

Area Studies at the Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies: How to Bridge Disciplinary Difference and Time?

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To introduce the Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies (AOI), the major area studies institution at the University of Tübingen, we briefly expound on the history of area studies in Tübingen and then focus on the institutional structure, research, and the limitations and strengths of the AOI.

There are four models of area studies pursued in Germany, different from those in China. Model A refers to area studies conducted by having area specialists within discipline-based departments. Model B model refers to centers for areas studies, reaching across departmental boundaries, with or without center-affiliated faculty, which is both the Berlin and Beijing option. Model C refers to area-specific institutes or departments within a school (faculty), usually subdivided into specific departments. The AOI is such an area-specific institute. Mode D refers to area-specific programs that reach beyond departmental or school boundaries, with or without program-affiliated faculty.

Tübingen as a whole works with models A, C, and D. First, there are area specialists within discipline-based departments such as specialists on European Politics in the Department of Political Science and on (Eastern) European History in the Department of History. Second, there are area-specific institutes or departments within a school (faculty). One to be introduced is the Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies (*Asien-Orient-Institut AOI*) within the School (Faculty) of Philosophy. Third, there are also area-specific programs, e.g., the Global South Program (open for scholars of different disciplines interested in the Global South).

As for the AOI, the history of area studies in Tübingen is very long. There is a strong legacy of Middle Eastern (*Orientalistik*) and Indian studies (*Indologie*) stemming from the 19th century based on the study of historical and philosophical (religious) texts, for which Tübingen has always been famous. Areas are foremost cultural spaces deeply shaped by the past. So, knowledge of the past is paramount to understanding the present, which is a German tradition. Area studies in Tübingen are much based on that tradition and the ensuing institutional edifice built up over recent years, though there have been changes in epistemological and theoretical approaches to an area.

The AOI was formally established in 2008. First, it was meant to enhance the institutional power of area studies within the university. At that time, the different departments were independent units of small disciplines. In the old Faculty of Humanities, the institutional power of those small disciplines was quite weak. And

there were a lot of spending cuts and infighting on funding distribution in the early 2000s. Organized in such a way, area studies had little leverage within the university to defend their turf, so they united. This innovative union was not easy because all these units had been strongly independent for a long time, but the conditions of rising pressure forced them to cooperate. Second, the AOI was established to connect area studies in Tübingen to push their development, and bring about synergy and outreach in terms of teaching and research.

There are six departments in this institute within the School (Faculty) of Philosophy: Chinese Studies, Japanese Studies, Korean Studies, Indian Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, and Anthropology with a regional focus on South Asia. At the beginning, Chinese Studies and Korean Studies were one department. Later, when Prof. Lee You Jae came to Tübingen and revitalized the small division of Korean Studies, the department was separated into two. As a so-called systematic discipline, anthropology is a little bit peculiar here. But since there had been area studies specialists within anthropology (the scholars within the Department of Anthropology are specialists in contemporary India), it was a logical step to bring them into the AOI. These six departments create a “federal” structure within the institute, which means that there are things that we do together administratively and things that we keep separately. For instance, the recruitment of professorships is a matter of the respective departments. So, in recruitment commissions, we may come together as cross-department nomination committees. But the final decision is made by the departments, or at least they have a very powerful voice on the final vote. The “federal” approach has been maintained over 14 years now and has proved to be stable and efficient.

As a small institute, there are 14 professorships within the AOI as regular faculty: 3 in Chinese Studies, 3 in Japanese Studies, 2 in Korean Studies, 2 in Indian Studies, 2 in Middle Eastern Studies, and 2 in Anthropology. Their disciplines are also quite heterogeneous: 4 in Cultural Studies, 1 in Religious Studies, 1 in Philology, 3 in History, 2 in Social/Cultural Anthropology, 2 in Sociology, and 1 in Political Science. Among the scholars, five are social scientists and the rest belong to the humanities.

The degree programs are foremost department-based. There is only one degree program connecting AOI departments: the M.A. programme in Politics and Society in East Asia (jointly offered by the Departments of Chinese, Japanese and Korean Studies and the Department of Political Science, belonging to the School of Economics and Social Sciences). The AOI also cooperates with the Department of Economics in its B.A. programs in International Economics offering a regional focus on China, Japan, and Korea, and with the Department of Political Science in its M.A. program in Politics of the Middle East. Besides, there are numerous degree programs at B.A. and M.A. levels organized within respective departments of the AOI. Furthermore, there is intensive language training in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Hindi, Sanskrit, Malayalam, Urdu, Tamil, Pali, Arab, Persian, and Turkish for students to learn.

There are three centers in East Asia complementing language training and course work: The European Centre for Chinese Studies (ECCS) at Peking University; the Tübingen Center for Japanese Studies (TCJS) at Doshisha University (Kyoto); and the Tübingen Center for Korean Studies at Korea University (TUCKU) in Seoul. Students

of the respective departments are required to study one term at those centers. Language training abroad is offered in all other AOI departments as well, though this is optional.

AOI professors work on a wide range of topics, either in individual research projects or in interdisciplinary research clusters. There are many projects ongoing within every department. From each department, we list one as follows: The Development of a Buddhist Monastic Identity in Jainism (Department of Indian Studies); Myths, Narratives and Everyday Life of the Vagri in Tamil Nadu India (Department of Anthropology); Cultural History of the Natural Sciences in the Islamic World (Department of Middle Eastern Studies); History of Knowledge in Early Modern China (16th-18th Century) (Department of Chinese Studies); The Digital Transformation of Contemporary Japan (Department of Japanese Studies); and Rentier Capitalism and Social Inequality in Korea (Department of Korean Studies).

Individual research may link up with other research endeavors within or outside the university. Within Tübingen University, AOI professors contribute to two SFB Research clusters, “Threatened Order – Societies under Stress” and “Resource Cultures”. SFBs are the biggest collaborative research format in the German academic system financed out of public funding. There is also a DFG Research Group “Holy Texts”, a small but exquisite research format financed by the German Research Association. Then there is the “Global Encounters” platform, a special research format financed with Initiative of Excellence money provided by the university. Finally, there are two centers affiliated to the AOI: the European Research Center for Contemporary Taiwan (ERCCT) led by Prof. Schubert, and the Center of Korean Studies (CKS) led by Prof. Lee.

The current AOI has remarkable strengths, but also some limitations. First, area studies are conceived of in very different terms within the AOI. Due to the above-mentioned tradition in the humanities and its more recent connection to the social sciences, there are different concepts concerning the question what area studies are. It is an obstacle that we have to deal if people within the AOI work with different concepts of area studies. Second, the “federal” structure and disciplinary heterogeneity hampers institutional coherence in terms of setting up joint degree programs, developing joint research projects, and setting up overarching strategies for research and personnel recruitment.

However, the very same structure, intellectual tradition, and heterogeneity in research interests and disciplinary competencies enable the AOI to cooperate across the Humanities and Social Sciences easily, which is a big advantage. We are so heterogeneous that we can work together with different people, different research projects, and in different clusters. In fact, “federalism” is a flexible structure that can link up with different research initiatives and university units.

Finally, let’s raise the further outlook for the AOI and Triple Alliance. First, a new AOI building for all departments is currently under construction, which will help in building up more coherence in the future. Right now, as is a typical situation for Southern German universities, the AOI is spread across the old city of Tübingen. After moving to our new building in about three years, the six departments will be together for the first time, providing ample opportunity for creating coherence that would then,

hopefully, translate into more cooperation. Second, area studies in Tübingen will probably not grow in terms of faculty and resources because of declining student demand due to demographic change. As in any country around the world, German universities and government authorities attach great importance to student demand when deciding about funding baselines. If student demand declines, so do the resources – no matter what importance is assigned to research. That is a structural impediment to the development of area studies in Tübingen, Germany, and beyond.

As for the surplus value of the Triple Alliance, the three universities have different approaches, different points of departure, but also a lot of similarities. First, we may expand the scope of academic inquiry by more systematic comparison across space and time. Second, we should institutionalize the change of perspectives in our cooperation in order to understand better the driving forces of the contemporary world. We must discuss global problems, understand why different people think differently, and ponder solutions which are mutually acceptable. To understand does not mean to agree. But changing perspectives and enhancing mutual understanding are preconditions for solving problems of global concern. Area studies must be conducted along those lines. Third, our mission is to foster more exchange between Germany (the West) and China against all the odds. International communication and interaction are becoming. As scholars involved in area studies, we must do everything we can to maintain academic exchange, no matter how difficult the geopolitical environment is. That should be the Triple Alliance's mission in troubled times.