



2012 International Roundtable “Asian Studies in Africa”

Report

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The Asian Studies in Africa Roundtable

The Asian Studies in Africa Roundtable was an exceptional setting in its representation of a wide range of disciplines, which rarely meet within a university, as well as a wide range of geographies. For the Asian Studies in Africa Roundtable, scholars gathered from around the globe, travelling from five continents and 17 countries, and representing 21 nationalities. This distinguished group brought with it a diverse range of experience and expertise, providing an excellent platform for discussion.

The purpose of the meeting was twofold: First, to outline the current state of Asian studies in Africa, as well as the issues and challenges such studies face. Second was to identify a way forward for the future of Asian studies on the African continent.

The objective of the roundtable was to develop a programme that is in line with the goals outlined above. Each session was centred on a relevant topic to this development, and all participants participated fully in each panel. Panels Chairs managed the panels through relevant questions and the guidance of discussion, and providing a summary of the session.

Asian Studies in Africa: Why and for Whom? An Overview

The Roundtable began with a discussion of Asian Studies in Africa, the reasoning for such an initiative, and the perceived beneficiaries of such.

The context within which Asia was being studied in Africa is a critical starting point, and, specifically, the impact of the colonial experience on theorizing and thinking about the world. We ask, 'How has the colonial experience impacted how Africa has seen the world and not just on how the world sees Africa?'

There are both theoretical and practical problems with the legacy of the colonial experience on scholarship. Theoretically, Africans have understood their history through a European lens, which impairs assessment of Asia from the perspective of African interests and African analytical frameworks. Practically African scholars have not benefitted from structures, inputs and networks that will promote the posing of novel questions about Asia and Asian flows of capital, commodities, people, and ideas, about which African scholars might then systematically research and answer.

The Asian Studies in Africa initiative seeks alternative paradigms that shift the perception of the role of the African intellectual and validate African contributions to global knowledge production on Asia.

In order to validate such contributions we must first answer why Asia needs to be studied in Africa. It cannot be just because those at the meeting each have one foot in Asia and Africa, whether due to reasons of biography or scholarly interests. Nor do we believe, despite current scholarly and popular trends, that we ought to promote only Chinese studies in Africa. Rather, Asian studies in Africa is justified because there is enough insipient strength among African scholars undertaking research on Asia to build upon and because there are migration patterns beyond the China-Africa story.

Along similar lines, we recognise that there has been an inordinate focus on China and India, as well as economically important countries such as Japan, Singapore, etc. The implication of this is that there has been less interest amongst African scholars for other topics as it relates to Asia, including linguistics, culture, history, etc., creating a narrow disciplinary and geographical focus.

Therefore, we propose to build up institutional muscle to develop an authentic voice for Asian studies in Africa. We argue that the role of the intellectual is to change society for the better through knowledge production and dissemination and to build the potential within African societies themselves to make a better Africa.

This is an alternative viewpoint to the western hegemonic viewpoint. However, the Asian Studies in Africa initiative is dedicated to learning about Asia at both an intellectual and a practical level. We believe that the widening gap between rich and poor internationally creates an important impetus to learn what works and what does not in terms of economics, politics, and social structures. Africans can therefore learn from Asian successes, as in the cases of the Asian 'tigers,' but also so Africans can also learn from Asian bottlenecks and difficulties.

We must also consider practically studies at the undergraduate level, where most students have no geographical conception of Asia in Africa, as well as at a general public level and at the level of policy engagement. In general, there is a lack of accurate information about Asia in Africa, and in Asia about Africa that requires address.

Once defining why it is necessary to have Asian Studies in Africa, the Roundtable then set out to ask, for whom is such an initiative being created? The answer is that Asian Studies in Africa will benefit both the current generation of scholars, as well as in turn then

influencing future generations of scholars through both short term and long term initiatives.

Assessment of Existing Capacities in Asian Studies in Africa

Although the studies of Asia in Africa have not yet been centralised and there is significant need for additional programmes and institutions, the first step in any relevant discussion of Asian studies in Africa is of existing capacities. After asking the important question, 'Is there an interest in Asian studies in these countries?', we received as an answer a strong, 'Yes,' as evidenced by existing capacities across the continent.

In East Africa, the University of Dar es Salaam, in Tanzania, has already developed an Asian studies programme with much success. In West Africa, in Nigeria, there are two main universities that have specific programmes on Asia: the University of Lagos and the University of Abuja.

In Ghana, a programme in Mandarin has been developed at the University of Ghana as a part of the Department of Modern Languages. Additionally, the Legon Centre of International Affairs and Diplomacy has been running a Japanese language course as part of its MA programme. There are also a cluster of centres for the study of the Chinese language. Many new books on Asia in Africa have also come from West African scholars.

In East Africa, examples come from Nairobi, where Confucius Institutes have led to the creation of whole programmes and departments. At the University of Nairobi, the success of the Confucius Institute has led to the creation of the Chinese Department. This Department now provides a B.A. and is developing an M.A. and Ph.D. programme. It also provides an example of a win-win situation for the Chinese teachers involved, who do their own research on Africa while teaching Chinese.

In Zimbabwe, only the University of Zimbabwe is making an effort in Asian studies, but there is commitment without coordination. Similar to Nairobi, there is a Confucius Institute offering a B.A. in Chinese language, which also sends graduate students to do Master's programmes in China. There is also a Masters in International Relations that covers Asian-African studies.

However, the longest standing programmes of Asian studies in Africa come from South Africa. There are language studies centres that date back to at least the middle of the 1990s, as well as many other initiatives throughout the last two decades.

In the beginning there was a shared understanding to study the Asian region within a broad geo-political framework. The two main universities involved in this initiative were Wits University and Stellenbosch University. At Wits, the focus has been on China. At Stellenbosch, studies began in the Political Science Department and the Asian Studies Desk. They too focused on China through the work of scholars such as Ian Taylor and Martin Davies, and then Japan with the work of Scarlett Cornelissen.

There are many lessons to be learned from the South African example. Firstly is how these programmes gained support. The protagonists of the development of Asian studies in South Africa gained support on a small scale, moving to a large scale as they used networks to gain access to an international audience. Institutionally speaking, they had receptive university administrations. Since 2000, Stellenbosch has even offered a B.A. in Mandarin. The funding for this degree programme, however, comes from a company, demonstrating a very receptive community within South Africa broadly speaking.

However, despite these valuable contributions, it will be necessary to carry out a more systematic survey of existing capacities on the study of Asia in Africa. This will be one of the crucial first steps to developing and creating capacities for the promotion of Asian Studies in Africa.

Perceived Gaps and Needs

While there are several good examples of existing capacities in Asian studies in Africa, these programmes highlight perceived gaps and needs, both within existing programmes and the need to create new programmes. Therefore, the next item of discussion for the Roundtable was perceived gaps and needs.

The first obvious question to be raised in such a diverse grouping of scholars, such as was gathered at the ASA Roundtable, is, 'What are the geographical and disciplinary limitations of this exercise?'

The geographical focus has been unbalanced, focusing on China because of its popularity amongst the media and scholars. There is the need to create a more balanced scholarship on Asia in Africa. Geographical limitations also exist in terms of travel within Africa and travel of African scholars to Asia to conduct research.

In terms of discipline, there are gaps in the scholarly production, such as from economists, as well as anthropologists and sociologists, whose work is sporadic and not sustained.

Several think tanks exist for the study of Asia; however, these tend to serve the interests of governments, which drive the research agenda.

Within South Africa, the main centre of research on Asia, there is an atmosphere of competition, rather than collaboration, amongst major players such as Stellenbosch, Rhodes, and the University of Cape Town.

More common institutional issues are reflected continent wide, particularly in terms of faculty, curriculum materials, and basic administrative issues. For example, the University of Botswana, which has developed a B.A. in Chinese Culture, has many interested students but that lacks development because of a paucity of teachers. Portuguese speaking countries are very far behind because universities were not established until the 1980s. A Chinese study course at Rhodes University began as a three week course and became so popular it was developed into a full programme. However, there was no space to house it.

Issues such as these abound in institutions, but the needs even go beyond higher education. The media also represents a challenge for scholars, as there is a limited focus on Asia within Africa by the media. And in terms of curriculum, there is a need for the development of high school education curriculum on Asia, as university programmes exist because of high school education.

This is just a sampling of the issues discussed at the Roundtable. Once a systematic survey of existing capacities is undertaken, additional gaps and needs can be further addressed.

The Association of Asian Studies in Africa

The workshop was dynamic and engaging, and the overall outcome manifested in the creation of the Association of Asian Studies in Africa (AASIA). AASIA will be 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, AASIA represents an important step forward for the study of Asia within Africa, as well as the creation of linkages between scholarships on both continents. As founding members of the Association, Roundtable participants represent a wide range of geographies and disciplines, pointing towards a promising future development.

Steering Committee

AASIA's development is currently headed by a steering committee of scholars from Africa, Asia, and Europe. These prestigious scholars and administrators represent all geographies and most disciplines present at the ASA Roundtable. Their combined expertise and experience was chosen to push forward the agenda of the Association of Asian Studies in Africa. They are:

- Lloyd Amoah
- Thomas Asher
- Scarlett Cornelissen
- Webby Kalikiti
- Liu Haifang
- Yoichi Mine
- Oka Obono
- Philippe Peycam

This committee will next meet at the International Consortium of Asian Studies (ICAS) annual meeting in Macau in June of next year. ICAS represents the largest international convention of Asian scholars. It meets bi-annually, and, at the last meeting in Honolulu, Hawaii, had over 5,000 participants.

ICAS will be used as a platform to promote AASIA and to discuss the future of the Association, including the establishment of a permanent secretariat within Africa. Because of the nature of ICAS, it will also be used as a tool to mobilise support for AASIA and build visibility.

Five Year Plan: Proposed Initiatives

The first step of the steering committee is to finalise a five year plan for the future of the Association of Asian Studies in Africa. Participants at the Roundtable discussed possible capacity building and enhancing initiatives for the first critical years of the development of the Association. These initiatives included:

- Programme development and enhancement
 - High School
 - University
 - Institutes

- Think tanks
- Language study programmes
- Joint degree programmes
- Scholarly exchanges
- Joint curriculum development
 - Foundational principles/courses
 - Intro to Asian studies for African students
 - Intro to methodologies
- Regional resource centers
 - Basic knowledge
 - Books
 - Digital repositories
- Networking
 - Website
- Conferences
- Publications
 - Open source journals
 - Conference publications

The point of departure is that there are many synergies beginning to be uncovered and that the issue is to channel these energies in the most productive way.

Inventory of Existing Capacities

The first key project for the Association will be an inventory of existing capacities of Asian studies in Africa. It will be critical to identify who is doing Asian studies in Africa and what are the existing institutions and programmes. The outcome of this inventory will be a digitally available directory of academic institutions in Africa and Asia. The overall goal of this information will be to increase existing capacities and a geography of points of excellence.

Inaugural Conference: “Views of Asia from Africa”

In the meantime, work is already underway for the planning of AASIA’s first conference – tentatively scheduled for May 2014 in Accra, Ghana.

Questions proposed for the conference included:

1. What is the state of Asian studies in Africa?
2. What does doing Asian studies in Africa mean?
How do we define Asian studies in Africa?
3. What are the issues and challenges that Asian studies facing Africa?
4. How can Asian studies be relevant for Africa?
5. What does Asian studies mean for global African humanity?
6. What are the linkages between Asia and Africa?
7. What are the challenges Asians face in Africa?
8. How do we situate this initiative within the larger arena of area studies?
9. What is the current research being undertaken on Asia in Africa?

After discussion, the theme, "Views of Asia from Africa," was decided upon by participants. Then questions were organized into themes. The goals of this conference were defined as threefold, outlined below:

1. Theoretical

- a. How do we define Asian studies in Africa?
- b. How can Asian studies be relevant for Africa?
- c. How do we situate this initiative within the larger arena of area studies?

2. State of affairs

- a. What is the state of Asian studies in Africa?
 - Gaps and needs
 - Current programmes / institutes
- b. What are the issues and challenges that Asian studies faces in Africa?

3. Current Research

- a. What is the nature and focus of current research being undertaken on Asia in Africa?
 - Transnational Linkages

- Diasporas

The conference's theme is "A View of Asia from Africa" and will include workshops on the promotion of Asian studies, as well as panels dedicated to new research being conducted on Asia from African scholars.

Permanent Secretariat

A longer term goal for the Association is to create a permanent, core secretariat located somewhere on the African continent. At least one full time position would create an anchor person, who can create credibility for the process. The creation of the permanent secretariat will be discussed by the steering committee at the ICAS meeting and subsequently members at the Accra 2014 conference.

Conclusion

The creation of the Association of Asian Studies in Africa is at a critical moment for scholarship within Africa and scholarship on Asia broadly speaking. Increasing transnational linkages between Asia and Africa ensure that the need for an Association like AASIA will only continue to grow.