

#AsiaNow An Interview with Maura Elizabeth Cunningham



#AsiaNow, which debuted in March 2017, is the blog of the Association for Asian Studies. The blog includes Asia content and features interviews with authors and scholars, new media available for those interested in Asia, pedagogical strategies for the classroom, and other posts. #AsiaNow also is an excellent repository for learning about both AAS opportunities and other Asia-related professional development, conferences, and research initiatives. #AsiaNow is available to both AAS members and individuals interested in Asia who have not joined AAS. Visit www.asian-studies.org/asia-now for access to all posts since the blog's inception.

Maura Elizabeth Cunningham is a historian and writer based in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where she is Digital Media Manager at the Association for Asian Studies. Maura earned a PhD in Modern Chinese History from the University of California—

Irvine in 2014 and has written for a variety of publications, including *Time*, *The Financial Times*, *World Policy Journal*, and *The Los Angeles Review of Books*. She is coauthor (with Jeffrey Wasserstrom) of the third edition of *China in the 21st Century: What Everyone Needs to Know*, which will be published by Oxford University Press in spring 2018.

For more specific information about the blog and visions about #AsiaNow's future possibilities, please read the short interview with Editor Maura Elizabeth Cunningham that follows.

Lucien Ellington: How did you first become interested in Asia, and why did you decide to make the study of Asia a career?

Maura Cunningham: Growing up, I was always interested in history, writing, and travel. I had no idea what I would do with my life, but I wanted it to include a combination of those three things in some way. In high school, I developed a fascination with Russian history and started college thinking I would focus on that, but when I showed up for my first semester, I got placed into a seminar on the history of travel writing about China. We began with Marco Polo's *Travels* from the thirteenth century and finished with Paul Theroux's *Riding the Iron Rooster* (1988), covering 700 years of Chinese history in the process. I was completely engrossed. I had never studied China before, aside from reading Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth* in ninth grade, and I came out of that course convinced I needed to know more about the country and its past. So I took another class on Chinese history, and another, and just kept going from there. In the end, I graduated with a minor in Asian studies and never got around to a single course on Russian history.

Similarly, going on to graduate school and making a career in Asian studies was a decision I sort of backed into. As I neared my college graduation with no definite plans for the future, I thought about the things I liked to do (reading, writing, telling stories about people and places) and started looking for a career that would tie them together—frequent travel a plus. I sat down with a few of the history professors who had taught me, and all of them asked if I'd ever thought about doing a PhD. I hadn't, because I really didn't know what it *meant* to have a doctorate or what career paths that would open. But everything they told me sounded good (they might have skipped over a few things, like qualifying exams!), and I decided to make a PhD in Chinese history my ultimate goal, though I didn't follow a completely straight line to get there in the end. And now, I'm just as interested in China's present as its past; these days, I mostly write about current events and politics from a historical angle.

Lucien: In addition to editing #AsiaNow, what are your other AAS publication responsibilities?

Maura: I'm the person behind all our social media accounts, as well as a lot of the emails that our members receive. I also work with our publications manager, Jon Wilson, to promote AAS publications like *Education About Asia* and our different book series.

Lucien: Was the notion of creating an AAS-published blog your idea, or were you hired with an already-existing job responsibility to create the blog?

Maura: The idea of having an AAS blog had been kicking around the office for several years before I was hired, but the AAS is a small organization

in terms of staff members, and there was no one with the time to oversee the creation and maintenance of what has become #AsiaNow. In addition to starting a blog, the board of directors and AAS staff also wanted to increase the use of social media and engage more directly with association members, educators, journalists, and policymakers. They knew that AAS members were involved in many diverse and exciting projects in terms of research and writing, pedagogical initiatives, and creating networks of scholars around the world, but the association didn't really have a way to share information about those in a timely and flexible manner or to communicate with a broad audience beyond the AAS membership.

I actually first interviewed for a different job with the AAS, but during my conversations with the officers, they realized my background and skill set would enable me to undertake some of the digital initiatives that had been on the back-burner. During my years in graduate school, I had been an editor for several different online publications—*The China Beat*, *China-File*, and *The LA Review of Books China* blog—and I had a lot of experience as a freelance writer as well. So the AAS officers asked if I'd be interested in coming to work for the association not in the role I had originally applied for but in a totally new one that they would create for me. That became the digital media manager position, which I took up in August 2016.

Lucien: Your "instructions for contributors" on the blog page are specific, but feel free to elaborate if you like by giving any additional advice to potential contributors.

Maura: I'll emphasize that the most important thing is to write in a smooth and concise manner and to keep in mind that #AsiaNow's audience is a broad swath of Asianists and people interested in Asia. This isn't to say that I want posts that "dumb down" important and complex topics, but they should be written with an awareness that we reach readers far beyond any single regional specialization or field of study. In that way, writing for #AsiaNow is probably similar to writing for *Education About Asia*.

Lucien: What are some possible future directions you or your editorial board have discussed for #AsiaNow?

Maura: We want to offer scholars and educators a venue in which they can talk about their work—whether that work takes place in the classroom, the library, or on extramural excursions—and welcome inquiries from prospective authors who want to share their experiences with our readers. We'd also like to publish short reviews (of books, movies, podcasts, exhibits, etc.). Overall, what we want most is to feature a diverse array of voices and perspectives; I invite anyone interested in writing for #AsiaNow to contact me at mcunningham@asian-studies.org.

Lucien: Maura, thanks for the interview! ■