

# Developing European Resources and Alliances in Asian Studies: Anguish and Advantages

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*There is great potential to better develop our network of Japan studies institutes across Europe. This includes mechanisms where we can work together to improve research, and to provide better output and services at lower costs. For example, Japan Portal national projects can facilitate both inward and outward interactions between each nation and Japan, but also can effectively collaborate together and share certain costs and benefits. This paper discusses problems and bottleneck with marketization of university functions, efforts in the wider academy to rise above competitiveness and political interference struggles, and ways in which Japanese studies are particularly challenged. In short, effective collaboration provides ways to survive and thrive in the newly dynamic European environment; specific suggestions are provided.*

## **Introduction: crisis incites innovation**

The recent past has brought numerous changes to European universities and area studies research centres, many organisations that have been securely funded are having to justify their activities, their funding and even their very continued existence. While improved accountability is a positive change, many institutes and universities have felt the sting of severe budget restrictions and expensive administrative overheads (such as lengthy assessment exercises seeking to measure and compare activities and research). The following discussion briefly summarizes such current conditions in area studies, and offers countermeasures useful in the competitive, revenue-driven world of higher education today. The analyses presented here are directed toward Asian studies, especially to Japan (which this author has studied since 1978, and where resided for twelve years). But many of the examples pertain as well to conditions for other regional or area studies.

An important shift has taken place in collaboration. In the past, especially in Eastern and Central Europe, budgets were durably furnished by the state. Economic transition

and changing priorities have made funding much less stable. This has meant that today there is substantial room for (and indeed a mandate for) collaboration among our organisations: for cost-sharing, exchange of countermeasures to budget cutbacks, for mutual support, and for new Pan-European organizational forms (perhaps a loosely-coupled distributed Area Studies resource platform). Increasingly, those new to the cut-and-thrust of budget politics are finding allies and mentors among colleagues in neighboring countries. Indeed, such relationships oftentimes are stronger than domestic comradeship, which has to contend with cross-town rivalries and competition for national recognition and funds.

Japanese and Asian studies are particularly challenging. Due to physical distance from Asia, our basic costs are high, and our isolated scholars often cannot share basic overheads and expenses such as reference library development. Circumstances such as the phenomenal growth of electronic communications technology now offer many newly developing opportunities. But there are distant dark clouds as well: new budget rigidities, political meddling in university affairs, and the slow supplanting of collegiality & cooperation by cutthroat competition. Universities often must seek to manage an erosion of public funding while top faculty and students at the same time are enticed away by the new and competitive private sector or overseas institutions. Processes for developing co-operation and collaboration are thus all the more important. This paper analyzes such trends, and suggests opportunities, threats, resources & alliance formats, and substantive mechanisms for cost savings. Also discussed are strategies through which individual scholars and their institutions can become more competitive.

### **Research: a higher calling?**

In days past, those who would be 'intellectuals' took holy orders, with vows of poverty, obedience and chastity. The path has greatly changed.

Area studies is diffuse, and it is thus difficult to properly develop the critical mass of experts in subdisciplines such that scholars feel that they are part of a team of similar specialists. A row of Asian Studies offices might house specialists from linguistics and languages, geography, art, anthropology, philosophy & religion, or any of the other social sciences. Can they build a sense of community and develop synergies amongst themselves? Overlap may be of less importance if specialists can easily correspond with similar subtheme experts around the world.

Finally, how much should we interact with the wider society? Budgets are being cut, and Asia is far away, do we expend sufficient efforts at developing in others an understanding of the wider outside world and our experiences of Asia?

### **Centres for Excellence, National Capabilities & Security**

All over Europe, in both larger and smaller nations, higher education has been challenged to efficiently develop excellent scholars and students. In terms of graduate output, supply should somehow fit the fluctuating demands of employment markets. If not, alternatives exist: many systems are open, so supply and/or demand can shift to markets in other nations. Not all markets are completely open, however: national security jobs, for example, are often reserved for home nationals only. Training for such jobs need not be conducted domestically, but the strategy of many nations has been to invest in such capabilities. Many of our area studies centres owe their development to such considerations.

The study of far-off languages and cultures is labour-intensive and often challenging. Gaining expertise is a lengthy process. Even with open enrollment, programmes are often small and inefficient, lacking critical mass and economies of scale. Entry numbers and completion rates may fluctuate dramatically. While the system overall may seem inefficient, where many people develop skills which are largely underutilized, it can be good for all concerned that such capabilities exist. Further, technological advances now offer new markets for special skills; it has become possible for many people to find and complete project work in physically distant markets, communicating cheaply, immediately and securely with the far reaches of the world.

Area studies in United States universities in some cases have become highly contentious in recent years. Differences in ideology seem to be at the heart of the problem, but at issue are grants provided by the federal government (some US\$90 million in 2004) to select institutes and universities around the nation under Title VI of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (rev.) Section 601. This states that the USA needs “increased numbers of trained personnel and research in foreign languages, area studies, and other international studies” because “the security, stability, and economic vitality of the United States in a complex global era depend upon American experts in and citizens knowledgeable about world regions, foreign languages, and international affairs, as well as upon a strong research base in these areas.” Certain groups have strongly lobbied the federal government to more effectively wield these funds, and to correct perceived ideological imbalances in US international studies promotion. But the funds are distributed to universities, and some scholars are worried about interference with academic freedom and classroom affairs (see, for example, Scholes, 2004). Another view is that academics have launched “a campaign of disinformation regarding a fairly simple, bipartisan piece of legislation” (Harris, 2004). The latter author seems reasonable in pointing out that a proposed oversight board was to be advisory, not supervisory, and “painstakingly bipartisan.”

But bipartisan is different from non-partisan. Objective academics assert an independence from political controls, and many will resist having political operatives of any persuasion tramping about in their domain (religious groups claim parallel protections). That each and every politician might wish to get involved is irrelevant. Many see such interference as a dangerous threat to scholarship, while others see scholars themselves as the threat. Harris is rather less reasonable simply in stating (for the case of the USA) that “area-studies faculty, and Middle East specialists in particular, are dominated by a bias against American foreign policy and actively discourage government service” and that “the rot in Middle East studies” may be beyond possibility of healing. Such polemic should cause scholars everywhere to take notice. The lesson here may be no more than that funders may seek to steer activities toward desired ends. Or it could be grave interference in academic autonomy. Be forewarned: while America's ideological struggles may seem at this moment terribly far away from European language labs, the USA is not a minor nation. While the funds involved are only a tiny part of overall university budgets, this is not a minor worry (Scholes is concerned that ideological correctness is engendering a “climate of fear” around language instruction). As international interaction contracts with toughened security requirements, the potential for misunderstanding increases. Area studies institutions elsewhere would do well to note and understand these frictions. Similar threats arise in many national systems, and repeatedly have done so over many centuries; it is wise to study, and to be able to counteract, the strategies of those who would stifle free, non-instrumental enquiry. The wider global academy has a long tradition of protecting and supporting objective inquiry against partisan political attack. Again, perhaps our major strengths are cooperation and know-how exchange. We know these are important, but we may under-invest in critical network building.

### **Japan Studies Institutes in Eastern & Central Europe: newfound strengths**

Area studies specialists in the newer EU member nations have much both to offer and to learn. Where they can build liaison amongst one another, they are likely to become stronger. The wider environment is also promising. Established scholars throughout the world are still discovering areas of scholarship and fellow intellectuals who had been unknown to them due to Cold War barriers. More difficult to ferret-out are differences in methodology, or innovative ways of coping with limited resources. Networking, co-operation and collaboration are critically important skills and efforts that are consistently undervalued in the academic world (only rarely, for example, would such practical skills gain explicit mention at times of professional faculty review). Interacting with the wider world outside one's office might stimulate a recognized need for reform, where institutional goals & path can be adjusted. Public

policy can be redirected through our efforts. Coming in contact with people from different backgrounds reaffirms both similarities and differences. Our parallel realities derived from differing experience can be usefully tapped in times of crisis, generating vastly different countermeasures. Specialists in area studies deal regularly with cultural variations, and perhaps model such differences; some can provide others with novel insights and assistance. Again, around us there are many good lessons for cost-effective operations. Norway and Iceland, for example, have developed methods to counteract their relative geographic isolation. Their hard-won experiences may be valuable for others from small nations or with tight budgets.

### **What are the goals of our endeavors?**

It is important that every organization clarify, perhaps in a mission statement, organizational goals, constituency and stakeholders. As educators, should we be solely intellectual ... or also pastoral (guiding students)? Is our responsibility short-term (for a course period) ... or continuing (lifelong)? Academic specialists should contemplate whether their job focus is simply helping students learn, or also helping to find employment? In the case of Japanese studies, our mandate could varyingly include providing a base for scholarly research, helping our own nation, helping Japan, applying for grants, etc. Why promote Japanese Studies? What subspecialties do we promote? How outspoken dare we be? What motivates our efforts? Are we lackeys of Japan? Certainly we have skills. But perhaps our basic message is more than simply the idea that such skills should be employed. We might expect that our societies promote and invest in globalization, but is university work national service?

Many of us take on the important role of injecting dynamism & new perspective in addition to filling an information gap. To what extent are we further willing to spend our limited time and energies on the requests or demands of those who provide our funding? Are we to be on-call, to reply immediately when needed? To be available on demand is costly!

Finally, and not insignificantly, do area studies diminish us as experts, splitting our loyalties and perhaps leading to suspect actions? It is easy to reply no, but in a highly polarised environment, such claims can arise as weapons when logical arguments are weak.

Many Japan-based foundations are suffering from low endowment income due to miniscule interest rates, and have stagnant or shrinking programmes. Recent pan-Asian funding has been relatively more encouraging for China-focused research. Japan has a much larger economy than China (where, according to the United Nations, 2004 GDP was only 35.3% that of Japan, and 3.5% per capita), but news of China's growth and its growth potential seem to have overshadowed interest in Japan. Japan is highly involved with investments and development in other parts of Asia, growth elsewhere is often

good for Japan. Yet the sense of primacy in Asia that Japan enjoyed from approximately 1964 when it entered the OECD through the early 1990s is largely gone, perhaps never to return. This may not be a bad thing. Northeast Asian collaboration has not developed as it might, and Japanese chauvinism has been in part responsible. A new international coalition of mutual respect and joint interests could develop in Northeast Asia. This is highly relevant to us in Europe for many reasons, but in as much as *the European Union is an important model for collaboration*, we European scholars can assist the Japanese and others with our experiences in defining and understanding the systems, benefits, costs and pitfalls of such community-building. The modest aim “to contribute to mutual understanding, peace and security in Northeast Asia” might thus be added to our list of goals.

### **Market-based scholarship and competitive discord**

The academic world is not prepared for true market-based interaction, and this is not simply a problem of backward or obstinate anti-mercantilist scholars. Much of the foundation of the scholarly endeavor is based upon collegiality, voluntarism and objective professional judgment. Research is built fundamentally upon the methods and findings of others; we will greatly suffer if information becomes scarce and expensive in a proprietary setting.

The ‘new mercantilism’ of universities strikes particularly hard at many departments in the humanities, as the people based there often are untrained in business, strategy, marketing, etc., and thus make very little competitive impression in wider society.

Harsh resource competition often already exists between departments, and among national experts; this is expanding to competition with departmental colleagues as some people see their personal way forward improved by denigrating all competition. Making self-interest more central for professors might also slow the progress of top-level ambitious students: if they are judged to be a future challenge, and soon to be competing for limited resources, there are substantive disincentives to promoting or assisting them. Many of us struggle both to build connections and to maintain a cordon around our expertise. Do we construct barriers-to-entry? People with interest in Asia are sprinkled throughout our societies and within many departments of our universities. Do we communicate openly, or are knowledge and contacts hoarded?

Asian studies in the Nordic region has suffered from these spats: both the Finnish National University Network for East and Southeast Asian Studies (Itä-ja Kaakkois-Aasian yliopistoverkosto) and the Swedish School of Advanced Asia-Pacific Studies (SSAAPS) have experienced nasty incidents of organizational and individual complaints, and ultimate Secretariat rehousing. While this perhaps is merely the general cut-and-thrust of political processes common elsewhere, and carries no individual malice, the result has been withdrawal of some highly useful elements from these coalitions.

### **Test-focused learning**

It can easily be the case that area or linguistic studies are subjugated to political ends. But the challenges of language learning can also be rigidified as a package of rules and exceptions, to be memorized as a requirement to enter further training. Miller (1982, pp. 274–284) criticized the “arcane” official English-language education of Japanese schools, with its focus on entrance examinations. He described such education as solely a rite of passage, as a challenge for testing purposes, and termed such language studies a “sociolinguistic bead game” in contrast to a means for communication. (He also documented a policy effort in Japan to promote a similarly designed training & testing system for foreign students of Japanese language. Most of what Miller dreaded has not come to pass: a wide range of language courses continue to be offered, and many foreigners successfully learn functional Japanese.) His criticism remains valid of the “special kind of English” taught in Japan to challenge those taking entrance examinations. While there have been improvements, the average Japanese person with six to ten years of English courses is still poorly-trained to communicate with people from the outside world. This is a rather sad condition. In general, such weakness may be of limited importance, but in many specific cases it confers a measure of strategic advantage to at least some subsets of interested individuals. Those of us who can effectively communicate with Japanese people are among those who benefit.

It is demanded of us that we consider and proclaim the value of what we do (and some may not agree to needing to justify their scholarly endeavours). Nonetheless, for scholars at all levels, while language skills have an intrinsic value, they are best supplemented with other skills if to be valuable to society. Certainly in preparing students we improve their employability by offering a wider skill set. Even for established scholars, many such dimensions are part of the how area studies scholars have prepared in past decades, though perhaps we have not made much of these skills and experiences. Tenacity is certainly an attribute of such studies. Those who conduct foreign fieldwork, who travel far overseas for research or exchange must develop independent living skills, because such activities that include foreign travel are expensive, generally much more so than a normal on-campus programme, and many area studies students develop substantive entrepreneurial abilities to garnish funding for their activities.

Scholars often can view challenge with detachment, keeping a cool head and analytical capacity when others abandon the fray, or muddy the waters with emotional outbursts. Many scholars have excellent communications and pedagogical skills, though the shortcoming of long-windedness is perhaps too common.

### **Pedagogical Neglect?**

An academic forum should be a place for growth and discovery, not merely for force-feeding of theories and facts, and a trying ground to test absorption. Good

teaching takes participants to new perspectives, to worlds formerly unknown to them. Such experience, when combined with critical analysis, may perhaps change the common thinking patterns of participants: on leaving the classroom, new information is processed differently than it would have been before. This may be simply what we term 'growth' – but its catalyst is often supplied in meager doses, and sometimes not at all. The bottleneck is most often the teacher: untrained in pedagogy, displaying professional distance instead of passion for the theme he or she represents.

Some teachers have never had a passion for the subject they teach: fascinations and insights have not been part of their scholarly experience. Others have forgotten these dimensions, while some refuse to communicate their feelings, thinking that extreme objectivity makes their work more scientific. (This however is pseudo-scientific belief. Clinical objectivity does not disregard human feeling: emotions and motivations are surveyed as an important part of a wide-ranging data set.) Many teachers are incapable of sharing the process of discovery, because to them it is bound with emotional and often deeply private dimensions, including perhaps years of personal and family hardships. They dislike being reminded of their days of apprenticeship.

### **Tapping local resources: be courageous!**

How much use do academics make of resources on Asia in our own locale? We should learn to utilize the Asia-related human resources around us. There are many people nearby in most communities with Asia-related background and with insight and energy to talk, to debate, and even to teach. Such people include students returned from overseas study or travel, expatriate businesspeople, housewives, retirees, martial and other artists, etc. Some in universities might feel a vague threat to bring amateurs into the classroom, even for brief discussions. But crisis demands courage. Most courses can benefit greatly from a healthy dose of the vitality of far-away Asia, and students may need reminding of why they study. Spending structured twenty minutes with an Asian busboy, a diplomat, an Asia-related researcher from another field, or with enthusiastic practitioners of *tae kwon do* or raja yoga offers a potentially invigorating experience for all involved. We teachers develop as well in finding such local collaborators, and learning to debrief them in ways relevant to our students. Mobile individuals who've spent parts of their lives away from where they grew up often have interesting perspectives of both here and there. I believe that most of us want our academic systems and the wider community to be robust and well-balanced. We in Asian studies can concretely develop such foundations by building links to and amongst the wider Asia-related community around us.

### **What is our ideal role?**

There are many possible roles for an area studies department. Many in the wider society might appreciate and financially support a *National Japan Portal* (e.g., Japan



Portal Lithuania) that supplies both inward & outward Japan-related services, liaison & facilitation. It is not essential that all involved be full-time employees, some of the talent can be bought-in on an *ad hoc* basis. Thus the portal may or may not have immediate know-how, but the staff certainly ‘know-who’ are appropriate nearby experts (and such an expert could be easily in a neighboring nation). Among those who might need such services are government & the Foreign Ministry, trade & commerce, scientists, other university departments (such as management, production engineering, art, music, or architecture), and private individuals. Providing such services gains resources for other activities, better maintains contacts in Japan, and keeps us better informed through contact with local & national interests involved with Japan. We often can gain access to otherwise expensive communications channels. Our students can benefit greatly from such real-world experience & contacts.

There are many possibilities that regional institutions could band together for investment in a *Networking Unit*. This discussion is rather too complex for explanation here, so the author urges readers to correspond ([bruce@reorient.com](mailto:bruce@reorient.com)) with comments and questions. Until such time, we should make full use of the many good general organizations for collaboration. Regionally these include the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS), the European Association of Japanese Studies (EAJS), the European Association of Japanese Resource Specialists (EAJRS), and others. Organizations in Japan that have strongly supported Japanese Studies networking in Europe include the Japan Foundation, the Toshiba International Foundation, the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken), and National Institute of Informatics (NII; formerly NACSIS, Japan’s National Center for Science Information Systems), the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS), and the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO). Notable national activities are the Swedish School of Advanced Asia & Pacific Studies (SSAAPS) and the Finnish National Network for East & Southeast Asian Studies. Each of these has possibilities for collaboration with outside scholars, and is likely to assist with benchmarking efforts.

There are many ways to expand a collegial atmosphere, and to improve operations without large expenditures. Under limited contractual terms, *departmental affiliation can be offered to adjunct faculty*. This might include young researchers who’ve yet to find a proper academic post, researchers with self-developed funding, or retired faculty with something yet to offer. *Foreign experts* can be named as adjunct faculty and provided with a local base, even if visiting irregularly; and the benefits and costs of experts visiting from afar can be shared with other organizations. Those who visit from Asia or North America generally welcome an invitation to visit research centres in other nearby European cities – and this can be accomplished at a small fraction of the cost of the overall trip. Nearby centres may pay merely the marginal cost of such travel, with the understanding that they will also regularly introduce visitors to the network.

Perhaps the most important suggestion is to *be proactive*: not merely to wait passively for change, but to go out and make change happen. One simple example is how we in Stockholm market the importance of Asian studies to general audiences – focusing on three ways that Asia might be important to them. We call these the 3Cs:

### **Why pay attention to East Asia? – the 3Cs**

#### **COMPETITION**

You may seek to ignore them,

but they are competitive – and will not ignore you.

*Asian businesses and Asian products are an increasing and important part of our local economy.*

#### **CUSTOMER BASE**

East Asia contains 1 billion 370 million consumers...

South & Southeast Asia have a population of 1.6 billion...

3 billion potential clients – too many to ignore.

*There are huge potential markets in Asia for what we might offer.*

#### **CACHE OF INFORMATION**

These dynamic markets, home to many world-class firms & business federations, are busy with research, developing technology, and collecting high-quality data on their worldwide competition. This information could assist your strategic decision-making.

*Top quality intelligence gathering on world markets is available in Asia.*

### **Cooperative mandates: the Bologna process and the Lisbon challenge**

We must not forget that in Europe we have mandates to cooperate and to develop. The Bologna Process is a Europe-wide pledge (from 19 June 1999) to develop a European Higher Education Area by 2010. Collaboration is a fundamental dimension, including (among other goals) the promotion of mobility, promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance, and encouragement of European dimensions in higher education. Further, in March 2000 in Lisbon, the 15 European Union heads of state agreed to an explicit, ambitious and much bolder goal: to make the EU by 2010 “the most competitive & dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more & better jobs and greater social cohesion.

This is often termed the “Lisbon Agenda” – but make no mistake: it is recognized as a challenge in Asia and North America. If we are to help realize such a vision, we must collaborate with nearby colleagues, and work to develop synergies such that 1+1=3.

We must mobilize and draw from the talents of the full range of our relevant stakeholders: people in the surrounding society, students and their families, the university faculty & employees, our alumni network ('past investors'), the wider academic research community, government, etc. Would-be stakeholders, including private firms and ventures with interest in Asia, might also be included. Our network of Japan studies institutes across Europe, as yet loosely-coupled, has strong potential. Fortunately the European Commission fuels key networking and research initiatives with funding & support programmes. Scientists and specialists in other fields have been making good use of these funds for many years; and they have gained skills in how to apply successfully for funding. We can achieve funding success through many possible methods: we can attack frontally with arguments of why our international Japanese-studies network can grow in excellence and be good value-for-money; we can ally as a group with other scientists and explain how our (wider) consortium will mutually facilitate operations and research; or we can individually become part of other networks. Entrepreneurial attitudes offer many possibilities. With clever open-mindedness, innovation and concern for social progress, we can go far.

### **Future co-operation**

Gaining fluency in a language such as Japanese is an involved procedure. More than with many specialties, it is a long, solitary process; we learn to persevere. Individually, we each often have travelled and become accustomed to a lonely path. Yet at present there are many good, keen Japan specialists in Europe, and a wider constellation of experts elsewhere. Politically, there is a window of opportunity in which we can mobilize, while technology has only recently offered us new and inexpensive mechanisms for communication and co-operation. Some of us suffer from overly rigid attitudes, and collaborative know-how is perhaps weak, but such problems can be overcome, in part with simple good will. Being highly isolated, and often lonely, need no longer occur. We can orchestrate our energies and magnify our talents. Let's do so!

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