



## European Alliance for Asian Studies

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Below: Asia Library, photo courtesy of Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies.



# The Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies at Lund University

## Asian studies, university politics, and the future

The Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies (hereafter the Centre) was established in 1996 as a result of a government initiative and long-term efforts at Lund University to promote education and research on the region (<https://www.ace.lu.se>).

Marina Svensson

### History and early institutional set-up

Education and research on Asia have been conducted at Lund University since the 1970s, mainly at the Department of East Asian Languages. The focus was on China and Japan although languages such as Thai and Indonesian were taught until 2006 (when there was a general cut-back on languages with the result that no Swedish universities any longer offer Thai or Indonesian). The department began an undergraduate programme in East and South-East Asian Studies in 1984 that combined languages with area studies. Only in 1989 did the department get its first professor, who had a focus on China. The department had started its Ph.D. programme the year previously with a focus on Chinese modern history, literature, and language. Individual scholars at Lund University were involved in research on East and South-East Asia, as well as on South Asia, but they were few and scattered across departments of anthropology, sociology, history and political science.

Sweden has quite a strong tradition in Sinology, represented by eminent scholars such as Bernard Karlgren and Göran Malmkvist, but it was an interest in contemporary socio-economic and political developments, as well as the growing global importance of some countries

in East and South-East Asia, that motivated the establishment of the Centre in 1996. The aim was thus to stimulate research and education on East and South-East Asian contemporary societies. In the period up until 2012, the Centre's permanent staff was quite small and consisted only of a professor, who served as the director, administrative staff and librarians, whereas researchers were either postdoctoral fellows or researchers with external funding on a non-permanent basis. The Centre from the beginning ran a master's programme in Asian studies that has developed over the years (see further below). The Centre also established its own library and in 1999 it was merged with the library at the Department of East Asian Languages. The Asia library was then run jointly until 2006 when the Centre took over sole responsibility as the Department of East Asian Languages was incorporated in the newly established Centre for Languages and Literature.

Although the postdoctoral fellows and other researchers at the Centre were very active, the nature of their positions made it difficult to develop a sustainable teaching and research environment. The restriction on permanent staff was lifted in 2012-2013 when new directives were adopted, which led to two lecturers being appointed (and one later promoted to professor). In mid-2016, planning

ahead of the retirement of the director and the future retirement of one of the two lecturers, the Centre was allowed to recruit three associate senior lecturers on a tenure track, and in late 2018 to promote one researcher to lecturer. This means that the Centre today has a permanent staff consisting of one professor and four lecturers. It also has one researcher, and in 2020 two postdoctoral fellows will join the Centre. It is currently the only institution in the Nordic countries that conducts both teaching and research on contemporary East and South-East Asia.

### New institutional set-up

When the Centre was established it was decided that it would be based outside of the faculties as were all other interdisciplinary centres. This had several advantages but also meant, among other things, that the Centre was not allowed to develop its own Ph.D. programme. With a new university management came a decision around 2016 to transfer all the existing interdisciplinary centres, including for example the Centre for Middle Eastern Studies, to a faculty. This was more of a pragmatic rather than a visionary decision, and raised concerns about how to maintain the interdisciplinary nature in a

new institutional environment. After much discussion, the Centre decided to choose the Joint Faculties of Humanities and Theology rather than the Faculty of Social Sciences. This choice was motivated by the promise by the former that the Centre could establish a Ph.D. programme, and by a generally more positive view on and experience of area studies.

Due to the institutional and administrative set-up at the faculty the transfer in January 2019 also meant that the Centre became a division within the larger Department of History that apart from the division of history also houses the division of human rights. The Asia Library remains at the same premises as the Centre but is now run by the faculty library management. The Centre has adopted new directives to ensure its interdisciplinary focus, something which is also reflected in the advisory board that has members from other faculties as well as one external member. Furthermore, the Centre maintains its social science focused master's programme and aim to promote cross-faculty interdisciplinary research. During this first year, the Centre has begun a number of undergraduate courses as well as had its Ph.D. programme in East and South-East Asian Studies approved. The programme will begin in September 2020.

The above overview of the background to the establishment of the Centre and its development shows that its birth was motivated by a public and governmental interest in the region coupled with some visionary thinking at Lund University. But university politics, administrative restrictions, and the strong power of faculties and disciplines at Swedish universities, have hampered the Centre in its development. Interdisciplinary area studies have difficulties to get a footing at universities due to quite conservative institutional set-ups that privilege more disciplinary institutions. Right now, however, the Centre is in a more favourable and stable position than before with a larger permanent staff and the ability to develop its own interdisciplinary Ph.D. programme.

### Interdisciplinary education

The master's programme is today a two-year long interdisciplinary programme conducted in English with a focus on contemporary East and South-East Asia. Each year around 25 students begin the programme. The first semester consists of an introduction to area studies and the region's economic and political developments. In the second semester students can choose to focus on a sub-region or a country, currently China, Japan and Korea, and South-East Asia, as well as take a course in methodology. The third semester consists of several elective courses on topics such as economics, development issues, human rights, digital developments, and international relations in the region, in addition to an obligatory data collection course that prepares students for their master thesis

work during the fourth semester. Students are also able to take an exchange semester in East and South-East Asia as well as conduct their fieldwork with the help of some of our partner universities in the region. The masters' programme thus enables students to both get a good overview of developments in the region as well as focus thematically and with respect to a specific country. Many former students go on to a Ph.D. programme whereas others take up jobs in NGOs, government bodies, and private companies.

### Research, networks and activities

The master's programme reflects some of the research interests at the Centre. Individual research projects currently cover topics such as civil society and domestic politics in Cambodia, microcredit programmes and economic developments in China, labour and migration in China, China's digital society, cultural heritage issues, film and media in China, Japan's foreign policy, and international relations in East Asia more generally. The Centre has been working to consolidate its research profile. There are currently three interlinked interdisciplinary research themes. The first, 'Digital Asia', builds on and expands the Digital China project (funded by the Swedish Research Council from 2013 to 2018) as manifested in a recent conference and Ph.D. workshop (see opposite page). The second, 'Human Rights and Social Justice', addresses topics such as academic freedom, freedom of speech, labour rights,

and civil society developments. The Centre is a member of the Human Rights Research Hub at Lund University. A recent joint call for a postdoctoral fellow in human rights in East and South-East Asia is also part of this research focus. The open access journal *Made in China*, with one editor based at the Centre, can also be regarded to be part of this focus. The third theme, 'Global Challenges and International Relations', addresses the region's role in global economic development and geopolitics. This theme is also reflected in individual projects dealing with sustainability issues, migration, human rights and flows of cultural products. The research agenda at the Centre is thus underpinned by a focus on flows of people, ideas, and goods – and the impact of these flows on individuals, communities, the environment, and human security. This focus opens up for new ways of studying the region, and links between domestic, regional and global developments.

The Centre hosts visiting scholars and in recent years has provided accommodation and office space as well possibilities to organise research seminars for visiting Ph.D. students. The Centre organises public lectures, film screenings and photo exhibitions in order to engage with the public and interested students and staff at the university. It also organises workshops and international conferences.

The Centre has extensive contacts with scholars and institutions in East and South-East Asia and elsewhere. It is also a member of different associations and networks, including the European Alliance for Asian Studies. The Centre is a paying member of the Nordic

Institute of Asian Studies Nordic Council. This for example means that students and staff at Lund University can access data bases and journals held by NIAS. It has also resulted in collaboration such as the recent conference 'Digital Asia'.

### Future work and challenges

At the Centre we are confident that the interdisciplinary field of area studies will remain relevant. Knowledge of individual countries and the region is necessary in order to understand many current global challenges such as climate change, human rights and security issues, and the growth of populism. Furthermore, the region is a site for new developments and applications of digital technologies that both harbour possibilities and new dangers, e.g., increase states' surveillance capacities. Another cause of concern is the lack of and threats to academic freedom in many countries, including in particular China, that have serious implications for research as well as make collaboration difficult. Being able to engage and collaborate with researchers in the region is central for the future of Asian studies. The Centre has thus been involved in discussions and seminars on academic freedom and how best to support scholars from the region. This was also the topic for a panel at ICAS 11 in 2019 that the Centre organised under the auspices of the European Alliance for Asian Studies.

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# Digital Asia

## Conference report

Nicholas Loubere, Astrid Norén Nilsson, and Paul O'Shea

An academic conference in Sweden in December may not at first glance seem an appealing prospect: the days are short and the weather is, well, cold. The semester is coming to an end and exams and administrative tasks are taking priority. On the other hand, attendance at panels is more or less guaranteed, as the darkness and cold keeps participants indoors! Whether this was intentional or not, the 12th Annual Nordic Institute for Asian Studies (NIAS) Council Conference and PhD Course at the Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies, Lund University in December 2019, was, regardless of the weather outside, both a lively and timely event.

Lively, because of the engaged presenters coming from far and wide, including Asia, Australasia, North America, as well of course Europe and the Nordic region. Timely, because of the theme—*Digital Asia: Cultural, Socio-Economic, and Political Transformations*. Aside from having the largest Internet population, Asia is at the forefront of digital developments in many fields, from governance, entertainment, and e-commerce. The vastness of the region also means that these developments take divergent directions, reflecting local cultures, histories, socioeconomic, and political realities. Given the theme, the papers presented cut across a wide range of disciplines and methods, diverse but unified in their aim of understanding the past, present, and future of the digital in Asia. For the programme see <https://www.digitalasia2019.com>

### Keynotes: recovering the human in the digital

Four innovative and intellectually lively keynotes framed the conference, exemplifying the wealth of approaches that a focus on 'Digital Asia' enables. Conjuring up vignettes

of Asian digital kinship and performative cartography (place-making through mobile media), Larissa Hjorth offered fascinating perspectives on how 'dataveillance' can be caring and benevolent, rather than exploitative as we typically imagine it to be. Diving into the related question of trust, Aim Sinpeng explored patterns of trust in social media across a range of Southeast Asian countries during election times, concluding that social media is informative in an environment of low trust, but becomes transformative when trust is high. Strikingly, the profoundly human traits and needs that infuse digital life emerged again as a main theme in Pauline Cheong's keynote, which explored human-machine interactions and the role of human communication in robotic systems. Human emotions were also an important part of Florian Schneider's exploration of what happens when Chinese nationalism goes digital, which suggested that nationalism today is a combination of human psychology and technological design (algorithms), and an emergent property of online networks.

### Digital politics

A roundtable on Internet politics, populism, and digital authoritarianism brought together expertise on Southeast Asia, China and Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan. The various insights offered from these diverse contexts fuelled a productive—and sometimes even passionate—debate among those taking part. Participants had different perspectives on key questions, such as whether social media platforms inherently give anti-democratic politicians an advantage, pointing variously to a digital bias and the liberal values that some argue are also spread by social media applications. Nor was there a consensus on the usefulness of the term populism for understanding the role of the digital in Asian politics, whilst concern was raised over the ease with which popular sentiment is dismissed through it.

Similarly highlighting regional differences, a panel on digital politics and governance gave insights into disparate patterns of digital politics across Southeast Asia, Japan, and South Korea. The role of Facebook for bureaucratic governance in rural Cambodia was explored, highlighting the technological difficulties encountered by local officials. Conversely, the potential of the digital for oppositional politics was laid out with regards to neighbouring Thailand and Japan, putting a spotlight on the Future Forward Party and Rikken Minshuto respectively. We were also introduced to the animated sphere of political podcasts in South Korea. Refreshingly, a long history of post-truth politics in South Korea was traced, putting the current hype about 'post-truth'—Oxford Dictionary's 2016 Word of the Year—in perspective.

A striking but perhaps sadly unsurprising insight offered by a separate panel was how the Japanese internet is dogged by misogyny and racism similar to that witnessed here in Europe. We learnt how both UK-based Facebook-Brexiteers and Japanese nationalists use similar tactics, and how female politicians on Japanese Twitter face the same kind of vitriol as seen in Europe. But we also learnt of Japanese social justice activists, whose online counter-protests against the far-right use gamification to increase participation and scope. Methodological innovations were in evidence here as elsewhere—getting access to vast amounts of social media data is one thing, but researchers still have to make sense of it. It was gratifying to see how advanced this research is, combining the best of Asian Studies in terms of context, nuance, and language, with the latest software to shed new light on older topics of research.

### Digital imaginaries and urban futures

The conference provided a space for early career scholars to present cutting-edge research on the ways in which digital transformations are fundamentally reorganising life for Asia's urban residents. Papers were presented on emerging platform societies, smart cities, and the digital sharing economy—exploring the ways in which big data is facilitating new forms of algorithmic control both by companies and governments, as well as attempts to subvert and game these digital systems by those subjected to them. Other presentations focused on digital subjectivities, looking at how apps and rating systems



have been internalised by different populations, shaping social interactions in unpredictable ways. ICTs and digital finance technologies, including the emerging phenomenon of cashless societies, were also examined in depth, revealing uneven digital geographies and new spaces for both exploitation and resistance. Combined, these papers and the ensuing discussions provided an unflinching—and often uneasy—glimpse into our shared digital futures.

### Preparing for the next generation of digital scholarship

The conference concluded with a two-day course for PhD students working on topics related to digital society and/or with digital methodologies. This included presentations on digital ethnography, digital data visualisation tools, and techniques for gathering and organising rich data from social media. There were animated discussions in sessions on emerging ethical issues in digital research and the role of digitisation in transforming academic publishing. Participants also broke into small groups for peer review sessions, providing an opportunity for detailed discussions about ongoing research projects and facilitating collaborative thinking for future research directions. All in all, the conference provided fertile ground for researchers across disciplines, fields, and areas of expertise to come together and compare notes on the digital developments that are transforming society and life in Asian contexts.

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