

The CATS building with the central library in the middle.



Asia and Europe from a transcultural perspective

The new Heidelberg Centre for Asian and Transcultural Studies (CATS)

Axel Michaels and Barbara Mittler

Early 2019 sees the opening of the new Centre for Asian and Transcultural Studies (CATS) at Heidelberg University.¹ CATS brings together the South Asia Institute, the Centre for East Asian Studies, the Institute of Anthropology and the Heidelberg Centre for Transcultural Studies (HCTS). These institutions are situated in four buildings surrounding a square with a newly-built underground library, which will provide central access to four departmental libraries and which will house a Digital & Computational Humanities Unit, the Heidelberg Research Architecture (HRA). The official opening will take place on 25 June 2019 and visitors are very welcome!

CATS can build on a dozen years of research and teaching in the Excellence Cluster 'Asia and Europe in a Global Context', which has manifested in the foundation of an online journal, two (open access) publication series,² and a Master and Graduate Program in Transcultural Studies—with the largest number of (international) students in the Humanities and Social Sciences in Heidelberg.³

Bringing together four independent institutions, CATS forms a research collaboratorium enabling critical dialogues between Asia and Europe. CATS houses some twenty-five full professorships in Asian Studies, and offers more than twenty Asian languages to its approximately 3500 students. It also provides access to a unique and hybrid Asia library, one of the largest in continental Europe. Most importantly, CATS is not just another Asia Centre. Its uniqueness comes from being structurally linked and strongly committed to thinking beyond Asia in order to engage in an extended conversation with specialists whose regional expertise lies elsewhere.

CATS as collaboratorium: dialogic perspectives on Asia and Europe

Research on Asia in Europe has developed rapidly in recent decades; but how Asia can in fact be adequately studied is a question much

discussed, especially in view of Asia's substantial transcultural entanglements. The significant differences in disciplinary cultures between Europe and Asia as well as the predominance of models and discourses developed in Europe, which have long been accepted as blueprints in Asia, make it necessary to break new grounds. CATS as a collaboratorium suggests an innovative approach by intensifying a dialogue between what is sometimes divided along the lines of 'area studies' and 'systematic disciplines', between scholars working on antiquity, modernity and pre-history and between scholars working on what has superficially been divided along the lines of nature and culture.

Cultures are not contained within ethnically closed, linguistically homogenous and territorially bounded spheres, yet today they are framed by specific, often region-bound disciplines. Instead, cultures are constituted through transformations and entanglements that follow from contacts and relationships between various agents, concepts and institutions, between human and non-human factors. This intrinsic transculturality must be seen as the norm, the default

mode rather than the exception in human history and experience. Indeed, processes of transculturation (e.g., assimilation, acculturation, hybridity, etc.) are ubiquitous, even if they are often resisted and denied.

CATS has thus been conceived as a collaboratorium that transgresses disciplinary and regional limitations and gathers specialists of Asia and beyond in many different disciplines, ranging from archeology to geography, from the philologies to religious studies and pairing them up with scholars in the Humanities and the Social Sciences focusing on other regions of the world. CATS assembles Heidelberg faculty and international fellows or activists, artists and professionals committed to transdisciplinary work that cuts across different regions and temporalities ranging in time from pre-history to the present and in space from Honolulu to Rome to Chennai.

Researchers in CATS will attempt to overcome prevalent value dualisms that treat Asia and Europe as distinct epistemic domains characterized by an inherent conceptual and methodological incommensurability. They will develop methods to overcome this barrier

and to come to a historically more plausible, non-orientalist approach that helps uncover a dynamic and connected relationship between Asia and Europe. Such an approach would be both self-reflexive and an essential step towards the development of new epistemologies adequate to the task we have chalked out.

CATS thus stands for a critical engagement with some of the epistemic foundations specific to the disciplines while at the same time maintaining their strengths. There is a striking tension between the stabilizing functions built into disciplinary practices on the one hand and the flux and fragility of the objects they study on the other. To question the values academic disciplines transport—such as authenticity, cultural purity, a deference to origins, notions of skill, perfection, beauty, or the valorizing of single events over long-term processes, is the aim of research in CATS. This kind of disciplinary critique, however, does not imply wholesale rejection of proven disciplinary methods. To the contrary. CATS is committed to disciplinary expertise in fields that are the backbone of the Humanities such as sound philological, historical, archaeological, iconological or narratological methods.

CATS research: theorizing from Asia and Europe

The transcultural and transdisciplinary approach practiced in CATS is an answer to the widespread feeling of crisis and threat that pervades many societies today. Political and religious fundamentalisms, new forms of nationalism, populism and protectionism, and frictions caused by mass migration have intensified conflicts and heightened the awareness for the fragility of our interconnected lives. All of these phenomena can be read as contestations of processes of transformation caused by cultural interaction. Resistance to such pluralizing developments often aims to restore an imagined 'authentic' unity that is claimed to have been lost. It strives to create a more stable and predictable future by harkening back to homogenous 'origins' in a more or less distant past. This points to a paradox: for some, instability is produced by cultural flows and exchanges; for others, it is generated precisely by opposition to these very forces. The tensions between these two attitudes, which can be more or less pronounced at certain times and in certain places, and the frictions they generate are integral to transcultural interactions at every scale. They are inscribed in the remains of the earliest human settlements, scratched on bones, cast in bronze or carved in stone, they have left a wealth of material and written traces throughout the histories of Asia and Europe and they are the most contested issues of our present day. This raises the questions when, under which circumstances, and by whom, transcultural interaction is promoted or rejected. Which resources are mobilized by institutions and other social actors to facilitate or counter such processes? Which narratives of endangerment and risk, security and control are deployed to portray them as fortifying or debilitating influences in media, literature and the arts? These are the kinds of questions that CATS will be able to address.

CATS thus practices a new type of transdisciplinarity, which begins by theorizing both from Asia and from Europe: Asia and Europe have brought forth (trans-)culturally formed, diverse responses to the challenges at hand at any particular historical moment and articulated in many different languages. Precisely due to their cultural diversity, these explanations need to be plotted onto a common matrix. Reading such materials 'in-conjunction' is a step towards theorizing equitably from Europe and Asia (and, to think even larger, the world). This means breaking through the wall of incommensurability that has been erected between different epistemic cultures.

While a large number of disciplinary methods and paradigms in use today were originally formed on the basis of European experiences, they migrated in the wake of colonialism and modernizing efforts to regions at the European periphery and Asia. There, they were adapted to local conditions and ideological needs, most notably in the context of nation-building. Recognizing such processes not only as 'colonial exports', but as transcultural phenomena in their own right, is an example of the critical reflexivity required in our project. It will be engendered through reading and theorizing in-conjunction. Integrating the knowledge of regions outside of Europe in disciplines such as musicology, philosophy, history, economics, politics and the like, traditionally dealing with Europe will help recalibrate disciplinary epistemologies and, in the long run, will enable a rethinking and reconfiguration of only seemingly self-evident institutional structures.

On the basis of these theoretical considerations, CATS will focus on some of the following research fields:

- International relations and global interdependencies with Asia
- The comparative analysis of foreign policies of Asian states, their economic and political policies and reforms, and the relationship of China, India, and Japan with their respective regional neighbours
- Religions and their multidimensional transformations in Europe and Asia, examining religious discourses and their particular claims to power
- The dramatic social and demographic

changes in Asia and their repercussions on Asia and Europe as manifested in new models of social organization, transitions from agricultural to industrial forms of economy and migration flows

- Aspects of urbanization focusing on problems and strategies for dealing with dynamically developing megaregions in terms of rural/urban planning and population movements
- Models of world-making in Asia and Europe tracing the 'traditional/past' bases for 'modern/present' self-descriptions and cultural imaginaries that are made for the future
- Challenges that the recollection and revitalization of indigenous knowledge repertoires can have on (globally) institutionalized knowledge markets, which are at the same time part and motor of challenging transcultural processes and dynamics
- Transformations of human lifeworlds as they are increasingly implicated in transformations of the natural world, and vice versa
- Changes in the (technological) environment and their impact on human and species' health

CATS infrastructure

In terms of its institutional infrastructure, CATS is made up of four institutions all of which engage in the collaboratorium on a scientific level, while keeping their legal, budgetary and administrative autonomy and independence.

The South Asia Institute (SAI)⁴ offers seven professorships in Anthropology, Classical Indology, Modern South Asian Studies, Economics, Geography, History, and Political Science, as well as the Heinrich Zimmer Chair for Indian Philosophy and Intellectual History (supported by the Indian Government), the Allama Iqbal Professorial Fellowship (supported by Pakistan) and the Chair of Sri Lankan Studies (supported by Sri Lanka). Languages taught regularly include Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit, Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, Dari, Tamil, Nepali und Singhalese. Courses offered include BA and MA in South Asia Studies, MA in Cultures and Religions of South Asia, MA in Communication, Literature and Media in South Asian Languages, and MA in Health and Society of South Asia (MAHASSA).

The Center for East Asian Studies (Zentrum für Ostasienwissenschaften ZO)⁵ houses eight professorships in different fields of Chinese Studies ranging from archaeology to political science (4), Japanese Studies (2: in history, religious and literary studies) and East Asian Art History (2: in China and Japan); it also has regular guest professorships in all three areas, and a Taiwan Lectureship. Languages taught include classical and modern Chinese (Mandarin, Taiwanese, Cantonese), classical and modern Japanese, and Korean. The Center offers a BA in East Asia with different specializations in Chinese Studies, Japanese Studies and East Asian Art History (including a teacher training option for students of Chinese Studies), three MAs in Chinese Studies, Japanese Studies and East Asian Art and an MA in Simultaneous Interpretation for Japanese.

The Institute of Anthropology (Institut für Ethnologie, IfE)⁶ includes two professorships with regional foci on Southeast Asia. Languages taught include Indonesian and Thai. Courses offered include a BA and an MA in Ethnology.

The Heidelberg Centre for Transcultural Studies (HCTS)⁷ has been built on the structures established by the Cluster of Excellence 'Asia and Europe in a Global Context.' It is home to five permanent professorships in Buddhist Studies, Cultural Economic History, Global Art History, Intellectual History and Visual and Media Anthropology. Each of these professorships works in fields that cut across conventional disciplinary and nation-state borders. The HCTS hosts a Master and a Graduate

Programme in Transcultural Studies, languages taught include Academic English and Tibetan. The HCTS also hosts a Digital Humanities Unit, the Heidelberg Research Architecture HRA.

The CATS Media Centre will house Heidelberg's substantial Asia libraries in one central location equipped with a substantial number of media labs. This is of particular importance as it facilitates the kind of transdisciplinary work CATS engages in. With some 290,000 media units, the library of the SAI offers by far the best library related to South Asia in Germany. The libraries of the Institute of Chinese Studies and the Institute of East Asian Art History, including some 190,000 media units and a digital archive with 3.5 million documents, are among the most important in the German-speaking world. These substantial media holdings in CATS are supplemented by a number of smaller collections from the Institutes of Japanese Studies, Ethnology and the HCTS. In terms of the digital library, the Institute of Chinese Studies was an early pioneer, building chinaresource.org in the 1990s, a platform that offered to open and develop digital resources and archives. [Chinaresource.org](http://chinaresource.org) was the prototype that the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin then expanded and significantly redeveloped for all of Asia, offering, in collaboration with the SAI and the ZO an enormous range of electronic services: CrossAsia E-Publishing with the three publication platforms CrossAsia-Repository, CrossAsiaJournals and CrossAsia-eBooks, digital collections with digitized historical monographs, collected works and journals, CrossAsia Search: a comprehensive search of approx. 90 million data stocks from Asian Studies, numerous scientific full text, fact and bibliographical databases.

CATS: the future

For a very long time, Asia has been closely linked to Europe. Exchanges have taken place in the fields of religion, art, literature and music as well as in business and politics, but also in terms of geology, health, climate and environmental sustainability. Recently, states in these regions, especially in China and India, but increasingly also in Southeast Asia, have undergone an economic development that, like that of Japan a few decades earlier, has made them leading powers internationally. Once emerging countries, they have become equal, even superior, partners. At the same time, this development has led to social and political tensions and upheavals within and outside of Asia. As a result, Asia has become a complex object of research not only in Asian Studies, but also in those disciplines that have so far developed their concepts and methods based on data from the 'Global North', simply 'applying' them to Asia.

Apart from the traditional tasks of Asian Studies departments (the teaching of Asian languages and knowledge of Asian cultures and societies) the CATS Collaboratorium offers a space for novel dynamic forms of intellectual debate and exchange, including an institutionalized dialogue with the Social and the Natural Sciences, thus opening up new modes of conducting research in the Humanities and forming a language of learning, in and for an increasingly interconnected world.

CATS will enable the transdisciplinary development of new research methodologies. The intensive dialogue between disciplines specializing in Asia and Europe, will allow researchers in CATS to address fundamental challenges together, through reading-in-conjunction, developing innovative analytical tools and vocabularies constantly sharpening them in different historical and regional contexts.

CATS will further the integration of hybrid research materials. Through developments in the field of digital and computational humanities and materialities research, the extensive and rapidly growing digital image and text data in Asian and European studies will enable research analogous to the development of 'data driven science' in the natural sciences and serve as a basis for research-based teaching in CATS. The Heidelberg Research Architecture, a Digital and Computational Humanities Unit based at

the HCTS, will be developed into an important facility for the University. It has developed a collection management system designed for collaborative research using MODS and VRA standards for highly descriptive standardized metadata.

CATS will build on this framework to facilitate further consolidation and expansion. With the help of intelligent annotations, intermedial transcultural interdependencies (object, material, text, sound, image, moving image) in past and present are to be made visible and accessible in multilingual archives available for further analysis.

CATS will strengthen educational and research exchanges between Asia and Europe. No other region in the world invests so sustainably in education as does Asia. In order to meet the resulting challenges on the educational market, institutional networking with academic institutions in Asia will be intensified under the auspices of CATS. In cooperation with the Heidelberg School of Education and initiatives such as the CATS 'Schülerlabor' or 'China in die Schulen' (China to the schools), CATS offers project days and designs teaching modules on regions currently not included in the existing teacher training programs in History, Literature, Religion, Philosophy, or Music, thus internationalizing teaching and learning at an early age.

Finally, CATS will unfold its full potential to address key challenges of our times by strategically developing its research activities beyond the confines of the academe. It will regularly open up its Collaboratorium and the Media Centre to the interested public and offer activities in libraries, galleries and museums in the region and near our partner institutions in Asia and Europe.

CATS aims to develop knowledge exchange activities open to diverse audiences and will share findings through regular media reports, blogs and multilingual newsletters prepared by its publications office. It is planned to test new forms of narration to disseminate our findings and reach broader audiences through, e.g. digital storytelling, podcasts, documentary shorts, plays, apps, online exhibitions, and creative forms of data visualization. Residencies and Tandem Fellowships will enhance these possibilities and offer new ways of learning and outreach—for example by inviting and working with agents whose experiences go beyond the purview of conventional academic demarcations such as artists, scientists, bloggers, novelists, or professionals. In addition, CATS plans to organize film and art festivals to foster critically informed debates on issues of public concern.

In short, CATS is not just another Asia Center. Instead, it offers new types and forms of interaction and dialogue between and beyond Asia and Europe, where Asia and Europe are not taken as territorially or culturally defined bounded units but rather as heterogeneous, interwoven structures, constantly subject to historical change. Asia and Europe are studied as coeval fields in shifting relations of continuous negotiation and translation. Theorizing from Asia and Europe, is a step toward a decentered mode of knowledge production. This mode is essential to equip students of contemporary societies with the knowledge that prepares them for a future in which the need to find adequate and equitable solutions to increasingly global problems becomes ever more urgent.

Axel Michaels and Barbara Mittler,
CATS Founding Directors
michaels@asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de
mittler@asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de

Notes

- 1 <https://www.cats.uni-heidelberg.de>
- 2 See, e.g., the online journal *Transcultural Studies*, publication series *Transcultural Research*, and the *Heidelberg Studies on Transculturality*: <https://tinyurl.com/heidelpub>
- 3 <https://tinyurl.com/heidelstudies>
- 4 <https://tinyurl.com/heidelSAI>
- 5 <https://tinyurl.com/heidelEAS>
- 6 <https://tinyurl.com/heidelIA>
- 7 <https://tinyurl.com/heidelHCTS>
- 8 <https://tinyurl.com/heidelHRA>