

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 2: Towards a Sustainable Model of Asian Studies in Africa: Conditions and Guidelines, and the Role of the A-ASIA

The second roundtable, 'Towards a Sustainable Model of Asian Studies in Africa: Conditions and Guidelines, and the Role of the A-ASIA', were chaired by A-ASIA Steering Committee Member Philippe Peycam (IIAS) and A-ASIA Member Rohit Negi (Ambedkar). The purpose of the second roundtable was more practical in nature, focusing on concrete objectives for the building of Asian studies on the African continent. Namely, the group focused on the following:

1. Institution Building

The first part of the conversation focused on institution building. A number of ideas were proposed along these lines including the possibilities of relying on existing institutions, the use of language training as a sustainable foundation for institutions, and the possibilities of project based institutions. A number of issues were raised as well, such as the importance of best practices and an attention to adaptability and change over time. A first step was identified in the creation and promotion of these institutions, namely exchanges at the faculty and student levels. Here, faculty exchanges were identified as particularly critical since they are in the position to

take the message to a variety of institutions and experiment with new pedagogies as well as disseminate most widely through undergraduate courses on Asia.

2. Curriculum Development

The discussion on curriculum development focused on practical aspects mentioned within the segment on institution building, specifically the use of language training as a foundational aspect, as well as more methodological and pedagogical issues as discussed during the first roundtable. The use of new technologies and online education was largely agreed to be the best way forward, particularly in the linking of different institutions globally. It was suggested that a first step for A-ASIA be the creation of a collaboratively produced online course to gauge interest, promote educational goals, and to begin creating institutional linkages. It was also felt that the humanities/sciences division was one that needed to be breached in order to contemplate some of the most pressing concerns today related to human-induced transformations of the world, including global warming. Therefore it was understood that one way to further develop and popularize the perspectival shifts noted in Roundtable 1 was the organization of Summer Schools of research scholars from different contexts.

3. Networking

There were three major ideas proposed in the discussion of the roundtable around ideas of networking. The first was the use of institutions and centres as places of networking and exchange. The second was the use of these institutions in the promotion of networking at other institutions, in other countries, and on different continents. It was envisaged that these exchanges could take place at a student (both undergraduate and graduate) and faculty level. Finally, it was proposed that networking could be further enhanced through a continuation of the conference series begun in Accra. It was felt too that more connections need to be built between academic institutions and other platforms, including think tanks, the media and policy spaces.

4. Fundraising

Discussions around fundraising focused on an understanding of funding flows, and namely the fact that the majority of the funds are found outside the African continent. CODESRIA was discussed as a possible Africa-based funder for institutions and projects. For the funding of A-ASIA specifically, a consortium was proposed, so that the Association had both individual as well as institutional memberships.

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

Munamato 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