

To AAS President, Board of Directors, and members of CIAC, NEAC, SAC, and SEAC:

The *positions* collective authored one of the letters criticizing the handling of the AAS-in-Asia conference last year. We thus appreciated the opportunity to debate the issues in a town-hall setting at the recent AAS annual meeting in Denver. The event was well attended, demonstrating member desire to be involved in the AAS-in-Asia initiative, and it led to a productive conversation. However, due to the limited amount of time and the large number of interested participants, questions were left hanging, issues were left unexplored, and misunderstandings were left unclarified. We are here following up on that discussion, in the hope that our contributions will help in formulating the promised member survey as well as in shaping the future general policies of AAS as a member-supported organization.

Transparency

In our view, the conversation did not properly address the main issue, which is *not* whether there is a “perfect place,” free of political obstacles, to hold a conference, in Asia or anywhere else. We fully acknowledge that no place is free of political impediment and cultural prejudice. We all do work in places with unsavory politics and policies; many of us live in such places. To the best of our capacities, we engage in activism that strongly challenges such objectionable politics where we live and work. Our objection to the AAS-in-Asia process had nothing to do with purity tests, nor did *positions* demand the cancellation of the meeting in India.

The issue was one of transparency and communication. First and foremost, when the visa problem arose, information about it was buried in a link that no one saw and no one knew about; this is legalistic plausible deniability, but it is not respectful to the members of a professional member-driven organization. The given explanation at the town-hall meeting was that the AAS leadership had a responsibility to the host institution—Ashoka University in New Delhi—so communication to members was limited and delayed. We submit, however, that the AAS leadership’s primary responsibility is not to any institution, or even to “Asia.” The AAS leadership’s primary responsibility is to us, the dues-paying, participating members. We thus found it deeply problematic that it was only in June, and only in the wake of a media storm, that AAS acknowledged that they had been informed of, and had covered-up, demands of the Indian government for a preemptive ban on all Pakistanis (nationals or descent).

The lack of transparency in this case raises the larger issue of transparency in general. How, for instance, are locations and institutions chosen, and by whom? Why? Which criteria are used? And what are the mechanisms for pulling out, should that become necessary? At whose expense? Are issues of pre-emptive censorship and restricted access taken into consideration? If so, who considers them? And as we agree that there is no perfect place and acknowledge that some events will go forward in less than ideal conditions, where is the bar that would militate against continuing? Is it a ban on LGBTQ people? Restrictions on certain topics? Again, this is not an issue of purity: again, there is no pure place. It is a problem of process and accountability to the membership. Members should know and have a voice in how these decisions are made. When problems arise, members should be informed immediately, clearly and without burying the information, so that each person can decide for themselves what conditions they are willing to tolerate to participate in any given event.

Hypocrisy

The response to our criticism has largely taken the form of attempted shaming: drawing equivalences, making comparisons, and engaging in “what-about-ism,” to suggest that because all countries (especially the U.S.) have unjust policies, our criticism is somehow hypocritical and even naïve. But no one has clean hands here, we know that. So the rhetorical strategy of equivalence might be a useful ploy, and it plays well, but it is ultimately a diversion, which has allowed AAS leadership to avoid a genuine conversation about *how* the AAS will deal with the accumulating challenges of academic freedom as we move further into this fraught global century. The scholarly achievements of the AAS leadership and their members-colleagues belie this rhetorical strategy. We have all made it our declared mission to be as critical of our own positions as we are of the political/intellectual/cultural positions of those whom we study and often know personally. At the town hall, we heard repeatedly that the AAS-in-Asia initiative is intended in part to ensure AAS “not lose touch with Asia/Asian colleagues.” Many members of AAS go to Asia regularly—factoring in the constraints of visas, expenses, family obligations, and so on—and we maintain relations with Asian colleagues, and to be frank, many of us are in fact “Asian.”

We call upon the AAS leadership to drop the rhetoric and to engage seriously in conversations about how to move forward, given that our world is becoming more and not less complex, more and not less toxic. It would be a shame if that toxicity were to become the standard mode of interaction among colleagues.

Alternatives

The stated purpose of AAS-in-Asia relates to a desire to establish and maintain connections to Asia and to increase opportunities for colleagues in Asia to attend larger AAS meetings. *positions* supports that goal. But why is a large meeting the only possible model of intellectual and conference interaction? The AAS leadership outlined very clearly the serious practical problems associated with holding such large events in Asian countries. Why stick to that model, then, a model that was founded, after all, on a Cold War assumption about scholarly work and academic interaction? Why not encourage and support smaller meetings organized by Asian scholars, to which AAS could lend its funding and intellectual support? Or why not invest money in supporting Asian scholars (and especially graduate students) to come to the annual AAS meeting, which need not be held each year in the United States? Why not try to negotiate even cheaper hotel rates and offer cheaper registration rates for graduate students and those who come from less well-off countries/institutions/situations? Or, if we really believe that our primary concern is our relationship with “Asia” and Asian scholars, given how odious US policies are, why don’t we consider Nicholas Loubere’s very serious proposal to move the AAS annual meeting to a location outside the US (a proposal that was met with laughter at the town hall)? Why is our AAS leadership so wedded to the Cold War model of “Asian Studies” enshrined in the AAS annual meeting in the US?

The survey

We support the proposal of surveying the membership about the AAS-in-Asia, but the survey should not be organized around a simple yes/no question. It should be substantive and reference the issues raised here, as well as those raised at the town hall. The survey should be undertaken by an independent individual with expertise and experience in survey design for academic institutions or professional scholarly associations. It should begin with consultation with AAS stakeholders to determine the goals of the survey, and to ensure that it is based in formative evaluation that includes the current position of AAS (and AAS-in-Asia), and where the organization would like to go in the future. These steps should be the basis for determining the concepts and desired information around

which the survey will be developed. We are happy to be part of this process. The AAS may also want to consult with Tracey Peter (http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/arts/departments/sociology/facstaff/tracey_peter.html).

The Town hall

The town hall should be an annual event at whichever venue is chosen for the annual meeting. The dialogue initiated between the members and the leadership was very instructive. People could *see* each other, interact in real time with one another, and learn about dialoguing in ways that are ever rarer in our era of social media dependence. Town halls are a valuable resource.

The editorial collective of *positions: asia critique*