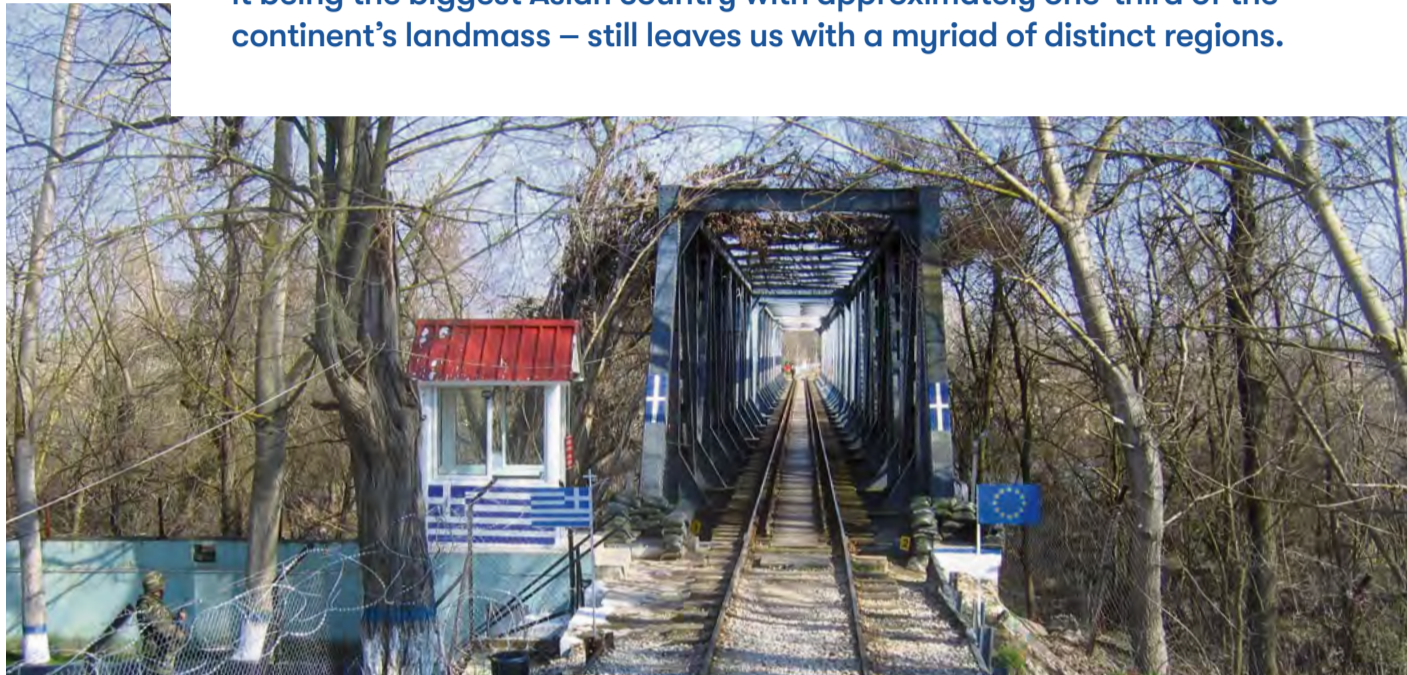


Asian Studies in Greece

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One of the first lessons that students of Asian Studies receive is that Asia as a geographic area and as an object of study are quite separate things. Although the term “Oriental” – not to mention “Far East” – is rightfully abandoned due to its colonial load, the preferred term “Asian” does not seem to solve the problem. “Asia” as a geographically delineated interdisciplinary area of study remains an impossibility. The size and diversity of the continent render overarching “Asian” expertise unfeasible. Even the widely accepted omission of Russia from Asian Studies – despite it being the biggest Asian country with approximately one-third of the continent’s landmass – still leaves us with a myriad of distinct regions.



The impossibility of Asia as an academic field means that Asian Studies around the globe focus on different Asian regions. The development and trajectory of Asian Studies within a country ultimately reflects the predominant local understanding and conceptualisation of “Asia” as shaped historically by political, economic, and social factors. In many Western European nations, Asian Studies emerged primarily out of a need to cultivate administrators for sprawling colonial empires. In these nations, the study of Asian cultures, languages, and societies was essential for maintaining and managing colonial interests in Asia. Similarly, in former communist countries, the imperatives of foreign policy and central planning during the Cold War played pivotal roles in establishing university departments dedicated to the study of languages such as Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean. Students were assigned to immerse themselves to the study of these countries, enabling a deeper understanding of these regions that would serve state interests. Thus, the forces of colonialism and communism were instrumental in propelling state-driven initiatives to develop Asian Studies in Europe. These developments reflected the geopolitical and strategic interests of the respective states in understanding and engaging with Asian countries. Their experiences also highlight the indispensable role of the state in developing new academic fields.

In Greece, a nation unmarked by either colonialism or communism, perceptions of Asia have predominantly been shaped by its historical arch-rival, Turkey. Despite their contentious history, these two nations share a common ancestry of statehood, tracing back to the eras of the Ottoman Empire and Byzantium. However, they have developed opposing nationalisms which are sustained (and sustain) geopolitical rivalries. In this context, the study of Turkey has become paramount in the Greek international relations discipline, a field introduced in the 1990s by a cadre of scholars primarily trained in the United States and United Kingdom.

International Relations (IR) in Greece has expanded significantly over the past three to four decades, largely shaped by immediate foreign policy concerns. The primary concern has been to delineate responses to Turkey’s rise as a regional powerhouse. Turkey is now recognised for its immense strategic value to the United States and NATO, its large economy, and its sophisticated and battlefield-proven military. The rise of Turkey necessitated a keen understanding and analysis of its regional ambitions and strategies. Thus, Greek IR scholars and political scientists have cultivated a robust community of Turkologists, producing a wealth of scholarly work interlaced with policy recommendations. These recommendations focus on strategies for Greece to contain Turkey’s expansionist ambitions in the Aegean Sea and Cyprus and to counterbalance its quest for regional supremacy. This scholarly and policy-oriented discourse seeks not only to comprehend the evolving dynamics, but also to equip Greece with nuanced approaches to manage difficult relations with its historical neighbour and rival.

As a result, in Greece, the academic exploration of Turkey has predominantly evolved within departments of international relations and political science. The growth and development of area studies, focusing on the detailed examination of Turkey in terms of its geography, culture, languages, and history, have been comparatively slower to progress and mature. The IR perspective has taken precedence, addressing Turkey’s foreign policies, strategic importance, and its relations with Greece and other nations. Meanwhile, the comprehensive multidisciplinary approach intrinsic to area studies has taken a backseat in the Greek academic landscape.

Today, there are 11 departments on IR and politics in Greece, all offering modules related to Turkish politics or foreign policy. There are only two departments with an interdisciplinary, area studies approach: (1) the Department of Turkish and Modern Asian Studies in the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, and (2) the Department of Balkan, Slavic & Oriental Studies in the University of Macedonia. The former was established in 2003 and envisioned the

creation of two pathways, one on Turkish Studies and one on East Asia (hence “Modern Asian Studies”). However, in the two decades of its operation, only the Turkish pathway has been realised and offered. Similarly, the Oriental Studies component at the University of Macedonia covers primarily Turkey and, secondarily, the Middle East. The number of Greek academic positions on “Asian Studies” beyond Turkey or the Middle East is miniscule.

The Greek economic crisis (2010-2018) had a heavy impact on the opening of new academic fields. Because universities in the country are public, they are forbidden from using undergraduate tuition fees for income and depend almost completely on the state for their operation and development. During the crisis, university hires were essentially put on hold for almost a decade, salaries were reduced by approximately 40 percent, and funding for higher education was barely sufficient to cover the operational expenses of universities. Social sciences and humanities encountered even graver challenges compared to STEM subjects, which could still attract funding from the private sector. This has resulted in a substantial generational “gap” of early- to mid-career scholars – typically those in their late 30s and 40s – that remains evident today. As Greek universities are still grappling with the myriad negative legacies of the economic crisis, prioritising the field of Asian Studies is not currently high on their agenda.

The shy development of Chinese studies

As noted above, the emergence of Asian Studies in Europe has, to some extent, been driven by contingency, a notion that can also be used to explain the development of Chinese studies in Greece. However, a distinctive feature in the Greek context is the conspicuous absence of financial support from the Greek state. Instead, the initiative to fill this void has been undertaken by the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which pursues a very active cultural and educational diplomacy in the country.

In Greece, the development of Confucius Institutes (CIs) commenced in parallel with

gradual entry of COSCO – the Chinese state’s shipping company – into the Port of Piraeus in 2009. Initially, a Business Confucius Institute was inaugurated at the Athens University of Economics and Business (2009). This was succeeded by the establishment of Confucius Institutes at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (2018) and at the University of Thessaly (2019). In July 2023, a fourth CI, specialising in Traditional Chinese Medicine was instituted at the University of West Attica. Although the primary focus of the CIs is language training, some have also broadened their scope to include public lectures on culture, economic issues, and international relations, featuring Chinese speakers. In addition, the World Sinology Centre, a PRC state-controlled institution is in talks with Ionian University to open a branch to lead the development of Sinology in the country. A more synergetic project is the Centre for the Study of Ancient Greek and Chinese Civilisation, inaugurated in 2023. This centre, funded by both the EU and the PRC, brings together a consortium of Greek universities with Chinese partners to study and disseminate ancient philosophy through a joint degree programme and other initiatives. Thus far, Chinese Studies in Greece has been intimately connected to and dependent on state institutions and funding of the PRC.

PRC-independent Chinese Studies programmes in Greece are primarily confined to social science universities and are mostly limited to a handful of modules offered to undergraduate students. (The author has identified only three within the whole of Greek academia.) Notably, the Department of International, European and Area Studies at Panteion University was the first to introduce an undergraduate module on Chinese politics in 2014, and its library has since developed the richest collection on modern China in the country. Furthermore, the Institute of International Relations, also at Panteion, has hosted an annual Chinese Studies Seminar since 2020 and a language programme for political scientists since 2021. In 2023, IDIS launched a programme to develop the field in collaboration with American, European, and East Asian universities. Social sciences delve into topics that experience stringent censorship in the PRC (e.g., human rights, minority rights, authoritarian governance, etc.), rendering financial and intellectual independence from China’s autocratic regime crucial for preserving academic freedom.

Despite the intensification of Sino-Greek economic relations, no Greek government has recognised the necessity for domestic and independent expertise on China. Rather, at the state level, nearly all initiatives related to China-focused education have been entrusted to various actors from the PRC, which often have a deeply problematic record that ranges from inefficiency and corruption to violation of academic freedom and espionage. Greek social scientists endeavour to conduct research on China in a manner that maintains academic freedom and integrity. However, they face limited sources of support and a Greek state that is chronically indifferent.

To conclude, the current state of Asian Studies beyond the study of Turkey is regrettably almost non-existent in Greece. This creates missed opportunities for young scholars and also leaves the nation vulnerable in its dealings with Asian powers due to a lack of expertise. As the case of Chinese Studies shows, the absence of domestic knowledge production leaves a void that is likely to be filled by external actors, whose interests are inclined to serve their own agendas rather than Greek universities or society at large. What is more, without a concerted effort to bolster Asian Studies within the nation, Greece undermines its agency in international relations, compromising both its national interests and its potential contribution to global affairs.

Fig. 1 (above): Border bridge between Greece and Turkey at Pythio. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons user Reinhard Dietrich, 2007)

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