

Roundtables Report

“Rethinking Asian Studies in a Global Context”

Accra, Ghana

24-26 September 2015

Background

As part of the A-ASIA – ICAS international conference *Asian Studies in Africa: Challenges and Prospects of a New Axis of Intellectual Interaction* (University of Ghana, Legon, Accra, 24-26 September 2015), IIAS, co-organizer of the conference, coordinated two consecutive and complementary roundtables. The first half-day interactive discussion focused on *Asia through an African Lens: Rethinking the Discourse on Asian Studies*. The second addressed concrete ways to move *Towards a Sustainable Model of Asian Studies in Africa*.

The two proposed roundtables under the *Rethinking Asian Studies in a Global Context* program sought to situate the Asia-Africa academic axis within the larger realm of the study of Asia, including the role of academic institutions in the North and West. The first roundtable addressed the transformation of the study of Asia from a Western-centered model to an Africa-Asia and global initiative; the second discussed the steps necessary to create a sustainable model of Asian Studies within African academic and societal contexts.

The Association of Asian Studies in Africa (A-ASIA) was founded in November 2012 at an international roundtable on ‘Asian Studies in Africa’. The AASIA is dedicated to the capacity enhancement of institutions, programmes, and scholars. Proposed initiatives include scholarly exchanges, new programmes and institutions, support for existing capacities, conferences, workshops, graduate student support, and curriculum development, among others. As the first association of its kind within Africa, the AASIA represents an important step forward for the study of Asia within Africa, as well as the creation of linkages between scholarship on both continents. Members of the Association represent a wide range of geographies and disciplines, pointing towards a promising future development.

The Accra roundtables were designed to facilitate and inspire open discussions between participants at the conference. As such, formal papers were not presented, and the format consisted of short interventions and discussion. The focus remained debate and discussion among the panellists and with the audience (for a full list of panellists, see Annex A). The roundtables occupied half a day each, divided into two sessions of two hours each. This report outlines the discussion and conclusions of the two roundtables, in light of the needs of A-ASIA in its conceptual and practical development.

Conceptual Framework

The two roundtables sought to answer a number of theoretical and conceptual, as well as practical questions about how to rethink Asian studies in a changing global context. Outlined below are the conceptual and practical questions and suggestions for areas of improvement, all of which guided the roundtables’ discussion.

I - Conceptual questions

1. What does doing Asian studies in Africa mean? How do we define Asian studies in Africa?
2. What are the issues and challenges that Asian studies are facing in Africa?
3. What does Asian studies mean for global humanities in Africa?
4. Are the difficulties faced by African scholars on Asia similar to those experienced by Asian scholars on Africa?
5. How do we situate this debate within the larger arena of area studies and global humanities?

II. Practical Questions

1. What is the current state of Asian studies in Africa? Current programs, gaps and needs.
2. What are the structural and programmatic challenges for Asian studies in African institutions?
3. To what extent Asian studies in Africa remain marginalized in institutions of higher learning (and in governmental/inter-governmental higher education policies)?
4. What is the nature and focus of current research being undertaken on Asia in Africa? The role of transnational linkages, diasporas, etc.

III - Suggested Areas of Intervention

1. Program development and enhancement (secondary school, university, institutes, think tanks)
e.g., Language study programs, joint degree programs, scholarly exchanges
2. Joint curriculum development (foundational courses, e.g., Intro to Asian studies for African students, Intro to methodologies, etc.)
3. Regional resource centers (basic knowledge, books, digital resources)
4. Digital linkages and networking (website, etc.)
5. Conferences
6. Publications (open source journals, conference proceedings)
7. Place and role of A-ASIA: what should be its mandate, structure and realm of intervention?

Roundtable 1: Asia through an African Lens: Rethinking the Discourse on Asian Studies

The discussion in the first roundtable, 'Asia through an African Lens: Rethinking the Discourse on Asian Studies', was led by A-ASIA Steering Committee Member Oka Obono (University of Ibadan) and senior scholar Carol Gluck (Columbia). The first sessions consisted of an open discussion, led by the chairs, of the panellists and audience participants about theoretical, conceptual, and methodological issues in the study of Asian from Africa. In decentering the discourse on Asia away from the West and taking into account an Africa voice, the group considered the ways in which knowledge is constructed, processed, and shaped, in an attempt to dismantle regimes of dependency on knowledge production.

There were several themes that ran throughout the discussion, including the importance of the urban (and, by extension, the non-urban), and namely that Kinshasa and Jakarta have more in common than Jakarta and Tokyo. Global South linkages were also identified in the importance of migration in 21st century narratives, as well as considerations of climate change, gender, and political voice. Instances of connectedness are key, as are opportunities for comparison.

The chairs opened the second session of the roundtable with a succinct summary of the discussion, highlighting the major themes that had been identified. These major themes are outlined below:

1. Firstly is the desire to seek commonalities. Commonalities (and subsequently comparisons), allow for the identification of hidden connections, as well as helping better inform our understanding of migrants (misplaced peoples), margins/peripheries, and inequalities in different societies.

2. The second major theme is the demand for new histories and a critical reengagement of the things in which we have professional competencies. Within this there is a desire to highlight the negatives and multiple temporalities. Within new histories social texture is just as important as social structure, particularly that of the everyday life. And marginalized peoples and themes, such as internally displaced peoples, art and literature, embodied experiences, and spatializations and disruptions, have room for consideration.

3. Thirdly is a complication and development of existing epistemologies and methodologies. A call for scholars within this initiative to be epistemologically promiscuous leads us to question existing western practices and paradigms and to work towards pedagogy from below in the building of theory across commonalities. Disciplinary boundaries were questioned, as was knowledge acquisition, production, sharing, and use, and the role of the state in this process.

4. Finally, the group discussed the way forward for this process. The emphasis here was a further affirmation of commonalities and interconnectivities. A greater vigilance towards stereotypes, sophistication rather than generalizations, and new approaches towards sources and archives are key first steps in this process. In the end, it was agreed that how questions are posed depends on interest and passion and that how you answer the question depends on where you stand – in this case the study of Asia in Africa.

Annex A: List of Roundtable Participants

Jessica Achberger
Southern African Institute for Policy and Research (SAIPAR), Lusaka, Zambia

Tom Asher
Social Science Research Council, NYC, United States

Zoe Butt
Sàn Art Gallery, HCMC, Viet Nam

Munamoto Chemhuru
Great Zimbabwe University, Masvingo, Zimbabwe

Abdoulaye Diané
African - Asian Research Center (AARC), Dakar, Senegal

Mamadou Diouf
Columbia University, NYC, United States

Carol Gluck
Columbia University, NYC, United States

Desai Gaurav
Tulane University, New Orleans, United States

Liu Haifang
Beijing University, China

Engseng Ho
Duke University, Durham, United States

Webby Kalikiti
University of Zambia, Lusaka, Zambia

Aarti Kawlra
Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Delhi, India

Lazare Ki-Zerbo
University of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso

Viet Le
California College of the Arts, San Francisco, United States

Oka Obono
University of Ibadan, Nigeria

Philippe Peycam
International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden, the Netherlands

Rohit Negi
Ambedkar University, Delhi, India

Lungisile Ntsebeza
University of Cape Town, South Africa

Tansen Sen
Baruch College, NYC, United States

Ian Solomon
The University of Chicago, United States

David Szanton
University of California Berkeley, United States

Albert Tzeng
United Daily News & CNEX Doc Channel, Taipei, Taiwan

Lawrence Ogbo Ugwuanyi
University of Abuja, Abuja, Nigeria

Chayan Vaddhanaphuti
Chiang Mai University, Thailand

Françoise Vergés
Collège d'études Mondiales, Paris, France

