



Fig. 1 (left): JAPON Cafe. (Photo courtesy of Institute of Asian and Transcultural Studies, 2024)

Asian Studies in Lithuania: Unexpected Connections

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When thinking about Asian Studies in Europe, Lithuania is not usually the first place that comes to mind. And wrongfully so. Although Lithuania never had direct colonial or imperial ties to Asia, the Middle East, or North Africa, the interest in these distant lands and cultures existed for many years. Radvila Našlaitėlis, a cultural and state figure of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, made documented pilgrimage journeys to Syria, Palestine, and Egypt in the 16th century. The 19th-century Lithuanian nobleman Mykolas Tiškevičius sparked public interest in ancient Egypt after he participated in several archaeological expeditions there and even brought back some (albeit, fake!) mummies. The excitement about Asia – the thirst for knowledge and experience of the continent – also motivated Lithuanian traveller and intellectual Antanas Poška to overtake the journey on his motorcycle from Lithuania to India, which he reached in 1931.

Lithuania's interest in Asia has not faded away and continues today. Popular trends from Asia are now reaching Lithuania just as they are in other European countries. K-pop bands are played on radio stations, Korean cosmetics are popular in beauty stores, bubble tea shops are filled with teenagers, and the Lithuanian National Gallery is currently hosting an exhibition on the connections between Japanese traditional arts and pop culture. Thus, it is not a surprise that the continuous interest in Asian cultures in Lithuania materialised in a serious academic field. The Institute of Asian and Transcultural Studies at Vilnius University is the largest and most diverse academic institution in Lithuania – or in any other Baltic state – that focuses on Asian and Middle Eastern cultures and societies. Even though the institute was established in 1993 (formerly called the Centre of Oriental Studies), the tradition of studying and researching Asia and the Middle East at Vilnius University began much earlier.

Vilnius University, founded in 1579, is among the oldest universities in Central and Eastern Europe and has played a vital role in Lithuania's political, cultural, and intellectual life. The early 19th century was a turbulent period for Lithuania. Following the third partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1795, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania became part of the Russian Empire, vanishing from the map for over a century. Nevertheless, some academic institutions, including Vilnius University, continued their activities, albeit under stringent Russian supervision. During this time, intellectuals at Vilnius University were keenly aware of the emerging significance and potential of Asian Studies. The initial romantic fascination with the East, fueled by informal student groups like the Filarets, Filomats, and Shubravcy, as well as Freemasonic lodges such as the Zealous Lithuanian Lodge, evolved into a serious academic engagement. The Department of Eastern Languages at Vilnius University

was formally established in 1810, but the actual teaching did not commence until over ten years later when Arabic and Persian languages were incorporated into the curriculum. In 1822, Kazimierz Kontrym, a notable intellectual and adjunct at Vilnius University, presented a proposal to Prince Adam Jerzy Czartoryski, the educational curator of the Vilnius District. Kontrym's proposal aimed to establish an institute for Oriental languages at Vilnius University, one that would offer instruction in Mongolian, Armenian, Turkish, Arabic, and Persian. Additionally, Kontrym sought to promote the study of Bengali, Sinhalese, Sanskrit, and other languages by sending students to India and Ceylon for further training.¹ His ambitious project, however, did not come into being at that time and had to wait for over a century to finally materialise into a proper department.

During Lithuania's interwar independence, Oriental studies received limited attention, sustained by a few

dedicated scholars. Under Soviet control, Lithuanian universities could not establish Oriental studies departments, forcing enthusiasts to study in Russian institutions. The sole exception was a Sanskrit course taught by Ričardas Mironas (a distinguished Lithuanian linguist and translator) at the Department of Classical Philology at Vilnius University. After Lithuania regained independence in 1990, interest in Oriental studies revived. In 1993, Vilnius University founded the Centre of Oriental Studies to advance the study of Asian and Middle Eastern languages, cultures, and histories. A full-fledged Bachelor of Arts programme titled Comparative Asian Studies was started in 2000, offering four specialisation tracks: Arabic Studies, Chinese Studies, Indian Studies, and Japanese Studies.

Until 2018, the Center of Oriental Studies was an independent academic unit at Vilnius University. Following structural reforms implemented between 2015 and 2020, the Center and its study programmes were



Fig.2 (far left): Partisan marketing of an ATSlbusk event. (Photo courtesy of Institute of Asian and Transcultural Studies, 2023)

Fig. 3 (left): Organisers of the ATSlbusk event. (Photo courtesy of Institute of Asian and Transcultural Studies, 2024)

Fig. 5 (below left): Public lecture-workshop by a Japanese Zen Buddhist monk. (Photo courtesy of Institute of Asian and Transcultural Studies, 2022)



integrated into the Faculty of Philosophy, changing its name and becoming the Institute of Asian and Transcultural Studies. This change indicates the constantly evolving nature of Asian Studies, as the institute's research focus now spans from ancient and classical texts and traditions to present-day socio-political realities. Thus, the institution has developed a holistic perspective with regard to cultural areas and their social, historical, and political specificity.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has resurfaced historical tensions with Lithuania's next-door neighbour. Lithuania's experiences under Tsarist and Soviet rule significantly shaped its perceptions of "Asia." Eastern Russia, associated with Siberia and broader Asia, was a site of exile and suffering for many Lithuanians, creating a lasting link between "Asia" and trauma in certain cultural and historical narratives. Also, Russia's vast geography, spanning Europe and Asia, complicates Lithuania's framing of "Asia." While Lithuania emphasises cultural and political distinctions from Russia, its proximity fosters awareness of Asia's geographic and cultural diversity. However, the focus remains primarily on Russia as a geopolitical adversary rather than its Asian dimensions. Meanwhile, Lithuanian scholars study Eastern Russia, including anthropologist Donatas Brandišauskas, who conducts research in East Siberia (Buryatia, Zabaikal Region, Yakutia) and the Russian Far East (Amur and Khabarovsk regions). Lithuania's foreign policy engagement with Asian nations, particularly China, Japan, and India, has also been an area of scholarly focus. For example, Lithuania's recent alignment with Taiwan and its tense relationship with China has sparked academic and public debates on the nature of Asia's role in Lithuania's global strategies.

Embracing diverse and interdisciplinary methodologies and approaches, the institute conducts research in two main areas: Cultural Studies of Asia and Anthropology of Asia. In the first research area, scholars investigate the distinctive forms of traditional and contemporary culture in various Asian countries and regions (South Asia, East Asia, Central Asia, Middle East). Drawing on multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary methods – including textual, historiographical, postcolonial, art-historical (visual and performative culture studies), and theoretical approaches – this research area seeks to identify and describe the dynamics of past and present cultural processes. These processes include the transformation of intellectual traditions, socio-political and globalisation dynamics, and changes in religious doctrines and practices. It also critically assesses the re-articulation and diffusion of various artistic forms, such as literature, cinema, and performing arts. In the second research area, scholars dwell on theoretical and methodological approaches of sociocultural anthropology and focus on the comparative study of human societies. They analyse the peculiarities of cultural life across a wide range of social activities and organisations and carry out research using ethnographic methods and long-term qualitative fieldwork. Scholars in this research area specialise in different regions and conduct anthropological fieldwork in India, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, China, Mongolia, Eastern Siberia, Jordan, Iran, Lebanon, South and North America, Eastern and Northern Europe, and Lithuania.

The institute also offers both undergraduate and postgraduate study programmes. The undergraduate Asian Studies programme offers five specialisations: Chinese Studies, Japanese Studies, Korean Studies, Middle Eastern Studies (combining

the former separate programmes in Turkish, Iranian, and Arabic Studies), and Indian and South Asian Studies. The Bachelor's programme in Asian Studies integrates a multidisciplinary approach, drawing from diverse academic fields such as language, literature, religion, art history, anthropology, history, and philosophy. Although primarily grounded in these disciplines, the programme also seeks to incorporate interdisciplinary perspectives by integrating cultural and social studies where possible.

The Modern Asian Studies Master's programme aims to develop students' expertise in contemporary Asian cultures, equipping them with strong intercultural and transregional competencies. It offers a broad methodological foundation and an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating elements from area studies, gender and postcolonial studies, visual culture, comparative literature, and cultural psychology. The programme is designed to welcome students from a variety of academic backgrounds, encouraging diversity in thought and action within multicultural contexts. Doctoral studies in Ethnology are conducted as part of a joint initiative between Vilnius University, the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theater, and the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore.

Additionally, the School of Asian Languages within the institute offers beginner and advanced courses in Arabic, Persian, Hindi, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Turkish to the general public.

The institute thrives on an exceptionally vibrant community life, largely driven by the active involvement of its students. In 2023, the student-led academic society "Undiscovered Asia" was founded, aiming to expand and share scholarly knowledge about the Asian region. This society has quickly become a vital part of the institute's academic and cultural landscape, fostering a deeper understanding of Asia through student-driven initiatives. In 2022, the student initiative "JAPON CAFÉ" was established. This community, created by Japanese and Lithuanian students at Vilnius University, offers unique opportunities to learn about Japan and Lithuania by directly experiencing both cultures. The café serves as a platform for connecting students from different nationalities, encouraging new friendships, and building a growing community of cross-cultural enthusiasts. Open to students from all faculties, JAPON CAFÉ holds monthly events, welcoming anyone interested in Japanese, Lithuanian, or broader cross-cultural experiences. An annual event, "ATSlbusk" (Eng. "Wake Up"), formerly known as "Orientalists' Days," has been a cornerstone of the department's

calendar. This multi-day event features hands-on activities, competitions, lectures, and other community-building initiatives about Asia and the Middle East open to the university community and guests. The institute also organises a regular South Asian Studies Summer School. In 2023, it was dedicated to the topic of South Asia on the Move.

In addition to its dynamic community, the institute is deeply integrated into international academic networks. Many students participate in exchange and mobility programmes at various universities in India, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Turkey, Jordan, Oman, and more, and faculty members engage in teaching and research visits at partner universities. Vilnius University is part of a wide range of academic networks, including Erasmus+, ARQUS, ISEP, NordPlus, the Nordic Center in India, and the Baltic Alliance for Asian Studies, among others.

The diversity of cultural areas, topics, and methodologies makes the Institute of Asian and Transcultural Studies a fertile ground for the development of comparative, cross-cultural, and interdisciplinary research projects that fuse perspectives stemming from the humanities and social sciences. Today, the institute is one of the major platforms of research and studies of non-European cultures, and it functions as a facilitator of knowledge between different governmental and nongovernmental institutions. The 2021 Belorussian migration crisis in Lithuania showcased the lack of language and culture specialists in Asian and Middle Eastern countries, facilitating the need for Lithuanian institutions to cooperate with the institute in interpretation and cultural training. There are also other areas (e.g., foreign policy, security, development, etc.) where the institute's scholars can provide qualified expertise and assistance.

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Notes

- 1 Beinorius, Audrius. 2009. "Introduction: Tracing the bicentennial history of Oriental studies in Lithuania", *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia*, Vol. 10 No. 1-2.