

## Chinese Studies at Tallinn University

Lisa Indraccolo, Jekaterina Koort, and Margus Ott

Chinese Studies in Tallinn dates back to 1992, when the first systematic Mandarin language teaching program was established as a part of the already existing major in Asian Studies at the Estonian Institute of Humanities, the first private higher education institution founded in Eastern Europe (1988). Chinese Studies as an independent major was opened in 2005, after several academic and research institutions in Tallinn, including the Estonian Institute of Humanities, were merged into Tallinn University (TLU). Today, the Chinese Studies programme at Tallinn University is a part of the Asian Studies academic unit under the School of Humanities, while the Mandarin language teaching is provided by the Confucius Institute (founded in 2010), a separate non-academic unit administered by the TLU Rector's office. Tallinn University's partner university in the People's Republic of China is Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, which provides us with highly qualified Mandarin teachers. The Confucius Institute is currently headed by our graduate Anete Elken, who, after spending several years working and perfecting her knowledge of the Chinese language in the People's Republic of China, is currently about to graduate our M.A. programme in Asian Societies and Politics. The Chinese language program at the TLU Confucius Institute includes three proficiency levels (A, B, and C), and is supervised by the Estonian-based Chinese language teacher Wu Zhuoya, who, besides being a refined tea expert and a tea ceremony practitioner, has actively participated in the development of our programme in Chinese Studies since she moved to Estonia from the People's Republic of China in 2000.

At the moment, Tallinn University offers a B.A. programme in Chinese Studies, which is solidly based on an interdisciplinary Area Studies approach, with strong focus on Chinese philosophy and its political, social, and cultural developments and outputs. We employ most recent teaching methods that integrate digital resources into our classes to offer our students a lively and stimulating learning experience. The current portfolio of courses on premodern and modern China includes lecture and seminar series on a wide variety of topics. These range from contemporary society and politics to urban life; from religions and intellectual history to culture and philosophical thought, just

to quote a few examples. Students are writing their final dissertations on topics as diverse as Chinese investments in African infrastructure development, women's condition and female education in contemporary rural China, and the intricacies of poetic language in Classical Chinese texts. We are also in the process of developing an M.A. programme in Chinese Studies that is expected to be active in less than two years as part of TLU's quinquennial development plan.

The long-term Chinese Studies Lecturer, Dr. Jekaterina Koort, defended her PhD thesis at TLU in 2016. Her dissertation is a good example of the interdisciplinary approach that characterizes our programme, as it examines the impact of revived Confucianism on the perception of the environment and on the evolution of the representation of landscape during the rule of the Song dynasty (960-1279). As a lecturer, Koort teaches a wide range of courses on China, including the history of Chinese culture and Chinese philosophy and religions. Koort has also translated several Classical Chinese texts into Estonian, the most recent of which is Gan Bao's (fl. 315, d. 336) *Soushen ji* (*Anecdotes About Spirits and Immortals*), a Chinese Medieval collection of supernatural short stories and anecdotes about ghosts, spirits, and immortals. The translation has just been published in December 2021 by the Estonian publishing house Ema & Isa. In recent years, Koort has also developed an interest and expertise in contemporary Chinese politics with a focus on its ideological aspect, and is often invited to comment on crucial political issues in the Estonian media.

The interest of the Chinese Studies unit at TLU in the exploration of the Chinese world of thought and its intellectual history is also witnessed by the research of other members. In 2020, Dr. Lisa Indraccolo joined the team at Tallinn University as Associate Professor of Chinese Studies. Indraccolo has several years of research experience and a solid background in Classical Chinese thought, literature, and intellectual history of premodern China, with a focus on the Warring States and early Han periods (ca. 5th century B.C.-2nd century A.D.). Her research brings together and combines a rigorous philologico-hermeneutic analysis of early Chinese texts with a philosophical approach to describing their content, using an interpretive framework informed by the categories of thought and

the methodology of conceptual history. She is interested also in the analysis of textual patterns and text-structuring devices in early Chinese texts, an approach promoted by most recent trends in textual studies in the field of Sinology. Her main research interests include the early Chinese "Masters" of thought, in particular the Logicians (the so-called "School of Names"), Confucian moral and political philosophy, and Classical Chinese rhetoric. Indraccolo earned her PhD from Ca' Foscari University of Venice in 2010 with a dissertation on the early Chinese "sophistic" text *Gongsun Longzi*. She has been invited to provide contributions and encyclopedia entries on the *Gongsun Longzi*, on early Chinese paradoxes and language jokes, and on Chinese legalistic thought. Her most recent publications include, among others, the invited contribution "Argumentation (*bian* 辯)" in *Dao Companion to Chinese Philosophy of Logic*<sup>1</sup> and the chapter "Argumentation and Persuasion in Classical Chinese Literature" in the edited volume *Essays on Argumentation in Antiquity*,<sup>2</sup> which is an extensive study of the two early Chinese rhetorical techniques of argumentation and persuasion. Indraccolo is currently a board member of the European Association for Chinese Philosophy (EACP) and a board member and the Vice-Secretary General of the European Association for Chinese Studies (EACS). In 2021, Indraccolo and Dr. Alessandro Rippa, Associate Professor of Chinese Studies at TLU who works across Chinese Studies and Border Studies,<sup>3</sup> submitted a successful bid proposal to host the 25th European Association for Chinese Studies Biennial Conference 2024 at Tallinn University. This will be one of the largest gatherings of Chinese Studies scholars organised by an Estonian University, and a major milestone in the development of Chinese Studies at TLU.

Finally, Dr. Margus Ott, who has extensive expertise in philosophy, has also been actively contributing to the programme in Chinese Studies for many years. He has been teaching courses on Classical Chinese thought and the history of Chinese philosophy through the ages, providing a complete overview that goes beyond the traditional focus on the earlier periods of Chinese civilization to also include the Medieval and mid- to late imperial thinkers and trends of thought in a more comprehensive, overarching perspective. Dr. Ott earned his PhD in Philosophy from Tallinn University in 2014 and is currently working as Research Fellow on the research project "Around the World and Back: Typology of the Reception of Estonian Semiotics in the World," sponsored by the Estonian Research Council.<sup>4</sup> He has a rich publication record and has published several research articles on Confucian, Neo-Confucian and Daoist



Jade Buddha Temple in Shanghai. Photo by Lisa Indraccolo, 2004.

philosophy, among other topics, also from a comparative perspective. His solid background in and broad knowledge of both Western and Chinese philosophy allow him to carry out research and work productively across different cultures and traditions. Dr. Ott has also produced several Estonian translations of Western philosophy (Bergson, Deleuze, Jullien, Spinoza, Leibniz) and Chinese philosophy (an anthology of texts on music and divination, including *Yueji* and *Xici*, among others).

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### Notes

- 1 Fung, Yiu-ming (ed.). 2020. *Dao Companion to Chinese Philosophy of Logic*. New York: Springer.
- 2 Bjelde, Joseph Andrew, David Merry, and Christopher Roser (eds.). 2021. *Essays on Argumentation in Antiquity*. New York: Springer.
- 3 For a detailed account of Dr. Rippa's background and research, please see the section on Border Studies.
- 4 <https://www.etis.ee/Portal/Projects/Display/d400a82f-ef3e-41fd-b723-7710a754bc86>

## Middle Eastern Studies at Tallinn University

Helen Geršman

Our B.A. programme in Middle Eastern Studies is grounded in two earlier disciplines: (1) Turkish studies, the beginning of which dates back to 1994 in Estonia; and (2) traditional Arabic studies, which was founded in Tallinn University by the renowned Semitist and dialectologist Dr. Otto Jastrow in 2007. The students' compulsory language is Arabic, while Turkish is optional. At the moment, the university is planning to further expand the programme and enrich its offerings by developing a dedicated M.A. programme in Middle Eastern Studies. Although we do not yet offer an M.A. in Middle Eastern Studies, we enjoy the luxury of four students at the doctoral level.

Middle Eastern Studies relies on the dedicated work of three enthusiastic lecturers, whose primary research language is Arabic. The programme draws strength from the diversity and richness of the research topics in which the three of them are engaged. The



Mesmerizing muqarnas in Alhambra, Granada. Image courtesy of Tallinn University.

pool of subjects that are traditionally part of a Middle Eastern Studies programme – such as the history of the Middle East, its culture, and its religions – is covered by junior lecturer Üllar Peterson. With his knowledge of both Arabic and Persian, Peterson's research mainly concentrates on a critical study of the available collection of texts on Syrian Alawites and related topics, namely the varieties of Islam and the intricate history of the Islamic world. The two main umbrella topics that bring

together the research of the lecturers and the current pool of doctoral students are the study of Arabic or Persian orations and their consistent rhetorical analysis. This research direction is inspired by the PhD topic of our Lecturer in Middle Eastern Studies, Dr. Helen Geršman – that is, the rhetoric of Usāma ibn Lādin's speeches. Although Dr. Geršman started her career as a Turkologist, she chose to move forward in the field of Arabic rhetoric, motivated

by the possibility of building a programme in Arabic Studies at Tallinn University together with Dr. Otto Jastrow. It is well-known that parallelism is a pervasive rhetorical feature of the tradition of the Arabic oration. Dr. Geršman has been studying specific orations carrying out a systematic rhetorical analysis of their composition. This is an innovative approach that employs a hermeneutic methodology of textual analysis mutated from Biblical studies, which is founded on parallelisms and

concentric construction. This methodological approach has inspired Helen Geršman not only to analyse the traditionalists' orations, but to also go further back in time, to the roots of the genre of the Arabic oration, and to apply the same analysis to pre-Islamic prose literature as well. The fascinating poetics which arises from the clear concentric formula of Arabic prose texts motivated our teacher of Arabic, Alice Volkonski, whose secondary research language is Hebrew, to compare the language features of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry and Old Testament Wisdom literature, basing her study also partly on a rhetorical analysis of the same type. Our doctoral students' research includes rhetorical and content analysis of either Arabic or Persian orations.

Apart from maintaining our unique Middle Eastern Studies programme in Estonia, we also consider it one of our primary responsibilities to reach out to the Estonian public. We do so by making available both academic and more popular translations of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish literature, where literature here is meant in the widest sense possible. We regularly contribute to the special translation series *Bibliotheca Asiatica* of Tallinn University Press. Also, Helen Geršman and Üllar Peterson are the cofounders of the "Islam in Context" Series at Tartu University Press.

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