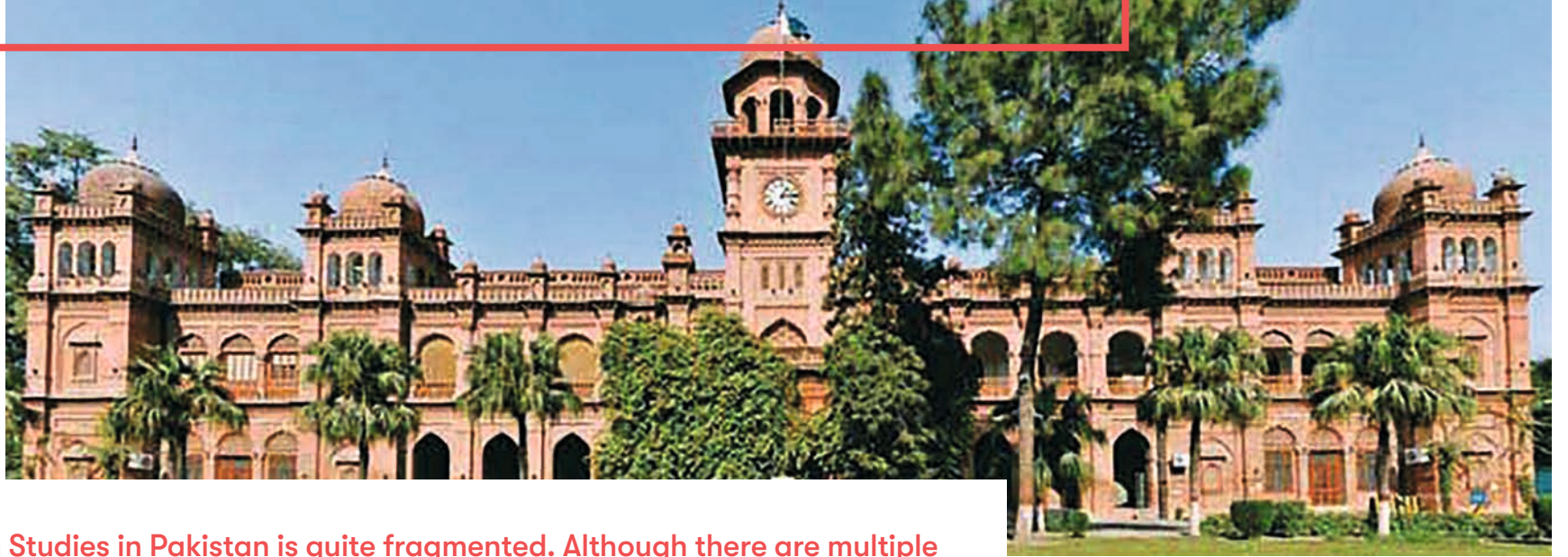


Asian Studies in Pakistan

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The status of Asian Studies in Pakistan is quite fragmented. Although there are multiple educational, research and policy institutes working on various topics related to different countries and regions within Asia, there is a lack of a well-defined inclusive 'Asian' academic space that engages with all regions of the continent.

While most of the educational institutes in Pakistan offer graduate and undergraduate courses and specialisations focusing on Asia and Asian languages, only a few universities have dedicated departments or research centres to carry out Asia-specific research. There are even fewer institutes that offer an entire degree program with an inclusive Asia-wide curriculum or Asia-centric research clusters. This is not to say that there is a lack of knowledge on Asia in the academic sphere of Pakistan, but rather to argue that Asian expertise does not concentrate under one banner, hence, limiting the scope of 'discursive' and 'non-discursive' knowledge production on Asian Studies in Pakistan.

Apart from the educational institutes, there are multiple independent think tanks, policy and research centres as well as NGOs working on Asia-related research, such as The Institute of Regional Studies (IRS), Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS), Pakistan China Institute (PCI), China Study Centre at Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), and Institute for Strategic Studies (ISS), to name a few. These institutes engage in diverse topics on Asia, covering politics, security, economy, culture, history or foreign affairs. However, the predominant focus of the research is South-Asia centric, and recently more centred on China rather than having an inclusive 'Asian' studies research approach.

Given this, I argue that the status of Asian Studies in Pakistan is asymmetric as some regions within the continent dominate the academic and policy-oriented research space. Pakistan, strategically located at the Arabian Sea and surrounded by India to the east, Afghanistan to the west, Iran to the southwest, and China to the northeast, is of much geopolitical significance at the Asian as well as global level. Moreover, its rich history and cultural tapestry have much to offer and share with other countries through research collaborations on Asian knowledge. In this article, I survey the major gatekeepers of Asian Studies research in Pakistan and trace out some possible factors and explanations for this Asian research asymmetry and the lack of an inclusive approach on Asian Studies in Pakistan.

Asian Studies Institutes in Pakistan (1973 – to date)

When it comes to Asian Studies in Pakistan, who is at the forefront of the production of knowledge in Pakistan? Which universities partake in this endeavour and what research capacities do they use to disseminate their knowledge on Asia? Area Study centres came

into existence in Pakistan in 1973, and were based on the National Education Policy of 1972-1980, following the Indo-Pak War and the separation of East-Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) in 1971.¹ This renewed education policy catered to the political need to study foreign societies that were of utmost significance to the national interest of Pakistan. Moreover, in 1975, the Area Study Act No. XLV passed by the Parliament of Pakistan mandated the establishment of six Area Study centres funded by the federal government. Of these six centres, three had an Asian-oriented focus, namely, the Centre for South Asian Studies at the University of Punjab in Lahore; Far East and Southeast Asia Study Centre at the University of Sindh in Jamshoro; and the Area Study Centre (Russia, China, and Central Asia) at the University of Peshawar.² These Area Study centres engaged in interdisciplinary research through teaching, research training, and organising conferences and seminars to assist decision makers in Pakistan in designing more informed foreign policymaking.

The Centre for South Asian Studies is located at Pakistan's oldest and largest university – the University of Punjab in Lahore – and started its research in 1973, with a focus on the socioeconomic and political developments in South Asia, covering India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. Besides offering Master and Doctorate degrees in South Asian Studies, the Centre also publishes two biannual journals: the *International Journal of South Asian Studies* and the *Journal of Indian Studies*. Moreover, the University of Punjab also hosts the Confucius Institute, which actively promotes Chinese culture and language.

The research of the Far East and Southeast Asia Study Centre at the University of Sindh in Jamshoro, focuses on countries such as Japan, North Korea, South Korea, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Brunei, Thailand, Laos, and East Timor. The Centre publishes the *Asia Pacific* research journal annually. The Area Study Centre (Russia, China, and Central Asia) at the University of Peshawar caters to the research and academic needs of Peshawar, as well as of the whole province and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Along with its biannual research journal *Central Asia*, the Centre actively offers training in Chinese, Russian, Pashto, and Uighur/Uzbek languages. Moreover, the University of Peshawar started the China Study Centre in 2016 after the launch of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

In addition to the above mentioned centres, there are some other academic institutes that provide Asian linguistic training, such as the National University of Modern Languages

(NUML), and the Gurmani Centre for Languages and Literature at Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS). NUML is the most prominent language institute, with multiple departments for Asian languages, such as Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Arabic, Persian, Pushto, Punjabi, among others. Established in 1969, initially it served as a platform for language training for government personnel, but later upgraded to University status in 2000. It now teaches 27 oriental and occidental languages and offers degree programs in multiple campuses across Pakistan. The Gurmani Centre for Languages and Literature at LUMS was founded in 2010 and specialises more on South Asian languages, such as Urdu, Persian, Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, and Arabic.

Although all of these Asian study and research centres have been engaging quite actively over the past years in Pakistan, some of them have fallen dormant because of either a shortage of funds or unavailability of qualified teachers.³ This has mostly led to the degradation of the research endeavours of these institutes. As most of the funding came from the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan in the past, these Asian Study institutes must enhance their existing funding or access some external funding to invigorate their research and Asia study programs.

Moving forward

Up until 2013, the number and regional distribution of Asia Study Centres remained more or less the same. However, with the recent launch of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) under China's Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, there has been a surge in the number of research institutes on China, as we are witnessing the strengthening of the Sino-Pak inter-governmental ties. Consequently, many educational institutes have initiated China Study Centres, such as the China Study Centre at the University of Balochistan, University of Sargodha, Government College University in Lahore, COMSATS University, Bahria University, and the China Pakistan Management Initiative (CPMI) at LUMS University. This increase in China-related academic study and research avenues aptly aligns with political needs and the foreign policy trajectory of Pakistan. Sino-Pak bilateral relations have always been strong as both countries have supported each other over the years; however, with CPEC, China has become the most important international actor for Pakistan. Hence, thoroughly understanding Chinese politics, economy, culture, history and language, as well as developing collaborative research with China in various fields, is of vital significance for Pakistan moving forward.

As most of the scholarly work in the field of Asian Studies was sparked by the political need for understanding other societies for policy purposes, area-specific research clearly served utilitarian purposes, rather than scholastic goals. Be that as it may, there is also an academic need to reorient and recognise the gaps within Asian Studies in Pakistan by developing a more inclusive approach and bringing other under-represented Asian countries into the fold. Yet, with the existing de-globalised forms of knowledge production, we need to reconfigure our globalised theories of knowledge with the local and regional theory building processes. It is crucial to reframe the Asian Studies narrative by including non-Western theories on Asia rather than heavily relying on the Euro-American centric accounts of Asian Studies. Additionally, Asian Studies should not only be confined to geographically defined regions but efforts should also be made to study Asia from a thematic, i.e., interdisciplinary and comparative perspective. In the case of Pakistan, this could be achieved by enhancing public funding to promote multidisciplinary and inclusive Asia research in colleges and universities, and by encouraging public-private partnerships and external funding initiatives among policy and research centres. Furthermore, we should continue to facilitate cross-border research collaborations and academic exchange programs for Asian Studies scholars in Pakistan, especially with regard to our neighbouring Asian countries, as they will enable us to advance and co-produce theoretically and methodologically rigorous knowledge on Asia. We would gain much more in academic and scientific ventures by mutual Asian knowledge gathering and sharing than confining this corpus of knowledge flow within our own borders.

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Notes

- 1 Islam, M. 2005. 'Area Studies in Pakistan: An Assessment', in Inayatullah, R.S. & Tahir, P. (eds) *Social Sciences in Pakistan: A Profile*. Islamabad: Council of Social Sciences Pakistan, pp.285-303
- 2 The other three centres were: Area Study Centre for Europe (ASCE) University of Karachi, Karachi; Area Study Centre for the Middle East and Arab Countries, University of Balochistan, Quetta; Area Study Centre for Africa, North and South America, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.
- 3 Ibid., note 1