

# Asia with salsa and samba

## Asian studies publications in Portuguese and Spanish

Claudio Costa Pinheiro

“Participating in the jury of a book prize can be an enlightening and amusing experience!” Those were the words of ICAS Secretary, founder and General Secretary of the ICAS Book Prize (IBP), Paul van der Velde, which convinced me to join the jury for the IBP awarded in 2017. And he was not lying. It was thrilling to unwrap the steady flow of packages coming in from all over the world and to slowly paint a picture of the international status of English language publications on Asia. In the end, I had a pile of 352 books standing in my office – including both Humanities and Social Sciences titles. Then I received the next invitation, for an even greater challenge: *Can Sepsis help ICAS to include Latin American publications on Asia in the IBP?* We took on the challenge and succeeded! But in fact we went further than that, as you shall see below.



Left:  
Participants of the workshop,  
9–11 November 2016,  
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

### Diversifying voices

So, in 2019, the IBP for the first time includes a prize for best publication on Asia in Spanish or Portuguese. Including this language prize was somewhat of a natural development for the ICAS Book Prize. The IBP was inaugurated in 2004; at that time it accepted only English-language titles, but in 2017 new language prizes were added to the list: Chinese, French, German, Korean. In 2021, Japanese and Russian publications will be the newcomers, and plans for 2023 include further language additions. This is part of a policy to amplify Asian voices, to decentre Asian studies and to show that there are also vibrant academic traditions in Asian studies alongside the one in the English-speaking academic world. ICAS-IIAS' commitment to decentre Asian studies speaks to the heart of Sepsis' mandate to promote South-North-South academic linkages. This is not the first time Sepsis-IIAS-ICAS have joined forces. In 2012 we together started developing the Asian studies in Africa network and association and since 2016, the Latin American Platform on Asian Studies – which has had meetings in Rio de Janeiro (Sepsis-UFRJ, 2016), Chiang Mai (ICAS 10, 2017), Lima (ALADAA, 2018) and will continue in Leiden (ICAS 11, 2019) and Mexico (WCAA-Colegio de Mexico), in October 2019.

### Asia in Latin America<sup>1</sup>

One year before launching the call for publications in Portuguese and Spanish, Sepsis organised a survey to map Brazilian books and unpublished academic dissertations on Asia, released between 2013 and 2018. On the ground, two undergraduate

students helped to identify all monographs, organized volumes, and unpublished PhD and Master Dissertations with Asia as an area of study or as a research theme.<sup>2</sup> Though priority was given to the Humanities and Social Sciences, the survey was not blind to any work largely related to Asia – including fictional literature, publications of migrant communities, religion and spirituality, etc.

This initiative had a clear focus and wide objectives: mapping part of the Latin American intellectual production on Asia was a strategy to access authors and publishers, and to connect academic communities separated by national, geographical and linguistic divides. The overall output of this survey revealed positive and negative aspects. It identified a very active scene, with almost 140 publications and more than 330 dissertations addressing contemporary and historical issues in Human and Social Sciences, focusing on Asian regions and sub-regions, and their connections with Latin America and with the Global South. Eventually, logistical issues led us to decide to not include dissertations for the first edition of the Portuguese/Spanish IBP; nevertheless the process of comparing published books and unpublished academic writings proved useful: a) to understand priorities of the local publishing industry, b) to analyse how it diverges from the scientific production in the field, and c) to develop strategies for connecting Asian studies in Portuguese/Spanish and academic communities.

A negative conclusion was recognizing that the Brazilian publishing industry is helping to reinforce inequality. It largely ignores local and regional intellectual production

on Asia, has limited participation in promoting science, and endorses gender imbalance. One-third of the Brazilian publications on Asia are translations; some are relevant works on history, economics and society of Asia, while a big chunk is made up of low-quality literature that frames Asia as a cultural asset, such as ‘the art of war for executives’ and the like. A large proportion of the titles that are produced locally fall within the International Relations camp, which basically reproduce hegemonic itineraries of the field and are largely incapable of reflecting on how the agendas of diplomacy, development and international cooperation concerning Asia are influenced by specificities of Brazilian (or Latin American) history and positionality. On yet another level, comparing ways in which Asia has been framed by the Brazilian publishing market and academia, gives a good sense of how Brazilian society ignores local intellectual thinking.

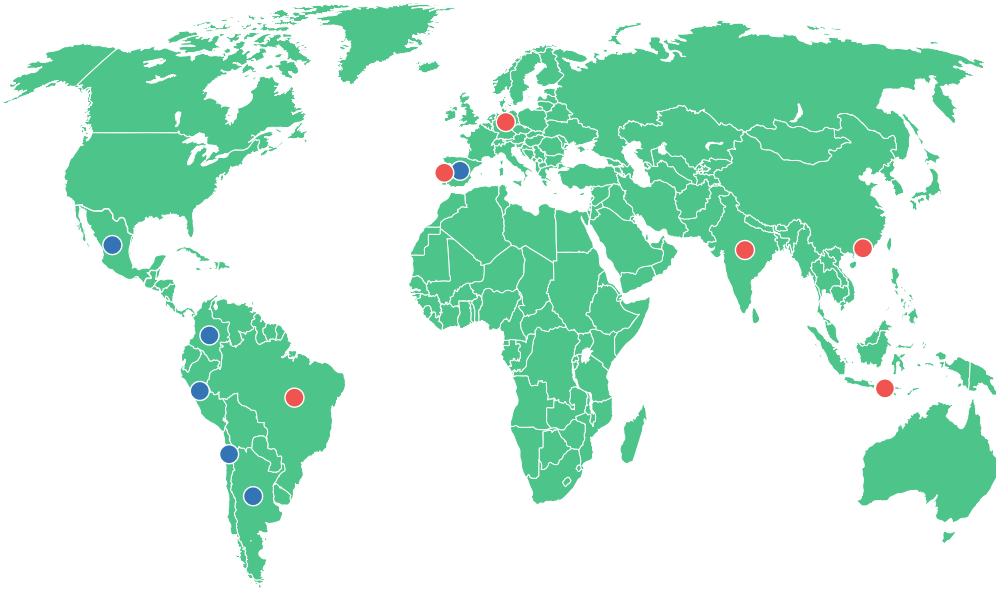
While Brazilian scientific production on Asia displays diversity and inclusiveness, actual publications tend to reinforce repetitiveness and exclusion. Unpublished research texts cover a large variety of themes, historical periods, regions (including Laos, Singapore, Hong Kong, Indonesia, ASEAN etc., and comparisons and connections with Africa and Latin America), and show a balanced division of gender in authorship (47% female vs. 53% male authors). Unfortunately, most of these works remain unpublished – exceptions are by universities or small publishers dependent on public funding. The Brazilian publishing market, on the contrary, continues gender imbalance (35% female versus 65% male authors), shows disregard for scientific

production as a source of autonomous thinking, and concentrates on a narrow set of themes/regions (China, the BRICS countries, and emerging development).

### The submissions

Although this survey can only show a partial picture of Latin America's thinking about Asia, it is still very enlightening, especially when contrasted with the books submitted to the IBP 2019 Portuguese/Spanish. It helped to develop strategies for making the prize more visible to a large arena of publishers and authors. The Call for Submissions circulated widely through websites, social media platforms, web lists etc. The main universities, research clusters, journals, gatekeepers dealing with Asia in the Portuguese and Spanish speaking academic circles were proactively contacted, sometimes even by telephone. The process involved the intensive participation of scholars and institutions from Latin America, Europe, Asia, Africa and the US. Interestingly, though not surprising, we received more responses from Latin American scholars and institutions after circulating the call through European and North-American networks. The call on the Sepsis page of one particular social media platform received six thousand views in three weeks!

The gratifying reward for this huge amount of work was, firstly, that the IBP 2019 Portuguese/Spanish collected the second highest number of submissions – second only to English!<sup>3</sup> We received almost 70 books from 12 different countries (from Latin America, Europe, Asia and Oceania). Secondly, the



Top Left: Geographical origin of all the books submitted to the ICAS Book Prize in Portuguese and Spanish languages. Below: Selection of titles.



process of mapping this literature made more visible the peculiarities of Portuguese and Spanish academic environments concerned with Asian studies.

The submitted books reveal that there is still a way to go for consolidating a field of Asian studies in Spanish and Portuguese-speaking scientific arenas, including the promotion of intra-lingual and inter-lingual intellectual communities. Publications sooner tend to display national (or regional) isolated cells of Asian studies, scattered through Latin America, Europe and Asia itself, than an organic epistemic community of scholars and institutions operating in dialogue. The existent connections are grounded in national scientific communities (sometimes framed by priorities of funding agencies) or regional scholarly traditions (trusting on networks of alumni), structured around themes like European colonialism in Asia, developmentalism, etc. In practical terms, though scholars circulate and have their works debated at academic events and published in academic journals or books, the literature shows a timid degree of both intra-lingual and inter-lingual citation, an observation also bounded by geographic isolation. Investigations developed by Colombian scholars do not naturally or easily appear as references in the Mexican, Chilean or Spanish literature on Asia – even if they all speak and write in Spanish. The same is true for Brazilian scholars quoting Macanese or Timorese authors and publications. Even in interactions between Brazilian and Portuguese academic communities, where dialogues on Asia are longstanding and vivid, the debate is largely restricted to themes connected to

Portuguese colonialism. The lack of dialogue is even more remarkable if we look at inter-lingual academic communities; Brazilians do not refer to Mexican literature, Colombians to Macanese, and so on.

Publications in Portuguese and Spanish exhibit an interesting distinction. Spanish language books find themselves in a solid scenario; not all Spanish-speaking national and regional institutions are well connected, yet the situation does display a stable scenario with high quality publications. Books are produced by either established universities (such as El Colegio of Mexico, the Autonomous University of Mexico, or the Autonomous University of Madrid) or commercial publishers with a focus on Asia (such as Bellaterra in Barcelona). In comparison, Portuguese-language publications reveal a much more scattered scene with not one big publisher concentrating on Asia; for example, the IBP 2019 submissions in Portuguese were limited to up to three books per publisher. Contrary to Spanish titles, the works in Portuguese show a remarkable geographical range: we received books from Brazil, Portugal, East Timor, India and Macau. This does suggest though that the Portuguese-speaking academic community on Asian studies emulates the Lusophone community and the Portuguese colonial past – in terms of its structure and most popular themes.

### Judging the prize

Sephis effectively took the curatorship of the prize as an opportunity to promote connections in the field of Asian studies in Portuguese and Spanish languages and

academic environments. These efforts were combined with the development of the intellectual capacity of students, with promoting dialogue between scholars, institutions, and with building shared curricula for giving consistency to Latin American capacity on Asian studies.<sup>4</sup> We developed strategies to face the disconnectedness between (and within) these academic communities. First, we opted for a single bilingual jury, able to evaluate all publications in both Portuguese and Spanish, in Human and Social Sciences. Our reading committee consisted of Prof. Dr. Lia Rodriguez de la Vega, Professor at the National University of Lomas de Zamora and at the University of Palermo (Buenos Aires), and recently appointed international president of the Latin American Association of Asian Studies, ALADAA; and Prof. Dr. Patricia Souza de Faria, Professor at Rio de Janeiro Federal Rural University and president of ALADAA Brazil. The committee was well aware of the lack of integration between and within Spanish and Portuguese academic communities and helped to conceive of strategies to promote intellectual dialogues between disconnected academic communities of Asian studies.

As for awarding prizes, one of the main preoccupations was to identify which publications best reflected the potency and peculiarities of the intellectual production of those academies of Asian studies. The reading committee was given total autonomy to decide which publications to reward, and together with the President of the Book Prize, they proposed new categories of accolades to reward publications that helped to strengthen connections between Asia and Portuguese and Spanish-speaking academic institutions.

### Challenges ahead

Starting with a positive aspect; Portuguese and Spanish speaking publications on Asia, especially in Latin America, show the progressive tendency to dissociate 'expertise on Asia' from an Asian 'ethnic background'. This is particularly remarkable when compared to publications and the field of Asian studies at large, where an "ethnophilic paradigm" still operates very strongly.<sup>5</sup> Take, for example, the growing presence of students of afro-descent in Brazil engaging with Asian studies.

A number of challenges stand ahead of us in our attempts to better integrate Portuguese and Spanish-speaking academic communities in the field of Asian studies. This is particularly challenging for peripheral academic circles from East Timor, Ecuador, Surinam, the Caribbean, etc., where publications face difficulties in circulation due to the costs. In fact, Sephis was approached by several authors and publishers with interesting titles for the prize, but not enough resources to meet the postal costs. So how do we boost and give visibility to small publishers? How do we create better mechanisms of visibility and distribution of Spanish/Portuguese publications on Asia? Can we develop consistent policies of translation?

To confront some of these challenges, Sephis is joining ALADAA and other academic institutions in Latin America and Europe to discuss strategies to overcome structural issues in promoting the field of Asian studies in the region and in Portuguese and Spanish languages at large. One initial step has already been accomplished as the ICAS Book Prize helps to give visibility to local production on Asia that would otherwise have difficulty to circulate and to be known. Further steps are coming soon: the Latin America-Asia Panel at ICAS 11 (18 July 2019), the WCAA meeting at El Colegio de Mexico (16-18 October 2019) and the forthcoming 'Latin American Conference on Asian Studies' in Rio (September 2020).

Being shortlisted or even winning a prize brings these authors and publications onto the global platform of Asian studies offered by the multilingual ICAS Book Prize. Specialists and the interested public can find all the ICAS Book Prize submissions for all languages online (<https://icas.asia/en/icas-book-prize>) and in the IBP 2019 publication, which will be posted on the ICAS website and distributed in hardcopy after the Book Prize ceremony on 16 July during ICAS 11.

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### Note of thanks

I am thankful to Dr Paul van der Velde, Profs. Lia Rodriguez de la Vega and Patricia Faria, for their inputs; and my student-assistants, Andressa Braz and Laís Marçal for the work on the survey. In the Spanish-speaking academe, Profs. Amaury Garcia (Colegio de Mexico) and Ignacio Villagran (University of Buenos Aires), Blai Guarne (University of Barcelona), Ricardo Sulamavia (Catholic University, Lima). In Macao, José Sales Marques (President of the Institute of European Studies of Macao) mobilized a wide network of scholars and publishers including Rufino Ramos, Antonio Monteiro, Yao Jing Ming, Ana Nunes, and others. In Timor, Keu Apoema (editor and scholar, Timor and Brazil), circulated our call for submissions and we got approached by a number of Timorese scholars willing to collaborate and engage. Publishers not only submitted their titles but spread the call among their peers – Catarina Madeira (Tinta-da-China, Lisbon), José Luiz (Editorial Bellaterra, Barcelona) among many others. Scholars and institutions from all over Latin America, Europe and Asia, were very supportive of this initiative and helped to distribute the call for submissions and encouraged colleagues and friends to apply and engage.

### Notes

- 1 I produced an analytical article about the English language publications on Asia, published between 2015 and 2017, and submitted to the IBP in 2017: Costa Pinheiro, C. 2018. 'Lendo a Ásia no mundo de hoje: políticas editoriais e produção de conhecimento' [Reading Asian in today's world: editorial politics and knowledge production], *Afro-Asia Journal* 57(1):123-150. Salvador: Bahia Federal University.
- 2 Andressa Braz and Laís Marçal are finishing their undergraduate studies on History at Rio de Janeiro Federal University. Both now conduct authorial research on politics of scientific production on Asia in Latin America – Braz observes the disconnections between Spanish and Portuguese speaking academic literature and Marçal analyses Mexican research and publication agendas concerning Asia through the *Asia y Africa Journal*, 1966-1980.
- 3 English received about 400 books, Portuguese and Spanish 66, followed by Korean with 53, French with 36, Chinese with 29, and German with 20.
- 4 It included organizing three seminars (between August 2018 to May 2019), some publications and an undergraduate course on Asian Studies, taught simultaneously at three universities in Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ, UERJ and UFRRJ), aiming at grabbing the attention of young students to the possibilities of researching Asia from Latin America.
- 5 Costa Pinheiro, C. (Forthcoming 2020) 'Asian studies and the ethnophilic paradigm', *Asia y Africa Journal*.