Journeys and journals east and west

Keywords: anesthesia; bibliometrics; editorial; Far East; journalism

This is the second in a series of editorials and articles documenting a self-evaluation and strategic reorganization of Acta Anaesthesiologica Taiwanica (AAT), to be re-named Asian Journal of Anesthesiology effective March, 2017.

Taiwan’s impressive economic and sociocultural development has been invigorated by transmission of knowledge, trade, assistance, and related intercourse between Taiwan and the West, and–post World War II—particularly with the United States.

Embedded in this success story dwells that of the also impressive development of Taiwan’s healthcare system, including that of the field of anesthesiology. Having long played catch-up with the advanced world economies, Taiwan—along with several other Asian nations and regions—today stands recognized in many respects as counting among them. A 2008 article published in the “Observations” section of The BMJ titled “Humbled in Taiwan” and headlined “Taiwan’s highly efficient system of national health insurance should humble and inspire the United States’” emblemizes this dramatic gap reduction.

Yet Taiwan and the rest of Asia in general lags behind the West in the production of high-quality academic research and professional/clinical literature, with the United States producing more such publications, and citations thereof, in anesthesiology than any other country, followed by European nations, Canada, and Australia.

With the Taiwanese Society of Anesthesiologists, our founding organization, marking its 60th anniversary this year, we take a look back at the work that has taken AAT from its inception in 1962 as the second or third specialized medical journal in Taiwan—“Depending on who you ask”, according to former Editor-in-Chief Professor Shuntai Ho— to its current status, and we acknowledge and draw lessons from those efforts as we seek to further elevate AAT’s stature and its power to contribute more substantially to the progression of anesthetic medicine, including perioperative medicine, pain medicine, and critical care medicine worldwide.

In its earlier years, AAT represented a significant achievement, conferring a point of pride in an underappreciated and relatively unseen specialty, materializing a place for pioneering Taiwanese clinicians and researchers to disseminate much-needed information and guidance to peers, and serving the nascent field as a platform where academics could publish their work (the first independent Department of Anesthesiology in Taiwan had been founded only six years previously). It was published in Chinese.

Around this time, industry overtook agriculture as the primary engine of productivity in Taiwan. Together with the government’s strategy of heavy investment in education, this facilitated a number of young Taiwanese physicians pursuing advanced study of anesthesiology in the United States.

Prominent among them was Professor Takyu Lee, whose tutelage under K. C. Wong, Chairman of Anesthesiology at the University of Utah School of Medicine, turned into a close personal and professional relationship lasting many years and was connected to Professor Wong spending much of his later career furthering education in anesthesiology in China and Taiwan.

Lee served as AAT’s editor-in-chief from 1994—2002 effecting a major pivot toward modernization and internationalization of the journal: He made it bilingual, personally devoting untold hours to polishing the English of submitted articles. This leap resulted in attracting several paper submissions from countries outside Taiwan, including mostly “mid-level” academic producers from India and the Middle East, but also a few from Germany and the UK.

Prof Ho, who had studied on a fellowship at the University of Chicago after his medical residency, undertook the editor-in-chief position in 2003, further upgrading AAT by transforming it into an English-only journal and aiming directly and persistently at achieving “SCI status” (by inviting recognized scholars to write review articles on hot or controversial topics, and reorganizing the numbers of published articles by type), an endeavor at which he today matter-of-factly deems a failure. Nevertheless, his efforts

Figure 1. Getting stonger. AAT’s increase in impact, 2005–2015.

resulted in setting the journal on an increasingly ambitious path and dramatically improved its impact factor. He also worked, both as editor-in-chief and earlier during his service as president of the Taiwanese Society of Anesthesiologists, to introduce greater separation between the journal’s editor-in-chief position and the board of the society. He also extended the term of the editor-in-chief position, granting greater editorial independence and more time for editors-in-chief to develop and execute on their goals (Figure 1).

The key contributions by the previous two editors-in-chief, then, involved making administrative changes, transforming AAT into an English-only journal, and diversifying submissions from authors outside Taiwan (Figure 2).

We’ve taken a look back, hopefully arming ourselves with information about what has worked to raise AAT to the position it enjoys today. In forthcoming articles, we will share our explorations into strategies that can help us steer the journal toward reaching its potential tomorrow. This will involve redefining ourselves as an Asian journal instead of a Taiwanese one, defining more precisely what that means, and examining what, as an Asian journal, we can uniquely offer and how increased collaboration with colleagues in medical publishing around the world might create synergies in support of our shared and most fundamental projects: To improve the work, health, productivity, and well-being of anesthesiologists and allied professionals, their patients and other stakeholders, and to more deeply integrate these efforts on a global scale.

Conflicts of interest

All authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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