Asian Review of Books

Making a reading public across Asia, one book at a time

Research through 6 October 2026.

The Asian Review of Books, or ARB, is an English-language review publication founded by Peter Gordon in Hong Kong in 2000. It brings books from and about Asia into a shared space of criticism, alongside essays, interviews and writing about the arts.[1]

Its institutional home changed in February 2025, when it became part of the Royal Society for Asian Affairs, a British educational charity. Gordon remains editor, but the work now joins a dispersed circle of reviewers to the Society's publication staff.[2]

Its distinctive undertaking is to make very different kinds of knowledge available to the same interested reader. A translated Japanese novella can illuminate nuclear politics; a Bengali fable can provoke disagreement about sexuality; an exhibition of recovered ceramics can make medieval commerce tangible. The book is an occasion for an encounter with another person's way of noticing, remembering or arguing. The publication's coherence comes from arranging those encounters repeatedly, rather than requiring all its writers to share a doctrine.

This makes ARB a useful case of a small cultural institution whose intellectual scale exceeds the boundaries of its own organization. The depth resides partly in reviewers' other lives: scholarship, translation, fiction, diplomacy, collecting and long residence in particular places. Its practical achievement is to turn some of that accumulated attention into a continuing public resource. Its limits follow from the same arrangement: a selective, English-reading public sees the Asia that a particular network can bring within reach.

A Hong Kong starting point, an outward-facing ambition

ARB grew alongside a cluster of English-language literary activities in Hong Kong. Gordon helped establish the online bookseller Paddyfield; the Hong Kong International Literary Festival operated from that office until 2007. He also worked through Chameleon Press and helped establish the Man Asian Literary Prize. These were separate undertakings, but their proximity brought bookselling, publishing, events and evaluation within one working environment.[3]

The significance of that proximity is practical. A review needs books to reach readers, publishers to know that a reviewer exists, and writers to recognize a conversation worth entering. Those relationships are easier to sustain when criticism belongs to a wider ecology of making, selling and discussing books. ARB did not have to manufacture every

connection itself. At the same time, proximity created overlapping interests: the person judging books could also be the person publishing authors or building the events at which they appeared.

A 2011 New York relaunch announcement named Gordon and journalist Mark Clifford, with Pankaj Mishra, Ha Jin, Suketu Mehta and Qiu Xiaolong on its proposed board. Its programme presented Asian writers as participants in global debates about modernity.[4]

A different experiment followed in 2014. Chameleon Press issued a paperback selection of ARB material from April–June, covering fiction, nonfiction and poetry. A contemporary notice listed availability through Paddyfield and international booksellers. By February 2015 another notice recorded a third quarterly volume and China 2014: The Year in Books. Online accumulation could be rearranged into a book-length object, with a different shelf life and purchasing route.[5, 6]

These experiments matter more than a story of steadily rising prestige. The publication tried several containers for attention: a continuously updated website, a more conspicuous editorial platform, print selections, and later audio conversations. The enduring unit was the considered response to a book. Formats could change without making that unit obsolete.

What “Asia” means on this particular bookshelf

The RSAA describes ARB’s priorities as translation, Asian and independent publishers, and scholarly books that seldom receive general-reader coverage. That is a useful statement of editorial purpose, rather than proof that every neglected book receives attention. The claim to be the only dedicated pan-Asian review publication belongs to its own institutional presentation.[7]

The archive gives the geographic ambition more concrete form. ARB’s 2024 translation roundup identifies 75 reviewed works, spanning Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Thai, Bengali, Sanskrit, Urdu, Sumerian, Arabic and French. Its groupings cross national, linguistic and historical boundaries. This is a record of that year’s selected coverage, not a census of Asian literature.[8]

English supplies a common meeting place, but it also sets a threshold. A work often becomes newly discussable here when an English edition appears, even if its original readers have lived with it for years. “New” can therefore mean newly translated, newly reissued or newly accessible to this public. Publishers and translators participate in setting the agenda before the reviewer makes a judgment.

Rosie Milne’s October 2026 review of Rashid El-Daif’s Paving the Sea shows the threshold at work. A Lebanese novel originally published in 2011 arrives through Nicholas R. Lobo and Alfred J. Naddaff’s translation. Milne follows its migrant protagonist through thwarted aspirations to Western modernity, while attending to the translators’ notes and

their handling of the narrative's tone. She makes the historical setting approachable without treating its characters as illustrations of an abstract "Arab world."[9]

The institution's geographic breadth is thus inseparable from a particular intimacy: an invitation to stay with someone's confusions, evasions or attachments long enough for the large categories to become less secure. Migration can be examined through disappointment and desire, rather than only through a demographic trend. A general reader need not arrive with specialist training, but is expected to tolerate an unfamiliar context.

Alison Fincher's review of The Luminous Fairies and Mothra takes a different route. She uses Jeffrey Angles's translation and afterword to recover the novella behind the monster film, including its relation to Japan's 1960 anti-security-treaty protests. She also notices its unevenness: three authors produced sections whose differences the translation preserves. Historical importance and literary success remain separate questions. Popular culture becomes an entrance into politics and textual history without receiving an automatic exemption from criticism.[10]

These two reviews suggest an editorial preference that is more precise than "East meets West." Familiarity travels unevenly. A film monster may be globally recognizable while its literary and political antecedents are not; a migrant story may be familiar in outline while its historical assumptions remain strange. Criticism can work on that unequal distribution of familiarity.

A network of readers, rather than one composite expert

The contributor list makes clear why no single editor could supply the publication's range. It includes historians, novelists, translators, teachers, journalists and people whose main work lies elsewhere. The listed locations extend from New Delhi and Iraqi Kurdistan to Japan, Melbourne, Hong Kong and the Americas. Juan José Morales appears as a contributor; he is not identified as an owner or co-editor. A byline records a contribution, not employment or a shared institutional position.[11]

Some expertise becomes a more continuous editorial responsibility. Fincher announced her appointment as Japanese-fiction co-editor in July 2024. Her separate Read Japanese Literature project maintains translated-fiction lists, reading resources and a podcast, with links back to her ARB reviews. The connection gives ARB access to a sustained engagement with a literature, rather than requiring each newly translated novel to be approached in isolation.[12, 13]

The difference is important. A reviewer who repeatedly follows a language's translated output can notice the return of a writer, changes in a translator's choices, or the narrowness of what publishers make available. An institution can acquire continuity through such relationships without employing a specialist in every field. But its knowledge remains distributed: the supporting reading, record-keeping and conversations may happen outside ARB altogether.

The publication also permits criticism to change scale. Jessica Sequeira's June 2026 essay "Beyond the Score" places three studies of Indian music in conversation. Its question is how to recover performance, bodily knowledge and emotional life when surviving archives privilege other things. It connects scholarship on Mughal musicians, Punjabi courtesans and South Indian caste relations; the reader encounters disagreements about what counts as an archive, not merely three purchase recommendations. The essay's form allows a question to organize the books, instead of making each title an isolated review.[14]

Intimacy here is historical and intellectual: relations between performer and patron, inherited repertoires, listeners' embodied responses. The essay asks how these can be known, bringing the conditions of understanding into the act of reviewing.

Susan Blumberg-Kason's October 2026 review of Tina Chang's Lion supplies another register. It reads poetry about anti-Asian violence through the visibility of women's lives, maternal inheritance, visual art and the fragmentary form of the zuihitsu. The review also notices whom the collection does not treat in comparable detail. Diaspora belongs within ARB's Asia through memory, literary form and unequal exposure to violence, as well as through origin or ancestry.[15]

These writers do not combine into a single authorized "Asian perspective." Their subjects and modes of attention differ. The common institution makes their differences legible beside one another. That adjacency is itself an editorial act: a reader arriving for political history may discover a form of knowledge carried by poetry, or one following Japanese fiction may be drawn into questions of performance and caste.

How a book becomes a continuing conversation

The visible intake process is selective and materially specific. Publishers normally request reviews before sending books. When ARB accepts a title for consideration, it generally directs the review copy to the reviewer; physical copies are usually required. Prospective reviewers approach the editor with relevant experience, interests and writing samples. Unsolicited completed reviews are rarely accepted, and ARB explicitly says it does not pay for book reviews. It also reports receiving many more review requests than offers to review.[16]

That imbalance is the institution's basic scarcity. Books and publicity are plentiful; qualified attention is harder to obtain. Sending copies directly to reviewers distributes the reading geographically, while editorial coordination supplies the common destination. The system depends on people willing and able to turn expertise into criticism without a review fee. Free access for readers does not mean that reading and writing require no resources.

The life of Tom Feiling's Alone in Japan provides a traceable example of what happens after selection. On 5 August 2026, Ian Rapley, a historian of modern Japan, reviewed it for ARB. He accepted demographic change as a serious subject but questioned the explanatory habits of a foreign observer: if aging is a wider global process, how much can be explained

through claims about distinctively Japanese culture? He also pointed to changes that complicated the book's melancholy account, including urban redevelopment and internationalization.[17]

On 1 October, Nicholas Gordon interviewed Feiling for the ARB podcast; the episode page sent listeners back to Rapley's review. The same book could therefore support both an independent assessment and an author's explanation. The sequence does not establish that the interview answered every objection, but it does preserve two different relations to the work: a critic's judgment and a conversation with its maker.[18]

Audio had been added in 2021. An April episode on Raza Mir's Murder at the Mushaira is preserved by the New Books Network, credited to Nicholas Gordon and linked to ARB's written review. Its announced questions concern historical fiction's departures from the record and the appeal of turning a literary figure into a detective. The podcast adds a recurring interview practice and another distribution system to the written publication.[19]

A conversation is not the same thing as endorsement. In September 2026 Gordon's review of Taiwan Travelogue examined the novel's colonial viewpoint and translator Lin King's decisions about place names, but also found that its layers of fictional authorship could obstruct emotional involvement. Prize recognition did not settle the aesthetic question for him.[20]

Blumberg-Kason's 2022 review of Manindra Gupta's Pebblemonkey, translated from Bengali by Arunava Sinha and published by Jadavpur University Press, made another distinction. She welcomed the environmental fable while objecting to a passage that disparaged same-sex marriage. Translation expanded the available voices; it did not make every voice progressive or every judgment persuasive.[21]

Taken together, these examples make the publication's advocacy intelligible. Bringing a work into view means giving it the possibility of being read seriously, including being disagreed with. An institution devoted to attention can be hospitable without making approval the price of admission.

Familiarity with a place, and the obligations it creates

Hong Kong remains more than a convenient point on ARB's letterhead. Its archive records arguments about the cultural life surrounding the publication. In his 2017 response to Wasafiri's "Writing Hong Kong" issue, Gordon disputed overly restrictive definitions of Hong Kong writing and argued for taking the work seriously as literature, beyond its value as political testimony. He also disclosed that ARB and Chameleon Press had published some contributors and that the issue discussed his own work.[22]

That disclosure identifies a structural tension. Literary familiarity can sharpen judgment: a critic knows what an isolated publication leaves out, which debates are old, and what local readers might recognize. The same familiarity can make criticism self-involving. ARB's

editor is sometimes writing from inside the cultural arrangements under discussion. The useful question is how those interests are made visible and whether the argument survives their disclosure.

Morales' s January 2025 review of the Nanhai I exhibition praised the Hong Kong Heritage Discovery Centre' s explanation of maritime commerce while criticizing the absence of a catalogue or brochure and asking for a bilingual publication. The review asked how knowledge could remain accessible after a visit.[23]

ARB' s relations with cultural venues can therefore be critical rather than contractual. A museum supplies an encounter and material to interpret; the publication may evaluate both the exhibition and its public provision. Mentioning, attending or reviewing a venue does not establish that ARB organized its programme. The institution' s role here is to make the encounter available to another public, with a judgment attached.

Publicity, payment and the boundary around judgment

ARB offers publishers a separate route for book announcements. As checked in October 2026, this service is free, discretionary and limited to a narrow publication window: the preceding three months or the following month. Publishers are asked to prioritize a maximum of three titles and provide book information rather than promotional pitches or endorsement quotations. Announcements have their own form; it does not accept review requests.[24]

This distinction matters to the reader as much as to the publisher. An announcement establishes that a title exists and describes what is offered. A review is a particular reader' s encounter with it. Both can help a book circulate, but their evidentiary value differs.

The historical archive also retains items categorized as sponsored content. The August 2020 announcement for Gordon and Morales' s Painter and Patron is one example. Its appearance on ARB is evidence of promotion by a publication associated with its authors, not independent critical reception. The page does not disclose a payment amount.[25]

Abbreviated Press describes an association with ARB for short prose publishing. That does not establish common ownership or shared accounts.[26]

The visible economics resist a simple commercial formula. Unpaid reviews coexist with a free announcement service, older sponsored labels, associated publishing and an external podcast platform. The New Books Network' s "Asian Review" subscription page offers another potential support route, but public-facing subscription infrastructure does not reveal ARB' s realized receipts or revenue share.[27]

What can be said with confidence is that several different parties contribute resources: publishers provide books and images; reviewers provide reading and prose; editors provide selection and continuity; distribution partners provide access to other audiences. The

institution organizes those contributions, but the public record does not price all of them. It would be misleading either to call the whole operation costless or to reconstruct a profitable business from the existence of promotional channels.

Where the work actually goes

ARB's stated reuse policy requires permission, while saying that reprinting will usually be allowed without charge. It also invites substantive letters and allows the original author to reply. These provisions describe a publication intended to circulate beyond its own pages while retaining editorial responsibility for what appears under its name.[28]

There are concrete traces of that circulation. Scroll published Rosie Milne's review of Naguib Mahfouz's I Found Myself in September 2025, identifying ARB as the original publication. The review moved into an Indian news outlet with its byline and provenance still visible.[29]

Across the Pacific, the September 2021 issue of Minnesota's ChinaInsight printed Kristen Yee's review of Carolyn Phillips's At the Chinese Table and Gordon's review of Innovation and China's Global Emergence. Both credit ARB and give the original review dates. Here a review entered a community newspaper whose surrounding pages concern local events and Chinese-American public life. This is a documented use of criticism in another reading environment, not an inference from a website's theoretical worldwide availability.[30]

Publishers also reuse recognition. Princeton University Press's autumn 2019 catalogue described Robert Irwin's Ibn Khaldun as an ARB book of the year. Hampshire College later publicized ARB coverage of books by Uzma Aslam Khan and Sandeep Ray. A review can thus become a publisher's selling point or an institution's evidence of a writer's reception.[31, 32]

These are modest but meaningful measures of influence. They show that others select, reproduce and use the work. They cannot tell us how many people bought a book because of a review, whether a reader changed a conviction, or how representative ARB is of Asia's many publics. Its strongest demonstrated contribution is an intermediate one: it gives books an additional, reusable public life.

A new home for the work, and an unfinished question of continuity

After the move, RSAA staff handled daily publication and social-media posts, drawing on Gordon and the reviewer circle. A new website and Instagram and LinkedIn channels followed. The division of work could now extend beyond the publication's own editorial relationships.[33]

That larger organization has its own obligations. The RSAA is a registered educational charity with trustees and a chief executive; ARB sits alongside its journal, events, collections and other work. The Charity Commission records total 2025 income of £161,315 and expenditure of £239,081 for the Society. These are not ARB figures, and they cannot identify its individual costs or revenues.[34]

Nor is institutional incorporation a guarantee of security. At the July 2025 AGM, the Society acknowledged a long decline in membership and the need to attract a younger cohort. ARB offers frequent, accessible material in that setting, while acquiring organizational support. The relationship joins two continuity problems rather than automatically resolving either one.[35]

There is also a practical connection between critical attention and access to books. The Society's eLibrary, launched in March 2025 through Libby, includes selections reflecting ARB's coverage. For members, a review can lead into borrowing within the same wider institution. This does not remove the distinction between freely readable criticism and membership-based book access.[36]

The archive shows what continuity requires at a smaller scale. ARB provides a separate search for material older than July 2016 and warns that migrated content may not display as intended. Some pre-2026 pages carry a similar notice; the 2024 translation roundup currently exposes gallery shortcodes where its grouped selections should appear. A preserved title and URL are useful, but they are not the same as a fully functioning reading object.[37, 38]

The task ahead is consequently both editorial and custodial. A publication built through accumulated relationships has to keep finding readers capable of noticing what matters in a particular book, while preserving the work already done. Staff, systems and a charitable home can help carry that burden. They cannot simply replace the familiarity with a language, place, form or argument that gives a review its reason to exist.

ARB's institution-making is clearest at this point. It creates a recurring occasion for those forms of familiarity to become shareable: a review that lets an unfamiliar book enter someone's life, a disagreement that resists easy cultural affirmation, an interview that opens the writer's choices, or an essay that puts separate studies into conversation. Its future depends on sustaining that quality of attention while making its production and preservation less dependent on the endurance of any one person.

Notes and sources

All current roles, policies and site observations were checked on 6 October 2026.

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1. USC US–China Institute, "Launch of Asian Review of Books", 26 April 2011; retrospective founding account, not an incorporation record.↩

2. RSAA, Annual Report 2026, p. 5; year ended 31 December 2025.↩
3. Hong Kong Baptist University, Department of English, Spring 2014 programme, Gordon event, 20 January. The organizations named here are not treated as subsidiaries.↩
4. USC, 2011 launch listing, announced programme and board; not an attendance record.↩
5. Rosie Milne, Asian Books Blog, July 2014 archive, “Inaugural print edition,” 21 July. Contemporary notice by a writer who also contributes to ARB.↩
6. Asian Books Blog, February 2015 archive, “Quick Notice,” 28 February. No continuing print schedule is inferred.↩
7. RSAA, “Asian Review of Books”. Institutional statement, including its exclusivity claim; no independent market census is available here.↩
8. ARB, “2024: The Year in Translation(s)”, 28 December 2024. The number is the editor’s roundup total, not a fresh audit.↩
9. Rosie Milne, “Paving the Sea”, 6 October 2026. This discussion analyzes the review, rather than claiming an independent reading of the novel’s Arabic original.↩
10. Alison Fincher, “The Luminous Fairies and Mothra”, 2 April 2026, updated 8 April.↩
11. ARB, “Contributors”. Current contributor biographies are neither a historical staff census nor verification of each person’s remuneration.↩
12. Alison Fincher, “July RJL Update (for Everyone!)”, 31 July 2024, publicly indexed post; self-reported appointment.↩
13. Read Japanese Literature, current reading lists, podcast and ARB links. This is Fincher’s separate project.↩
14. Jessica Sequeira, “Beyond the Score: Performance, Power, and the Hidden Histories of Music in India”, 26 June 2026. Discussion concerns the essay’s comparative method, not independent verification of all the books it interprets.↩
15. Susan Blumberg-Kason, “Lion”, 2 October 2026. No lines of the poems are reproduced here.↩
16. ARB, “Reviews and Reviewing”, current policy, especially publisher requests and reviewer recruitment. The policy does not expose the correspondence, revisions or time spent on an individual assignment.↩
17. Ian Rapley, “Alone in Japan”, 5 August 2026. Rapley’s byline biography identifies his Cardiff University position.↩
18. Nicholas Gordon, podcast with Tom Feiling, 1 October 2026. Evidence used is the episode page and its explicit review cross-link, not a claim to have audited the audio.↩
19. New Books Network, Raza Mir, Murder at the Mushaira, 22 April 2021; host and announced topics.↩

20. Peter Gordon, “Taiwan Travelogue”, 27 September 2026. The example is a critical judgment, not a statement of the institution’s collective taste.↩

21. Susan Blumberg-Kason, “Pebblemonkey”, 6 August 2022. The review’s concluding objection supports the distinction made here; other factual assertions in the review are not adopted wholesale.↩

22. Peter Gordon, “Wasafiri’s ‘Writing Hong Kong’ issue”, 4 December 2017. The opening disclosure and discussion of literary identity are the relevant passages.↩

23. Juan José Morales, “Nanhai I Shipwreck and the Maritime Silk Road”, 6 January 2025, final paragraphs.↩

24. ARB, “Requesting Book Announcements”, current offer. “Free” is time-specific and does not establish past terms.↩

25. ARB, announcement for Painter and Patron, 3 August 2020, updated 26 August. Category labels include sponsored content and nonfiction reviews; the title explicitly identifies it as an announcement.↩

26. Abbreviated Press, association statement.↩

27. New Books Network / Supporting Cast, “Asian Review”, subscription landing page. No price, subscriber count or realized income is asserted.↩

28. ARB, “About the ARB”, “Letters to the ARB Editor” and “Using ARB content.” ↩

29. Rosie Milne, “I Found Myself,” Scroll, 14 September 2025; byline and republication credit. This and the original review belong to one text, not two independent evaluations.↩

30. ChinaInsight, September 2021, pp. 2, 8–9. Masthead gives Hopkins, Minnesota; review credits identify ARB and dates 27 July and 9 August 2021. Public PDF checked directly.↩

31. Princeton University Press, Autumn 2019 catalogue, printed p. 89 / PDF p. 91, Ibn Khaldun entry. Publisher use of a distinction does not measure resulting sales.↩

32. Hampshire College, “Two Hampshire Community Members’ Works Featured in The Asian Review of Books”, 13 July 2022.↩

33. RSAA, Annual Report 2026, p. 5; operational changes.↩

34. Charity Commission, RSAA overview, charity 1179300, financial year ended 31 December 2025; RSAA institutional information. Society-level accounts do not isolate ARB.↩

35. RSAA, AGM minutes, 16 July 2025, p. 1, questions on membership and recruitment.↩

36. RSAA, eLibrary, launch date 31 March 2025, scope and member borrowing arrangements.↩

37. ARB, “Search archives”. Archive boundary and display warning as observed at the cutoff.↩

38. ARB, 2024 translation roundup, current rendering. The warning and shortcodes establish a display problem, not proof that the underlying material has been lost.↩