

Asian studies is not usually the first thing that comes to mind when considering Iceland. In fact, in the second half of the 20th century Iceland was too pre-occupied with its own European-American identity problem to be able to pay serious attention to a distant region such as Asia. But as Geir Sigurdsson, director of the recently opened Icelandic Centre for Asian Studies explains, the situation has changed rapidly during the last two decades.

Forging links between distant lands

ASÍS - The Icelandic Centre for Asian Studies

GEIR SIGURDSSON

Due to the relative geographic isolation of Ultima Thule, the impact of globalisation has arguably been more tangible in Iceland than in most other European countries. Since the early 1990's, there has been an explosion in trade, tourism and cultural exchanges between Iceland and Asian countries that only 30 years ago seemed almost unimaginable. This applies in particular to East Asia, i.e. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and not least the PRC, but also India and parts of Southeast Asia. Iceland's membership of EFTA brought a free-trade agreement with South Korea in 2006, and its non-membership of the EU enabled it to negotiate a bilateral agreement with the PRC, likely to take effect next year. This will be China's first free-trade agreement with a European nation, and without a doubt it will open up opportunities for Icelandic enterprises.

New and distant partners

Trade calls for exposure and communication and throughout history it has often been the vehicle for closer cultural and personal ties between remote areas. The case of Iceland and Asia is no exception. After Icelandic embassies opened in Beijing in 1995 and Tokyo in 2001 a growing need was felt to facilitate the future generations' increased understanding of the new and distant partners. The breakthrough was made in 2003, when a programme in Japanese language and society was established at the University of Iceland with the support of the Japan Foundation.

In December 2005, the two major Icelandic state universities, University of Iceland and the University of Akureyri, jointly established the Icelandic Centre for Asian Studies (Asiuver Islands – ASÍS). One of the main objectives of ASÍS is to create an environment - through lectures, conferences, exhibitions and other events - conducive to fostering interest in Asian studies and understanding of Asia-related issues among both academics and the general public in Iceland. Besides a series of local events, ASÍS has co-organised two international conferences, the first on the Mao Zedong era in China in collaboration with the Chinese Icelandic Culture Society (KÍM), and the second on Asia-related gender studies in collaboration with the Scandinavian based Gendering Asia Network. It is anticipated that the biannual conference of the Nordic Association of Chinese Studies will be held in Iceland under the Centre's auspices in 2009. Several renowned scholars and researchers have also visited and delivered lectures for ASÍS, including Geir Helgesen (Nordic Institute of Asian Studies), Elaine Jeffreys (University of Technology, Sydney), Mirja Juntunen (Nordic Centre in India) and Chung-ying Cheng (University of Hawaii). Expected visitors during the current academic year include Yuki Ishimatsu (UC Berkeley), Henry Rosemont Jr. (St. Mary's College of Maryland),



Göran Malmqvist (Swedish Academy of Sciences) and Mark Elvin (Australian National University).

Expanding the Asian Studies curriculum

ASÍS is also working towards an expansion of the Asian studies curriculum at the two state universities. Shortly after its establishment, the first Chinese studies courses were offered at the University of Akureyri, where the Centre's main office was located in its initial phase. As of August 1st 2007, the office was moved to the University of Iceland in the capital, Reykjavik, though ASÍS still remains jointly operated by both universities. The first fully-fledged Chinese studies programme was then launched at the University of Iceland in September 2007 with the support of the Office of Chinese Language Council International (Hanban). A certain combination of Chinese studies with the consistently growing Japanese language and society programme makes up a

major in East Asian studies. Through the close partnership with Ningbo University and the anticipated establishment of the Northern Light Confucius Institute in Iceland in 2008, Chinese studies is proving to be a fast growing field of academic study and research in Iceland.

However, the Centre is also turning its attention towards South Asia and aiming to establish a course in South Asian studies in the near future at the University of Iceland. This decision has been made with regard to the growing importance of the South Asian region in world trade, politics and culture. An Icelandic embassy was opened in New Delhi in 2006 and in early 2007 the University of Iceland became a member of the Nordic Centre in India.

Since its foundation, ASÍS has been looking in particular towards the Nordic region for cooperation in Asian studies. The two state universities became members of the Nordic NIAS Council (NNC) in 2006, a consortium that provides direct access to the Nordic Institute of Asian studies and facilitates contact with the most important Scandinavian educational institutions with a focus on Asia. ASÍS, however, is also working with other European institutes, such as the Centre of Oriental Studies at Vilnius University, Lithuania, and the Irish Institute of Chinese Studies at University College Cork, Ireland, and is eager to construct further networks. In the future, ASÍS is expected to serve as a networking resource for education and information on the Asian region, and an all-inclusive communication centre for Icelandic-Asian interactions. The importance of the mission of ASÍS is acknowledged by some private enterprises in Iceland, e.g. Glitnir Bank and Avion Group, both of which support its operations. ■

The current chair of ASÍS is **Dr. Ingjaldur Hannibalsson** (ingjald@hi.is) and director is **Dr. Geir Sigurdsson** (geirs@hi.is).
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