Ten Questions for Ping Zhang

This week’s Ten Questions features Ping Zhang, who served as the first Historian for AIS. Her work in the mid 2010s helped to set the foundation for the history of the association and the IS discipline, and many of her interviews and written pieces are still referenced today. She was the author of the first article published in the AIS research flagship journal JAIS.

Zhang is a Co-Founding Editor-in-Chief of AIS Transactions on Human-Computer Interaction. She is a former Senior Editor of JAIS and former Associate Editor of CAIS. She and Fiona Nah founded the AIS SIGHCI.

Zhang is a professor in the School of Information Studies at Syracuse University. Her research interests include the intellectual development of information related fields; human-centeredness in ICT development, evaluation and use; affective, cognitive, motivational and behavioral aspects of individual reactions towards ICT; and the impact of ICT design and use on individuals, organizations, societies and cultures.

1. You were one of the first to undertake the task of telling the history of AIS. What made you interested in this topic and how did you get involved?

On December 31, 2012, Richard Baskerville sent me an email. The following are excerpts of it:

“Dear Prof. Zhang, I am writing to you in my role as VP of Communications for the Association of Information Systems (AIS). I am searching for an individual to lead the AIS (in a voluntary capacity) in its initial efforts to capture the history of information systems… Those who have lived this history are quite prepared to help, but not lead… However, no leader has stepped forward to serve as the AIS Historian.

I encountered your 2003 article with Andrew Dillon on HCI/MIS. It is among the few serious pieces of scholarship into this history, and I compliment you
Richard certainly knew how to be persuasive, because it was hard for me to reject such a flattering email. He was right that I was deeply interested in the history of our field. Besides the paper he mentioned, I had published two other papers and was working on yet another paper, all related to the intellectual development of scientific fields. Coincidentally, I had saved three AISWorld (the IS ListServ) emails sent many months before Richard’s email and was contemplating what to do about them.

- “JIT Special Issue on Why History Matters” on April 11, 2021, by Tony Bryant
- “A call to history” on February 2, 2002, by Andrew Schwarz, then VP of Technology of AIS.
- “ISF A Special Issue in Memory of Paul Gray” on August 2012, by Anat Zeelim.

Richard’s invitation came when I had just finished my four-year duty as the PhD Program Director in the iSchool at Syracuse University. It was a time-consuming and high-pressure job, and knowing I would be leaving that position made me think about what I should do to fill that spot on my plate.

As I was going back and forth with Richard to understand more about the position, I discovered that there had been initial ideas circling among Andrew Schwarz, Richard Baskerville, Rudy Hirschheim and Paul Gray. In fact, the idea of preserving the history of our field dated several years back. It was only around 2012 that a systematic effort was put in place.

I was honored and thrilled to be offered such an important position. I took it with my whole heart in it.

2. You had the opportunity to interview many of the pioneers of not just AIS, but the entire Information Systems field. What was that experience like for you?

AIS as an association was formed in 1994. The academic discipline of the IS was formed way before it. The history of AIS wouldn’t make sense without the history of the IS discipline.

With the help of the AIS History Task Force (Richard Baskerville, Rudy Hirschheim, Frank Land, Andrew Schwarz and Doug Vogel), I developed a strategic plan with three goals, three guiding principles, and a set of short-term and mid-term tasks. It was meant
to be a starting point and to guide a long-term effort to preserve the IS and AIS history. The CAIS 2015 paper reports the details of the strategic plan and some results. The CAIS 2016 paper reports more results.

I was in the historian position for less than three years. Within that time frame, with limited financial resources, and holding the position on a volunteering basis (outside my regular research, teaching, and service duties as a full professor at Syracuse University), I, along with two volunteers Dov Te’eni and Varghese Jacob, did a total of 21 interviews as part of the oral history effort. This was on top of organizing 10+ conference panels and conference tracks and editing two CAIS special issues on IS history-related topics.

As I reported in the CAIS 2015 paper, the overall impression I got from all these field leaders is that, in addition to the success they have had in their careers, they all are very kind and humble human beings. I was deeply touched. The pioneers I interviewed were such brilliant, yet kind and generous people. My interactions with them were so much more pleasant than I anticipated. We normally don’t see this side of them, and I am glad the interview videos showed some of that.

3. Who do you wish you’d gotten to interview and never had the opportunity?

I regret never having an opportunity to interview Paul Gray. He was instrumental to me when I was a young scholar (he was an external letter writer for my tenure case) and continued to encourage me as I grew. I hope he’d be happy with what I did as the first AIS Historian because I tried to incorporate many of his early ideas on preserving the IS history.

4. Your work as the AIS Historian has had a lasting impact on telling the important story of the field. What do you hope the next generation of IS scholars can learn from your work?

I’d quote James Burke again, “If you don’t know where you’ve come from, you don’t know where you are.”

And I’d add, “You won’t know where your future might be.”

5. You are the author of the first article ever published in JAIS. What was that experience like for you and did you ever imagine JAIS would become what it is today?

I started as an assistant professor with no journal publications during my Ph.D. program. Not only did I not know how to write for journal publications, I also didn’t know where to send manuscripts. That particular paper on animation’s effect was the first effort I ventured outside my technical background and training and created a new research stream of behavior research. The first outlet I submitted to was a traditional Human-
Computer Interaction (HCI) journal. After 11 months and countless email inquiries, I was given a rejection based on one reviewer’s comment and recommendation.

Just then, I learned from AISWorld that Phillip Ein-Dor was the founding Editor-in-Chief of JAIS and there was a call for papers. I revised the manuscript and sent it. Phillip and four reviewers provided constructive feedback that allowed me to significantly revise the paper. After four rounds of reviews and resubmitting, I was told it was accepted. Then it surprised me that Phillip decided to publish it as the inaugural paper, with a note that he wanted to establish expectations of the journal from the start.

I knew JAIS would be significant because, from the start, it was labeled as the research flagship journal of the IS discipline. But I could not imagine where it might go and how big an influence it would have. I am very happy to see its evolution and status in the IS field. I am proud to have published its first article and a few more articles later. I am also proud to be a senior editor for it for several years.

6. What was the most rewarding part of your time as an AIS volunteer? Are there any programs or initiatives that stand out that you were especially proud to be involved in?

To serve the community that I call my academic home is very satisfying. I am extremely proud to have formed the AIS SIGHCI, to have established the first AIS Transactions journal, AIS THCI, and to be the first AIS Historian, an organizer of many workshops, panels, minitracks, and sessions, and an editor or guest editor of many AIS journals.

7. If you had to go back and change one thing about your time as an AIS volunteer, what would it be?

Not a thing!

8. What do you think the next big area of focus will be for IS? How can AIS support it?

Being technology-related, the IS field has always been challenged by the fast development of technologies. Thus, there has been the perennial call for identity, from the early days of the IS field to the present day. If history serves us, then we should know that trying to beat any techy fields is a mistake. We should remember our advantage of being the multi- and inter-discipline that fills the gap(s). There will always be humans and organizations (of humans) that technologies are designed for. Stay true to what we did well, and we should do well in the future.
9. What are some of the most important research areas with the potential for lasting global impact that IS researchers should focus on more?

See my answer to question 8.

10. What is the one trend you are most excited about for the future of IS?

Based on my answer to question 8, as long as the human race exists, and human organizations exist, there will also be a place for the IS discipline for its research and education.

Ping Zhang’s website is https://pzhang.expressions.syr.edu/.