology, economics, development studies, geography, and sociology had journals dedicated to their particular disciplines, which attracted new work in these different fields. This increased *MAS*'s bias towards South Asian history, and in time this became self-perpetuating. As the journal attracted more and more of the best work on South Asian history, it became the 'go-to' journal of choice for many leaders in that field.

Secondly, there was a perceived need for a journal that would (in the tradition of the old Proceedings of Learned Societies) publish longer essays—based on archive- or fieldwork—which gave scope for the data on which the original arguments were based to be presented in full. This was territory that *Modern Asian Studies* made its own—helped pragmatically by the fact that the University of Cambridge was one of the places where a great deal of excellent research was being done. Longer essays on modern South Asian history became a hallmark of the journal. More archival work followed, bringing in work on other countries, and the institutional base of contributors, especially historians, expanded greatly.

A unique feature of *Modern Asian Studies* is that, from its inception, it has not imposed word limits on authors. When asked the question by would-be authors, Gordon Johnson—always pragmatic and flexible—typically replied to them, 'How long is a piece of string?' This remains the journal's philosophy, although referees and editors alike are now a trifle firmer in asking authors to cut words that are patently unnecessary.

Another significant editorial decision was to favour longer review essays (there was a long-standing fantasy that each issue would include a piece modelled on the great nineteenth-century articles written by Macaulay). This proved harder to achieve. Academics, even in the more leisurely days of the 1970s and 1980s, were very willing to carry off books from the office but surprisingly reluctant actually to write about them. Still, the point was made and from the earliest years there were review essays that provided original (and sometimes controversial) contributions to knowledge in themselves.

Fifty years on, these features remain the pillars of the journal's identity. Yet some things have changed. Some five years ago, the journal entered fully the digital age, and its office became completely 'paperless'. This has changed how most readers experience *MAS*. Many more of them now download single articles than those who read, or even physically hold, a hard copy of an issue with its familiar black-and-yellow cover. It has also changed (not always for the better) how authors, reviewers, and editors interact with the journal as *MAS* grows and prospers.

If, in the early years, the problem was a dearth of articles, now we struggle to cope with abundance. Each year we receive about 300 articles, averaging one a day (bar Sundays) and is a huge challenge for a core editorial team, which remains small, lean, and—if not mean—certainly inexpensive. Double-blind peer reviews, multiple revisions and resubmissions, impact assessments, and research excellence frameworks all impose a host of new pressures on authors, referees, and editors alike. Nevertheless, we believe that these have raised the quality of the average article. Recently *MAS* has expanded from four issues per year to six, in order to make more room for the increasing numbers of excellent articles that reach us through our online submission portal.

Members of our Board now more actively encourage young scholars, based in Asia and who are working on exciting new subjects using Asian-language archival resources, to think of publishing in *Modern Asian Studies*. We very much hope they will do so in growing numbers as the journal becomes more engaged with scholars based in Asia. In addition to our traditional strengths in South Asian scholarship, we are now also making a particular effort to attract scholarship on China by Chinese scholars in Chinese universities.

Building upon the journal's tradition of influential, yet infrequent, review articles, *MAS* now makes a concerted effort to solicit review articles from both established and younger scholars on a more regular

basis. In order to maintain a high standard of academic rigour, we put these review articles through the same double-blind peer review process as our research articles. Two of these review articles, by Janet Hunter on earthquakes in Japan and Chinnaiah Jangam on Dalit studies, appear in this fiftieth anniversary issue. Additionally, and reflecting our engagement with scholarship in Asia, the journal has started a new initiative to publish longer synoptic reviews of scholarly works written in Asian languages that would not ordinarily be reviewed in an English-language journal. Fernando Rosa Ribeiro's review of *Bahasa Sanskerta dan Bahasa Melayu (Sanskrit and Malay)* by James T. Collins, published in this issue, is one such example.

Another editorial development of *MAS* has been the now-regular publication of special issues, fora, and round tables. Academic presses today are more reluctant to publish edited volumes of essays or conference proceedings, so the editors of some of these innovative collections now look to journals for a home for their proceedings, and *MAS* actively seeks them out. We are proud to have published several exceptional special issues and fora on a range of subjects from Islam in South Asia, orality and literacy in South Asia, inter-Asian connections, and Chinese refugees. In terms of 'impact', these issues have been among our most successful, being most frequently downloaded and cited.

In this issue, we offer a lively and exciting round-table discussion, stimulated by Sanjay Subrahmanyam's posing of the question, 'One Asia or many?'. Simon Schaffer, Edmund Herzig, and Craig Clunas respond to Subrahmanyam from their different regional and disciplinary perspectives in a rich exchange that helps us reflect, as we embark on the next decade of the journal's history, on what Asia was and what it is today. We also present a range of articles on a wide variety of subjects, regions, and disciplines.

Fifty years on, this issue represents the eclectic mix, the breadth, and the quality of *MAS* and sets a high standard for the journal during its next half century.

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