

# **The Power of Presenting: Professional Involvement in Academic Conferences**

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## **プレゼンテーションの効力：国際学会への積極的参加**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the advantages to investing the time and money needed to attend annual conferences of large research organizations. Examples are provided from the author's experience at the Association of Asian Studies 2004 annual conference. The value of attendance includes professional visibility, exposure to new research fields and topics, human networking, publication potential, and other informational experiences.

**Key words:** conference presentation, research, publication, Asian Studies

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### **抄 録**

この論文では国際学会に参加することの意義について私の2004年アジア学国際学会の経験から考える。学会に参加することにより、研究者として自己アピールの場が得られ、新たな研究分野やテーマの発見ができる。また他の研究者と出会うことにより出版など様々な情報に関する知識や機会も増やすことができる。

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Conference attendance is an expensive and time consuming venture, demanding substantial outlays of currency for fees, travel, food, and lodging, as well as travel time (with its associated fatigue and distractions from other tasks), cancelled classes and missed meetings, and time away from family. All but the most elite researchers at the largest conferences must pay their own way to conferences that invariably rotate locations throughout the country of the organizations' home and around the world. The most input that anyone gives at a conference is typically a short presentation with some discussion time; some give poster presentations and some do not present at all. Considering the costs of such an activity, it is understandable that many researchers shy away from conference attendance. In this paper, I argue that the benefits of conference attendance and participation are well worth the costs and provide examples from my own experience at the Association of Asian Studies annual conference in 2004 to convince readers of the need to include conference attendance as a priority for teachers and researchers.

The Association of Asian Studies (AAS) held its annual conference in San Diego, California, USA, in March, 2004. The annual conference provides an umbrella for Asia researchers from various sections to present from a wide spectrum of perspectives and is large enough to support many special meetings and a book fair. The AAS annual conference is host to over 200 panel presentations, which includes over 1,000 presenters over four days. The AAS is too large to host individual presentations and all participants form panels during the application process. Historical, social, cultural, political, literary, and other research methods and disciplines are represented in the panels on a variety of topics throughout Asia. Additional to the presentations, many organizations host special meetings or luncheons and there are many non-presenting attendees as well. In 2004, the AAS conference occupied a massive conference facility with several different presentation venues and is a significant academic conference.

My attendance at this conference marked many firsts for me in my professional career, as it was my first presentation as a panel member, the first time I had attended the AAS annual meeting (I have attended regional conferences within the organization in previous years), and it was by far the largest conference I have thus far been to. I'll also admit that it was the first international conference I had attended on my own and without knowing anyone who was going to be there, a point that will be relevant in the discussion below. In this article, I will discuss some general attributes of my experience at the conference and reflect on the value of conference presentation and professional involvement. This article will be of special interest to researchers without much conference presentation experience as well as researchers and Asian specialists in general who are keen to share the perspective and experiences of a freshman researcher or information about the AAS conference. Many people may consider presenting to be the key to attendance but indeed

this is far from the case. It is always preferred that researchers contribute to the field and seek to present the findings of their research but when this isn't feasible, attendance in and of itself proffers many benefits.

All conferences share some particular characteristics that make them valued experiences in the lives of researchers. Obviously, the collection of presentations and the opportunity to present one's own work constitutes the core rationale for conference attendance. The scale of the conference is paramount in this regard: small specialized conferences provide opportunities for researchers focused on a small issue to gather and probe their topic in-depth and large annual conferences hosted by parent organizations gather an immense variety of research topics and studies and thus provides unique chances to discover something or meet someone new. Large organizations such as the Association of Asian Studies have many subordinate groups with specific regional or disciplinary themes and the annual conference is the primary, if not only, opportunity for these groups to meet, interact, and influence each other.

It is difficult at times to stay abreast of research within one's own discipline much less all other related areas of research, and conference proceedings help streamline this process. At large conferences, there are many presentations to be found in areas related to one's own research, the research of colleagues who are not attending, and other topics that are just simply interesting. Meeting some of the people who've written articles you've cited (or who've cited yours) is exciting and revitalizing and drives up one's motivation to reciprocate and publish. I met Jane Bachnik (author of *Situated Meaning* (1994)) and Merry White (author of *Perfectly Japanese* (2002) and *The Japanese Overseas* (1992)) at the AAS and was simultaneously pleased and disappointed to hear them both mention that they wanted to hear my presentation but because it was at the end of the program on a Sunday, they were unable to attend. This simple interaction had a huge impact on my confidence in my research and excited me about presenting.

Due to the complexity involved with the sheer number of presentations in some of the larger conferences such as the AAS, participants are encouraged to form presentation panels on their own and submit a panel proposal. The AAS encourages inter-disciplinary panels and as a result, each presentation often provides an approach to a theme from many theoretical and methodological perspectives. My panel was hosted by a historian, chaired by a sociologist, and included myself (an anthropologist), a literature specialist, and a sociologist as presenters, all on the topic of "Japanese returning to Japan: Social and psychological effects." Being a part of such varied approaches provided both opportunities for comments from researchers in other fields and showed me how others think and research.

Big conferences are not just for meeting people within related fields and foci of

research: they are also good for outright socializing. It is almost taboo to discuss non-professional aspects of travel and presentation but the truth is that conferences are a combination of professional excellence and involvement with an opportunity to travel to a new location and meet new people. To fully capitalize on this opportunity it is essential for presenters and attendees alike to attend as many presentation sessions as they can but to also attend luncheons, socials, and receptions. These extra curricular events are especially important for new researchers like myself, I learned.

Meeting new people is fun and exciting and reminds one of the joy of being a researcher. The whole experience is a motivational boost above and beyond the professional contributions of the presentation that revitalizes and affirms one's status. Luncheons and socials are prime opportunities for meeting people as well. I attended the graduate student welcome reception on the first evening of the conference and met other graduates. I was fortunate enough to meet Michael Paschal, the executive director of the AAS, there and learned a great deal about some of the administration of the AAS and the conference, which shows how luncheons, receptions, and socials are also opportunities to learn about the organizations hosting a specific event.

While we were talking, another organizer floating around the room stopped by to make sure that I and other graduate students were aware of the call for panel members page hosted on the AAS website prior to the application deadline. On this webpage, potential panel leaders or partial panel members can post the theme of their panel for potential recruits. People interested in presenting are encouraged to skim this page find a panel of related interest. Since the AAS rarely accepts individual presenters and encourages applicants to create panels of their own, this route greatly adds to the likelihood that a researcher's application would be accepted. Furthermore, the AAS is strongly supportive of new researchers, especially graduate students, and grants greater priority to panels with graduate students as members and members from a variety of disciplines and research backgrounds. (The association's support for graduate students was further exhibited by their automatic granting of a \$272.00 reimbursement and reduced application fees to all graduate students; unfortunately it appeared that few students realized this was available and failed to collect their reimbursement checks. But had they attended the reception, they would have been told about this grant.) I had used this page during my application process and was accepted to the panel from the contact I made that way, but had I not known about it, attending this reception would have helped me immensely. The conference organizers made sure that all students at the reception knew about this opportunity for joining panels (or posting calls for panels of their own) and the grant.

On the second day of the conference, I had lunch courtesy of the U.S.-Japan

Friendship Commission, a body I was unaware of prior to that point that provides funding for research and inter-cultural education. Here I incidentally met two old friends that I was not aware were in attendance, a social bonus. I also met an delightful independent researcher, a 87 year old Japanese woman who lived in the United States in southern California and read social science research actively. I also found out more about the hosting commission and learned that they were responsible for significant institutional grants that helped to build substantial libraries and other facilities throughout the Pacific Rim.

The largest meeting of all was the official conference reception in the main foyer of the largest auditorium, outside of the huge hall housing the book fair. This was an productive affair for meeting people because of the melting pot experience. In most meetings and receptions, attendees share interests in a theme or area but at the main reception, all sorts combine and mingle. By simply arriving early enough to seat myself at an empty coffee table, I was able to position myself to meet a political scientist from Leeds University in the UK specializing in post-communist Russia and two employees of the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), a non-profit, non-government research think tank specializing in Asia. I had interesting discussion with the gentlemen from Leeds about differences in the academic systems and climates in Asia, North America, and Europe and ended up talking the NBR staff repeatedly over the weekend and received some interesting and substantial political science analysis material from them as well.

These are just some examples of the experiences I had at the Association of Asian Studies conference. It is impossible to predict what kinds of people or organizations one may encounter but it can be reliably stated that interesting, informative, and productive encounters will result. In this regard, traveling by myself was a boon. When traveling with colleagues or to locations where one knows many people, it is too easy to spend time with those you already know. Indeed, it can be a needed opportunity to catch up with friends and colleagues in far distant locations (yet another reason supporting attendance) but can also deny one opportunities to meet new people and experience new locales.

This is especially true for freshman researchers. Those of us who are (or recently were) in graduate school have not yet met the people who research in our field or read our own research. We have not yet established a professional identity through publication. Attendance at conferences is thus essential for meeting people, attending other's presentations, and most of all, making a presentation of your own. Many organizations, the Association of Asian Studies included, make special effort to accept presentation proposals from graduate students and recently minted Ph.Ds and also have policies in place that promote presentation opportunities; if a person did not present at the preceding conference, they have a greater chance of being accepted to present at the current one.

Because of my presentation at the AAS, many people are now aware that I've done research on cultural and personal change among Japanese high school study abroad participants. At other conferences I have discussed some of the more administrative concerns of study abroad programs. This involvement advertises my research, which helps me to establish my reputation and expertise but also helps other researchers know what is being done in the field.

Conferences are an opportunity to share one's research in intimate discussions as well. In fact, I shared my research with more people outside of my presentation than during. Virtually all introductions at the conference involved a short description of one's research and presentation and typically led to longer discussions. These were exciting discussions because of the small group or one-to-one environment, usually with non-specialist and people from other disciplines or areas of study. Both in and outside of my presentation, I refined my discussion and responded to questions. I heard from many people about their own overseas experiences. Sometimes I received recommendations about books and articles or particular researchers; other times I simply noted that many people's experiences confirm what I've seen in my research. It isn't earth-shattering or paradigm-upending research, but discovering continued interest and real-world confirmation of one's work is reassuring and motivational.

In addition to my own presentation panel, I was able to attend presentations that looked at the state of education in Japan (both domestic curriculum and English), topics that I typically would not have been exposed to but found interesting. I met other researchers at these panels that were based in Japan, including some familiar faces that were nice to see again and many new ones. Part of the motivation to write this paper came from an experience I noticed within my own panel though. One of the other presenters was also a graduate student but we could not find him throughout the weekend. I was able to contact and meet our panel organizer on the first day and we continued to talk throughout the weekend and got to know each other and each other's general research area in addition to the presentation focus. We met our panel chair for an extended breakfast the morning of our presentation, a meeting that was full of stimulating discussion about post-modernism and the state of education in southern California, among other topics.

We finally met our final panel member moments before our presentation. He had just flown in from the east coast and was getting on a return flight a few hours later. Having experienced similar schedules myself at earlier conferences, I understood what he was feeling as well as why he scheduled himself that way. But after having been at the conference for four days and experienced the depth and width of such a large conference, I could not help but feel bad for him. He made his presentation and did a fine job, but

that is all he got out of it. 20 minutes of presentation with a short Q & A from the audience, listening to the other three participants, and then a very brief lunch with us after the presentation after which he rushed off to catch his plane back. He missed so many opportunities with such narrow involvement at the conference. I feel it is important to discuss the myriad benefits to investing the time and money to attend a large conference in its entirety so others can avoid missing opportunities of their own.

One other vital aspect of the immense annual conferences of large organizations is the book fair. The book fair is like a researcher's dream land, with rows upon rows of publishers and organizations with book lists and texts for sale, all at reduced conference rates. I spent parts of both Saturday and Sunday trolling the aisles, exploring the different publishing houses' wares, studying their book lists for texts relevant to my research or teaching (and finding many more than I could afford to purchase, much less carry home).

In this case, the most productive stop I made was at the University of Chicago Press station. The editor was there in person and I had an excellent discussion with him about the process a recent graduate should adhere to in pursuing the publication of a dissertation. He provided me with important recommendations about books that would help as well as practical advice for first time publication attempts, both book and article. This advice was perhaps the most prized catch of the conference, if I can capitalize on the opportunities ahead of me. Book fairs also offer the chance to browse titles that may be otherwise difficult to find, sell books at special discounts, and provide many opportunities for meeting researchers, editors, and authors.

Lastly, conference presenting provides the first step on the path to writing an article for publication. Many of us are busy (or procrastinate) enough that time slips by quickly and research results fail to get written up and submitted for review and ultimately publication. A conference presentation is easier to write than an article for publication and makes a good first step towards finishing a draft for submission. Following the conference, many organizations give priority to drafts written based on presentations, further help in getting published. The presentation provides a seed or catalyst that gets the ball rolling and helps to provide momentum for researchers.

I have explained how conferences provide essential opportunities for researchers. I have stressed the importance of contributing to the field by presenting, but many of the advantages in networking, exposure to new disciplinary approaches, research ideas, and organizations, and the book fair are available to all attendees. Considering that it is rare for an annual conference to be held in a person's hometown, most conferences of this stature require significant outlays of time and money to attend, and it is a wasted opportunity to not even attempt to participate in the presentation aspect of the conference. But even if one cannot present, it is important for all researchers to make such trips every few years at

least to refresh and nurture the spirit of research and engagement.

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