

# Cartographies of Asia in Latin America

There is an undisputable assumption among all Asian Studies scholars that Asia is a globally relevant topic. Most people, Asianists or not, are familiar with how Asia has affected global history and also with the history of global curiosity concerning Asia. But, how 'global' is this curiosity?

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## Conceptual empires

European views of the *Orient* were greatly influential to global perceptions of Asia. Initially, those visions concerned forms of political, economic and cultural imagination organized through forms of knowledge, ultimately at the service of a colonialist structure of power – which are indistinguishably associated to Western domination. This is essentially the critique made by Edward Said (and others before him),<sup>1</sup> through the concept *Orientalism*: imagination is power and knowledge wields control over the other.

Likewise, we should not forget that in modernity, the imagination of contexts (territories and people) colonized by Europe, emerges as a privilege of the colonizers, their descendants and apparatuses of power. This circumstance reinforces a cleavage that opposes an imaginative *North* – that produces imaginations as an attribute of power – to an imagined *South* – the very predicate of that power of imagination.<sup>2</sup>

The area studies framework has somehow, reinforced this scheme. On the one hand, it developed capacities of intellectuals dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of specific spaces. Yet on the other hand, as Willem van Schendel suggests, it reinforced the insulation of academic communities into self-contained realities and “conceptual empires” that, likewise, consecrated the areas to specific themes, methodological approaches, intellectual jargons, etc.<sup>3</sup> Another undesired effect of this approach on international scholarship is that postcolonial peripheries still suffer from the same isolation, blindness and mutual ignorance that affected them under colonialism. Asian, African and Latin American academics nearly never have direct contact and are largely ignorant of one another’s intellectual agendas. It has even affected the geographical perception of these regions, sometimes reinforcing imperial boundaries drawn by colonialism, sometimes dividing them through cultural areas, related to the post 1950s geopolitics of power.

Although the countries of Latin America (LA) share historical connections with Asia, LA has (with a few exceptions) never considered Asia particularly relevant to its reality. In fact, even after the bulk of 19th century independencies, LA continued to hold Europe as its main focus. This has not only led to a mutual disinterest, but also to the silencing of histories that once linked Asia and LA. The deleterious effects of this obscurity comprise not only the loss of histories “stored in social relations”, as Charles Tilly would say,<sup>4</sup> but also politics of “postcolonial amnesia” obliterating connections between peripheries of the Global South.<sup>5</sup> This condition is indeed damaging not only to the academic interaction between LA and Asia, but to the field of Asian Studies as a whole.

## The beginning of Latin America's interest in Asia

From the late eighteenth hundreds until the present, more than 120 institutions have been established (and some closed), more than 70 events have taken place and more than 20 journals dedicated to the study of Asia have been published (and some terminated) in Latin America. The current article presents a preliminary survey of the past and present state of Latin American curiosity concerning Asia – from a diffuse 19th century aristocratic inquisitiveness to the professional academic interest of post-WWII – and displays the diversity of views on Asia developed in Latin America.

Historically speaking, connections between these two regions were significant during Iberian colonialism, but decreased again from the 17th to mid-19th centuries when the British Empire controlled the global economic-political scene. In the eighteenth hundreds, relations moved through a gradual rapprochement and in the last 15 years have experienced a major revival. Broadly speaking, modern European colonialism as a globalized economic-political system was decisive for establishing effective, yet dispersed and indirect, connections between the peripheral parts of the world.

In economic terms, the commercial flow between Asia and Latin America was not the most intense, especially when compared to the South Atlantic commercial linkages or to the longstanding ties of the Indian Ocean, but it was still relevant.<sup>6</sup> The *carreira da Índia* (the ‘India Run’), for example, was one of the most complex and enduring maritime routes of the Modern Age, connecting Europe to the Far East, Africa and South America (up to the Andean region), from the 16th to mid-19th centuries.<sup>7</sup> In that period, many small and medium size companies based on kinship relations helped to maintain cultural and economic ties between colonial territories in parts of South America and Asia.<sup>8</sup>

Although mercantile bonds were central to colonialism, economics was not the sole justification for the connection between those regions. The movement of populations (forced, assisted or voluntary migration), of natural species, products and ideas, concerned not just commercial commodities, but also represented an important part of the circulation of imaginations between Asia and Latin America. For example, textiles from Asia became cult objects within Afro-American religions. Some deities and spirits of these religions can even be identified as the “people of Asia” or “people from the Orient”, often seen as divinities wearing turbans or saris, etc. The religious /spiritual domain was, in fact, very central to the expansion of a certain view of the Orient that reached South and Central America in the 19th century.

The 19th century is when LA’s autochthonous interest in Asia first became properly visible. This is the time of the first publications about Asia (or themes widely associated with Asia), the establishment of the first LA diplomatic missions, the presence of LA travellers in Asia, and of the preliminary efforts to institutionalize the continent’s curiosity for the Orient – through reading groups, religious societies, journals, associations, publications, etc. Clearly, the 19th and early 20th century Latin American imagination concerning Asia emulated that of Europe – through its Orientalist glasses. This was due to Europe’s role as gatekeeper to colonial Asia and postcolonial LA. Colonialism played a definitive role, not only in the way Asia and Latin America were connected, but also in the way Asia was framed by LA imagination.

Most of those first images and publications on Asia were European productions. Very few were by Asian authors – the first Asian author to be translated in LA was R. Tagore, after his Nobel nomination in 1914 (in Brazil, he was the only Asian author to be published until 1948)<sup>9</sup> – and none of the existing translations came from originals in Asian languages. The people in LA who mastered an Asian language at that time belonged to migrant communities and the skill was not very common in intellectual circles.

## Interest in Asia in the 19th and 20th centuries

At a time when Latin America was debating ideas of nation building, the constitution of the people, the importation of migrants to replace slaves, Asia appeared as an alternative pathway to modernization, a source for new civilizational and ontological models, in contrast to European positivism, materialism and nationalism. The spiritual-religious domain associated with the Orient had a particularly pervasive presence in LA. This domain did not forcibly concern any religion in particular, but focussed rather on concepts of spirituality, transcendence and the universality of man.

Asia’s identification with ancestral civilizations and ancient religious regimes, embedded the LA imagination of the Orient with a certain notion of immovable time and immemorial traditions, and the mid-20th century Asian movement for independence did not much affect LA’s curiosity concerning the continent. By and large Asia continued to be relevant for its past (pre-colonial and colonial), rather than for its present or future.

‘Asia’ was not recognizable as a geographic entity or sociologic category, but rather the ‘Orient’, which included the Ottoman Empire, North Africa, Middle East and Asia. It was associated with the non-academic study of colonialism, antiquaries, ancient civilizations and ‘oriental’ philosophies. LA’s interest in Asia was at the time very much confined to aristocratic elites (artists, writers, and dilettantes), to the religious/spiritual spheres or to communities of Asian migrants in urban areas. The source of interest was clearly reflected in funding for the circulation and translation of publications, or the creation of journals and associations. Religious and spiritual societies were particularly active until the 1940s. Also, aristocratic families and upper-class philanthropists were curious about the exotic, the occult, spirituality and poetry, but not Asia’s political context.

## Asia's appeal, 1950-1980

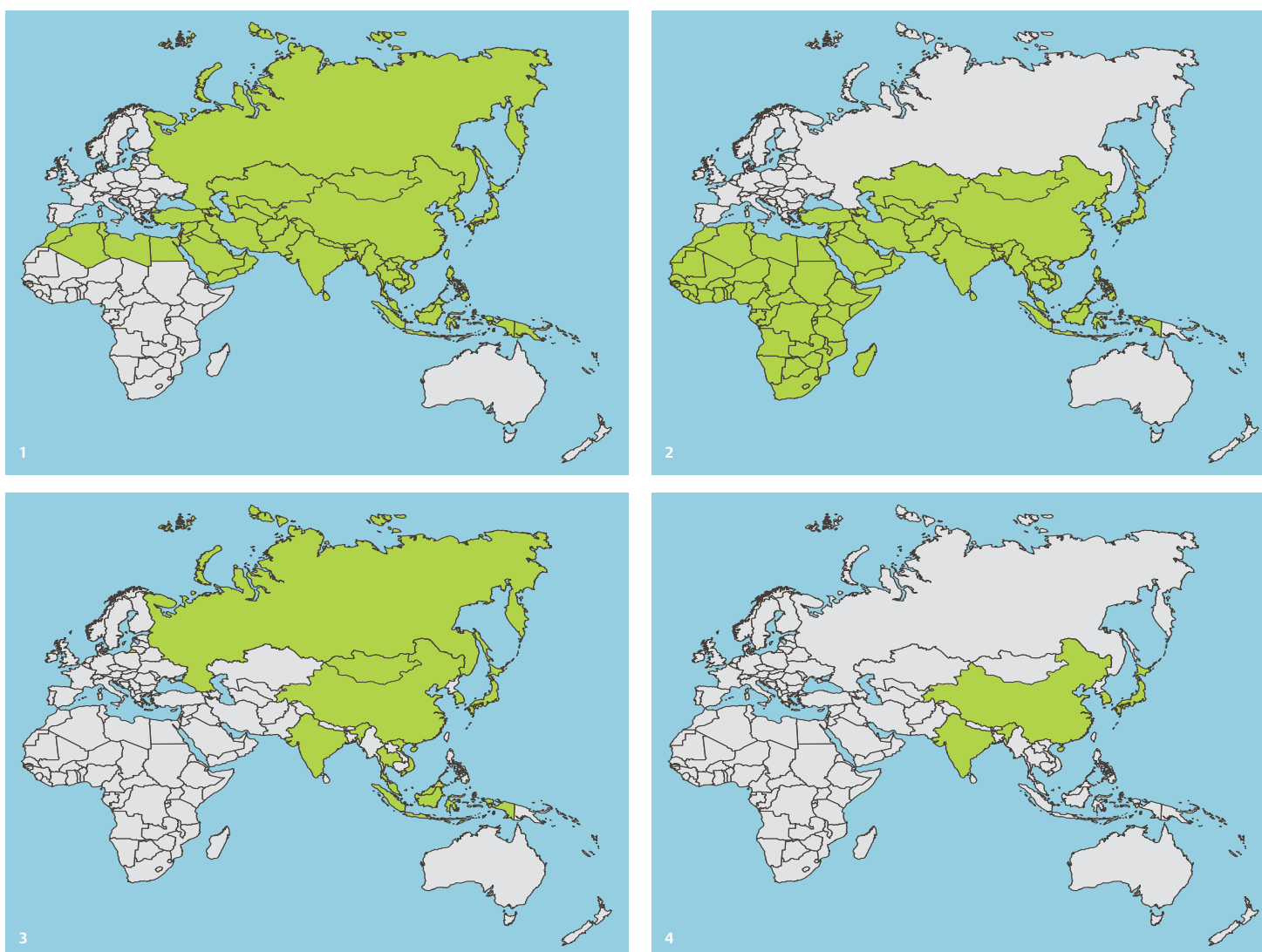
The idea of Asia in LA suffered a radical change after WWII; in fact, all postcolonial peripheries were affected by how the development debate and the later area studies approach framed their existence in the global political and intellectual arena. In this period, Latin American Asia became a theme of formal academic investigation and teaching in disciplines such as history, economics and social sciences, literature and language.

While it remained a historically relevant topic with regard to pre-colonial and colonial issues, Asia was certainly affected by the development debate. This is when A. Sauvy developed the concept of the Third World,<sup>10</sup> approximating Asia to Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, identifying these as places devoid of development and modernity. Accordingly, views of history and narratives of time continued to classify Asia not only as the land of immemorial past, but as a space of non-development, where modernity never arrived and with restricted possibilities for change. In the 1950-80s, LA endured a number of dictatorships; and though the promotion of development was prioritized by military regimes, academic interest in underdevelopment (e.g., in Asia and Africa) was under scrutiny. Paradoxically, this period of time, when LA and Asia were considered to be unable to achieve the *future* (as developed societies), was the time when they became mutually interested in their *present* (of underdevelopment).

The profile of scholars interested in Asia changed from *antiquarians* and curious dilettantes to professional academics. It did not mean that there were Asianists in LA, but at best ‘thirdworldists’ or ‘developmentalists’. Scholars skilled in Asian languages started to appear, though mostly speaking languages of migrant communities present in LA, such as Japanese, Arabic, and Russian. Linguistic skills were still not seen as a mandatory part of academic capacitation in LA.

Below: ‘Barbie Kali’ and ‘Ken Buda’ from the series ‘Barbie, the plastic religion’ (Buenos Aires, 2014), produced by Argentinian artists, Marianela Perelli and Emiliano Paolini ([www.pooly-marianela.com](http://www.pooly-marianela.com)). Photo courtesy of the artists.





The changes in LA's imagination of Asia again influenced its perceived geography (physical boundaries) of Asia, and accordingly, the politics of scholarship and institutionalization of Asian Studies in LA. From the late 1950s on, we see the inauguration of the first academic institutes, journals and centres for Asian Studies. The majority of these concerned Afro-Asian Studies – heavily influenced by the corresponding liberation movements and the spirit of Bandung and Non-Aligned Countries – or focused on individual countries (Japan, mostly). In both cases, the scholars were interested in the development debate. Asia was inevitably linked to Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and was framed as an indistinguishable part of the Third World.

A number of institutes and journals for Afro-Asian Studies had appeared in the late 1950s, but it was in the 1970s that this agenda became truly established. In 1978, for example, the ALADAA (Latin American Association of Asian and African Studies) was founded in Mexico, very much inspired by the ideological discussion on the consequences of colonialism and capitalism to peripheral societies. It was only in the late 1980s that local academic institutions began to consider Asia through other frameworks.

Funding in the 1970s and 1980s was not particularly abundant, and what there was came from Asiatic Foundations, public LA research funding agencies and, to a small degree, university departments and institutions. Asiatic Foundations focused on promoting the study and interest of the national sphere – such as the Japan or Korea Foundations. They restricted their support to language-training, and topics concerning the nation (not the region). Small grants were also managed by LA ministries and public universities to develop specific programs, journals or events on themes concerning Asia.

#### Institutionalization, 1990 onwards

From 1990 onwards, there was another interesting change in the perception of Asia in Latin America. Asia suddenly went from being the land of ancient civilizations, immobile time, and unchangeable realities of underdevelopment, to the land of *forthcoming prosperity*, and *ultimate modernity* and *forecasting futurology*. Again, the change in perception resulted in a new 'geography' of Asia, and LA's interest shifted from Japan to China; and places like Korea and India, for example, became more relevant for their present and future than for their pasts.

Asia continues to impact Latin America's intellectual and political agenda through the debate on economic development, and research now includes configurations that accommodate discourses on emerging development, like the 'Asian Tigers' or the 'BRICS' countries, ASEAN, etc. Thus in the 1990s and 2000s Asia was reframed through having achieved (some sort of) modernity. Public foundations and governmental initiatives invested in research and academic cooperation, motivated by the belief that some regions of LA and Asia share a common future of prosperity. Although the institutionalization of LA intellectual curiosity for Asia has been visible since the late 19th century, it is remarkable that the bulk of this interest came after 2000. It coincides with the celebration of the so-called 'emerging

Above: Latin American views of Asia's geography. Fig. 1: 19th-20th Century until WW2. Fig. 2: 1950-80s. Fig. 3: 1990s. Fig. 4: present day.

countries' as the future champions of development, and with the establishment of coalitions between those countries in both regions. During this period, direct intellectual connections have developed enormously. The number of publications on Asia has grown significantly; translations of Asian publications have started to appear, as well as publications authored by Latin American scholars. The number of events on Asian issues increased visibly, so too the circulation of Asian intellectuals in LA. Paradoxically, the consolidation of Asian Foundations supporting research and intellectual capacity in LA has undermined Asia, simply because the foundations tend to prioritize national state agendas (research on issues that are central to their countries, promoting language training, etc), instead of the regional/continental. The more these state initiatives enter the arena, the less Asia is visible as a totality.

#### Conclusion

A healthy curiosity between LA and Asia challenges the hegemony of the North Atlantic framework, helping to de-center Asian Studies. Democratizing the Asian Studies platform, including Latin American or African views on Asia, would already be sufficient reason to pursue this quest, but ideally, the capacity of scholars from LA needs to also be enforced. The ground is already very promising. With some concentration in the most rich and powerful countries of the region, we have (or have had) institutions dedicated to Asia in 17 (out of 26) countries of the continent. Of course, the existence

of institutions does not necessarily improve the existence of a local academic community or of a continued debate concerning Asia. Unfortunately, only 5 of the institutes produce a journal and only 6 organize events regularly. Journals, publications and events are indicators of the 'liveliness' of an intellectual community, the constant circulation of funding and the production of research that feeds publications (journals and books). The consolidation of Asian Studies in the region should encourage the publication (of journals and books), the offer of research grants and simultaneously the participation of LA scholars in events of the area.

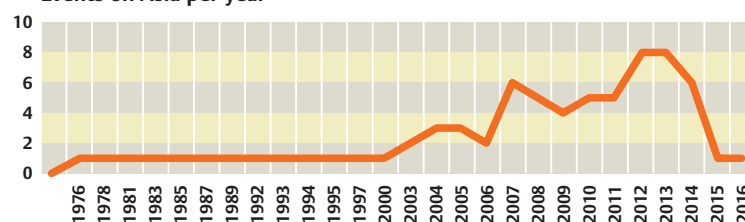
The advantages for the field of Asian Studies and for Social Sciences are potentially huge: to unfold forgotten historical connections, to compare theoretical frameworks, and to propose renewed vocabularies of analytic categories that do not share the historical background of the European Orientalist approach.<sup>11</sup>

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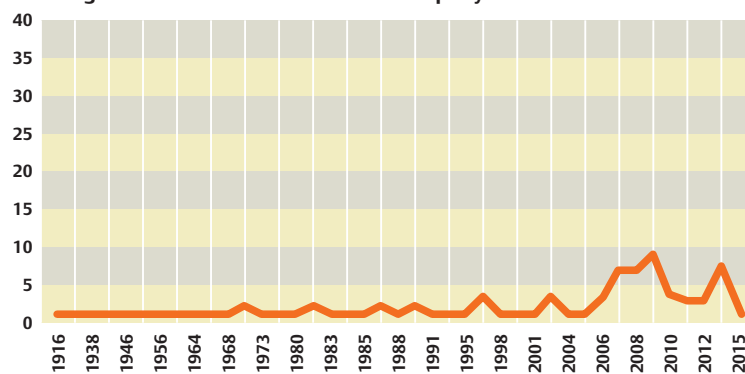
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- ibid. note 2
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- This is also the ambition of a consortium of institutions, led by IIAS, when developing the African Association of Asian Studies (A-ASIA)

Latin America Events on Asia per year



Latin America Inauguration of Asia-related institutions per year



Institutions dedicated to Asia per LA country

Country	Institutions	Events	Journals	Chairs
Argentina	23	11	4	3
Bahamas	1	-	-	-
Bolívia	1	-	-	-
Brazil	29	13	12	1
Chile	14	18	2	-
Colômbia	14	18	-	3
Costa Rica	1	-	-	-
Cuba	2	1	-	-
Equador	4	-	-	-
Guiana	1	-	-	-
Jamaica	1	-	-	-
México	18	9	4	2
Nicarágua	1	-	-	-
Peru	7	-	-	-
Suriname	-	-	-	1
Trinidad y Tobago	1	-	-	1
Uruguai	1	-	-	-
Venezuela	3	1	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>12</b>