
ИСТОРИЯ НАУКИ

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Asian studies in the Nordic region: Status, relevance, prospects

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This article surveys the history, present status, and prospects of Asian Studies in the Nordic region. Taking its points of departure from the recent closure of several small language disciplines at the University of Copenhagen in Denmark, the article discusses Asian Studies in Sweden, Norway, Finland and Iceland with reference to university funding, student preferences, and cooperation with Asian governments. Further, the relevance of Asian Studies is illustrated by three illustrative “vignettes” dealing with the educational role of museums in Denmark and Russia and with vulnerable societies of the far North; the varied motivations for the 18th century Royal Danish Arabia Expedition; and the usefulness of extensive pan-Eurasia knowledge of the kind that birdwatchers cultivate. The article posits that by cultivating fine-grained and extensive knowledge about the past and the present, Asian Studies may counteract the thinning out, and distortion of, knowledge while also legitimately serving economic and political interests.

Keywords: Asian Studies, Area Studies, Language Studies, Nordic Region, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, Russia, Siberia, university funding, museums, resilience

Status

This article surveys the current status of Asian Studies in the Nordic region and discusses the relevance and prospects of such studies. Asian Studies are taken to include the study of language, culture and civilisation in the tradition of the humanities, as well as Area Studies and Cross-Cultural Studies in the tradition of interdisciplinary social science. “Asia” is broadly defined, and the article includes neighbouring regions. The main focus is on Denmark, and the period under consideration is the recent past. The article looks at Asian Studies as practised in universities, but it also considers museums as communi-

cators of knowledge about Asia. The article presumes that Asian Studies ought to create and refine substantive empirical knowledge about Asia. Thus the article advocates neither the formulaic deconstruction of knowledge in a post-modernist discursive vein, nor the necessity or desirability of the wilful construction of false knowledge in a post-factual vein. Rather, the article makes the case for maintaining extensive webs of knowledge about the past and the present in the Spirit of the Enlightenment, and because knowledge about Asia has economic, political and other implications. Through three illustrative vignettes dealing with such varied topics as museums in Denmark and Russia, the 18th century Royal Danish Arabia Expedition, and the virtues of “Avian knowledge”, the article discusses ways to counteract the thinning out of knowledge. The article does not discuss in detail the following: the massification of university education, the internationalization of faculties and students by design or by default, and gender, ethnic and religious politics within academia.

I will start by outlining the status of Language and Culture Studies at the University of Copenhagen¹. In 2005, the university offered courses in 31 different languages. By 2016, this number had been reduced to 21 [1]. In a few disciplines, including Danish and English, the annual enrolment approaches 200. Arabic Studies also has a large intake, while Chinese Studies has an intake of about 50 students. In Russian Studies, around 25 students used to be admitted. However, in some language-based studies, only 10–15 new students are admitted per year, and in some culture-based classic studies only 5–10 students are admitted. The economy of all departments is linked to the intake of students and the number of exams they take. When, in 2016, the university faced an eight per cent general cut in state funding, the dean at the Faculty of Humanities waved the sword of Damocles over a number of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, whose economy was particularly strained [2]. This direct threat of closure spurred a number of publications in response, including a white paper presenting the contributions of each of the fourteen small disciplines that had come under a cloud [3]. This publication details the quality of the education, the research conducted, and the wider strategic importance of the knowledge generated in these departments, not forgetting to mention that faculty members have frequently appeared on radio and TV. These protestations notwithstanding, Indonesian, Tibetan and Thai Studies were closed. Other disciplines, including Indology as well as Balkan, Finnish, Hebrew, Polish and Turkish Studies, were left in a sort of limbo. Modern Indian and South Asian Studies was threatened with closure, but survived after receiving funds earlier earmarked for Greek Studies. By combining with Russian Studies, Polish and Balkan Studies found a lease of life under the umbrella of Eastern and Southeastern European Studies [4]. Two years later, the government plans to weed out a number of new and old disciplines that may not sufficiently qualify students for the labor market. In addition, the university has decided to cease offering courses in Old and Modern Icelandic, Faroese, and Old Danish even though these languages are closely related to Modern Danish. The university hosts the Arnarnagænn Collection of old Icelandic manuscripts. The collection embodies the

¹ This article is a revised version of “Grounded and ‘Avian’ Knowledge” presented at the 19th International Congress on Historiography and Source Studies of Asia and Africa, St. Petersburg State University, 21–23 June 2017. I would like to thank Igor Kotin and Alexander Matveev for facilitating my participation in the conference. I would also like to thank Richard Eaton, Hans Christian Gulløv, Michael Harbsmeier, Inge Marie Larsen, Sari E. Manninen, Ida Nicolaisen, Patrizia Paggio, Poul G. Pedersen, Amanda Lybke Rasmussen, Erik R. Sand, and Karen Qvist for guidance and comments.

shared history of Denmark and Iceland. It, too, may be closed. This decision has led to protests from the Icelandic government [5]. The concerted onslaught on Asian and other studies notwithstanding, the government, on a more forthcoming note, has announced that the future of the remaining small disciplines will be considered by a separate commission. This commission will take into account whether these disciplines serve a national interest by virtue of their cultural, economic or scientific character [6, p. 359].

The University of Copenhagen has a long tradition in Language and Culture Studies, but other institutions have tried to rival its position. Not long ago, the Copenhagen Business School (CBS) intensified its Asia-related activities offering both Chinese and Japanese language courses. Modern Indian Studies, without the language component, received a grant from a private foundation, which made it possible to hire a full professor. However, this major expansion has been rolled back. Since 2015, the CBS has virtually closed all its business-related language programs. This has happened even though the Confederation of Danish Industry (*Dansk Industri*) has publicly opined that the teaching of foreign languages at university level is necessary to maintain Danish competitiveness [1]. The CBS still has an Asia Research Centre, but it no longer offers its own courses in Japanese. Instead, a language proficiency test is offered by the Japan Foundation in collaboration with the Embassy of Japan. A similar course in Chinese has been offered by the CBS through the Copenhagen Business Confucius Institute. However, this institute is itself about to leave the CBS.

While activities located at the CBS are being curtailed or dispersed, the business school in Aarhus has reacted to financial constraints by teaming up with the University of Aarhus and allowing the students at the business school to study at the university. The initiative by Aarhus University is an attempt to stem the tide of “domain loss” that other languages — Asian or otherwise — suffer due to the inroads of English [7]. Between 2005 and 2016, the number of language courses taught in Danish universities fell from 97 to 56. The annual output of postgraduates in German and French for all universities combined is only 10 and 25 respectively [8; 9]. Aarhus University aims to reverse this countrywide trend by becoming a leading language-teaching centre in Northern Europe [10].

The status of Asian Studies in other Nordic countries varies considerably. In Finland, the situation is both dim and upbeat. In 2016, the University of Helsinki announced that it would dismiss almost one thousand employees, including about three hundred of its teaching and research staff [11]. The Finnish national character is said to be morose, but Finns are also known for their gutsy grit, or *sisu*. In the event, the Finns engaged in Asian Studies seem confident about their future despite the budgetary cuts. In 2016, some 347 students sought admission into Asian Studies at University of Helsinki even though only 16 were admitted. By comparison, the number of students seeking admission to various Finnish Studies programmes was only 269 [12]. The popularity of Asian Studies in Finland derives in large part from the Finnish fascination with J-pop, manga, and anime. A few years ago, admission to Asian Studies was linked to admission to African Studies. The result was that virtually no one majored in African Studies. Among the students admitted to Asian Studies, the high-performing Japanophiles got the large majority of seats. Even though Japanology has clearly been very popular at Helsinki, a key professor teaching Japanese was dismissed in the firing round mentioned above. Instead, the university hired faculty in Korean and Chinese Studies (Sari E. Manninen, pers. comm.).

As regards Norway, there is a considerable number of institutions teaching and researching Asia in one way or another. There are also extensive networks, such as the

Norwegian Network for Asian Studies (www.sum.uio.no/english/research/networks/network-for-asian-studies), which nurtures Asian interests. However, to judge from interventions at the Nordic NIAS Council (NNC) Conference held in 2016, supply at times exceeds demand. For example, not many students are keen on studying South Asia even though South Asia is increasingly important to Norway and Norwegians [13, observation by Kenneth Bo Nielsen]. This lack of interest has also hit the teaching of Sanskrit, which may be discontinued [14]. Norwegian students tend to deselect not only Asian languages, but European language studies, too. They even shy away from studying Norwegian literature.

The university sector in Sweden is the biggest in the Nordic region. Sweden has an impressive number of Asia-related academic activities and institutions, which include the Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies (www.lunduniversity.lu.se/lucat/group/v1000926) and the SASNET network focusing on South Asia (<https://www.sasnet.lu.se>), both located in Lund. In the 1990s, ambitious political initiatives cleared the way for a major renaissance of Asian Studies, but reality has fallen short of expectations [13, observation by Eva Hansson]. Twenty years ago, Sweden was clearly the center of Asian Studies in the Nordic Region. Today, Sweden, Denmark and Norway are more evenly matched, with Finland not far behind.

When it comes to the North Atlantic areas, there is no doubt that they lag behind in terms of the scale of Asian studies. In Iceland, the University of Iceland in Reykjavík has an Icelandic Centre for Asian Studies as well as a Northern Light Confucius Institute. These institutes collaborate with the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies and the Fudan-European Centre in Copenhagen. In Greenland, the Republic of Korea has helped establish a Korea Corner at the University of Greenland in Nuuk, but otherwise the academic reach of Asia is weak in Greenland.

In general, it would seem that in spite of the growing importance of Asia, the academic field of Asian Studies has not expanded commensurably in the Nordic countries. Asian Studies in the humanities have even been weakened in conjunction with the general retraction of language studies. In the case of the University of Helsinki, student demand for Japanese Studies crowded out other subjects. This was an unusual situation. Otherwise, the student demand for Asian Studies suffers from being too low, rather than too high. There has been an incipient academic wave of interest in Chinese Studies, but this wave seems to be receding as regards language studies. It is still present, more broadly, in the social and natural sciences as evident e.g. in the initiatives associated with the Nordic Centre in Shanghai (www.nordiccentre.net/), the Fudan-European Centre in China Studies at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (www.nias.ku.dk/fudan), and the Sino-Danish Center for Education and Research in Beijing, which features courses in both social and natural science (<http://sdc.university/>). Similar initiatives are fielded on a smaller scale with regards to India at the Nordic Centre in India (www.nordiccentreindia.com).

Relevance

I will now present three specific cases that illustrate the dilemmas that face Area and Culture Studies anywhere and anytime, indicating how these dilemmas have been productively tackled.

Eskimology and Arctic Studies was one of the study centres at the University of Copenhagen that was almost closed in 2016. This near-closure was particularly upsetting

to those Danes and non-Danes, who take seriously the relationship that exists between Denmark and the Arctic areas, and the almost one hundred years old academic tradition that has accompanied this engagement. I will discuss this historical connection with reference to Danish museums to illustrate how Danish museums try to make their collections relevant in a contemporary setting. Incidentally, this is also an area where Danish, Russian and Asian history overlaps.

The Ethnographical Collections (*Etnografisk Samling*, previously known as *Det Kongelige Ethnographiske Musæum*) opened in 1841 in what is now the National Museum in Copenhagen. The Director then was Christian Jürgensen Thomsen. His interests included numismatics, an interest which he shared with the Russian Mintmaster and Councilor of State Jakob Reichel [15]. They corresponded for 34 years, and several of their letters are still in the Hermitage Museum. Reichel also collected dresses worn by rural women in Estonia. The Danish National Museum could not compete with the museums of Great Powers that held key antiquities from Egypt, Greece and Rome. Instead, Thomsen and the National Museum collected such items of daily use [16]².

The more densely populated parts of Russia were not the main focus of ethnographic relations between Denmark and Russia. Rather, collaboration focused on exchange of ethnographic material from the far north. Thus, after the Danish explorer Knud Rasmussen terminated the 5th Thule Expedition covering Greenland and North America in 1924, the Danish National Museum received a large collection of Siberian clothing from Leningrad. The Danish expedition had intended to continue across the Bering Strait to Siberia, but the plan was aborted, and the gift from Leningrad compensated for that shortcoming (Hans Christian Gulløv, pers. comm.). The Danish National Museum also received two Samoyed masks and one Yakut mask from the Academy of Science in Leningrad. For about three months in 1936, the Russian ethnologist and linguist Alexandr Forshtein from Leningrad worked in the Arctic collections of the National Museum in Copenhagen [19]. In 1937, he was arrested along with other colleagues. Though sentenced to death, he was sent to a GULAG prison camp from where he was released in 1948. He never returned to scientific work, but a number of his photographs from Chukotka in Eastern Siberia have survived. These historical photographs recall aspects of a culture that came under political pressure to the point that it was almost forgotten by the native Yupik communities themselves [20]³.

Turning to the museum worlds as of today, what springs to mind is the appointment in April 2017 of the Danish anthropologist Rane Willerslev as the director of the National Museum [21]. Willerslev has done fieldwork among Siberian hunters. In 2007, he published *Soul Hunters: Hunting, Animism and Personhood among the Siberian Yukaghirs*, where he insists that one has to take the statements that hunters make about the spirit world at face value [22]. In effect, he seeks to bestow “cognitive justice” to the life-worlds of hunters inhabiting the long pre-agrarian dawn of human history by vicariously connecting with the spirits of the afterworld [23]⁴. Thus, Willerslev taps into the same tradition of holistic emphatic fieldwork in isolated areas that Forshtein and others pioneered. On a more mundane level, as detailed in Willerslev [25], he also faced Russian criminals when he sought ways to help the hunters obtain a fairer price for their sable furs.

² The collections of the National Museum in Copenhagen do include rare pieces of art, such as the only existing contemporary painting of Tsar Ivan IV [17; 18].

³ Thanks to Inge Marie Larsen and Hans Christian Gulløv for tracing this story.

⁴ The term “cognitive justice” was coined by Shiv Visvanathan [24, p. 25, note 1].

The National Museum, which Willerslev now heads, faces budget reductions similar to the cuts in university budgets explained above. Moreover, the museum has suffered a decline in the number of visitors. In response, Willerslev aims to make museums central to the self-understanding of visitors by opening up the museum to more engaging forms of participation for adults and children alike. Museums should foster wild ideas because human history itself is wild. Museums hold vast treasures of artefacts from the past in much the same way as the humanities and social sciences possess vast treasures of texts. The problem facing museums is how to make stored material come alive. How to make the public able to read, or decode, their cultural DNA? By combining the lived knowledge gained by anthropology with archeology, museums can bring to life the long history of humans, argues Willerslev [26]. He further asks:

And why is that so important? Why is it so important to know who we are and where we come from? Because having a “historical spine” gives us resilience. We are better able to stand upright when we meet globalization, refugee crises, and everything else that scares us today [27, p. 28, author’s translation].

Rane Willerslev does not explain exactly how knowing the past will make people more self-confident about the future and better able to deal with immigration. His twin brother, Eske Willerslev, who heads the project called “The Genomic History of Denmark” (<http://cfs.ku.dk/research-activities/researchprojects/the-genomic-history/>) is more explicit about how migration plays a positive role. In a functionalist vein, he argues that cultural contact fosters non-endogamous sexual relations widening the genetic base of a population, thereby making it more viable [28].

In the process of reinventing the museums, Rane Willerslev’s personality has become central. He has given umpteen interviews and has even become the centrepiece of a six-part TV-series called *Ranes Museum*, which details how he — “Denmark’s Indiana Jones” — muddles through to make museums the gateways to a deeper understanding of human cultural history in a style that is closer to reality-TV than to documentary television [27; 29]. In St. Petersburg, the *Kunstkamera*, which houses collections comparable to the National Museum in Copenhagen, retains some of the old school idea of a museum as a collection of curiosities. At the National Museum in Denmark, visitors may now press a “boredom button” to call forth an expert story-teller to unpack and explain the exhibits [30]. The *Kunstkamera* highlights the contribution of eccentric personalities, such as Yuri Knorozov who was crucial to the decipherment of the Maya script, but the *Kunstkamera* does not try to “tivolize”, i.e., commercialize, itself into the digital age. Even without a “boredom button”, visiting the *Kunstkamera*, and similar museums, remains *de rigueur* in St. Petersburg. Perhaps, the possibility of identification with the wild and exotic is what draws visitors to both museums.

Whether or not the Willerslev twins get it right or wrong when they translate lessons of the past into lessons for the present, I concur with them that museums, to be relevant, should produce engaging and reliable narratives about prehistoric tribal life as part of the even grander narrative of human evolution. Asian Studies should relate to the prehistoric past, grafting onto it the history of how the primitive societies were molded into the relatively stable states and civilizations that now cover most of Eurasia.

My second illustrative case looks closer at what drove the early history of modern Area Studies. Was it the quest for knowledge? This proposition goes back, at least, to the ep-

och of Enlightenment, when knowledge for knowledge's sake was identified and promoted as a common good. A possible example of such an endeavour occurred in 1761 when the Danish-Norwegian king, Frederick V, sent an expedition to Yemen. According to the German historian Jürgen Osterhammel, this expedition was truly driven by cosmopolitan curiosity and by respect for the Orient. It was as yet untainted by the imperial Orientalism and arrogance said to characterize the 19th century [31; 32]. However, other scholars deny that such undefiled scientific motivations drove the Royal Danish Arabia Expedition. Rather religion was the driver. In the 18th century, learned people in Europe believed that the study of contemporary Arabs would assist biblical exegesis. Southern nomadic Arabs had presumably kept their culture relatively intact since biblical times. Hence, a study of their culture would provide at key to understanding the bible [33]. The late Jonathan Hess, in turn, has argued that the motivation for the expedition was neither cosmopolitan curiosity, nor better biblical exegesis, but rather orientalist arrogance mixed with antisemitism. If the expedition was interested in contemporary Arab culture, it was because the person who conceived and framed the scientific program of the expedition, Johann David Michaelis from the university in Göttingen, wanted to deny German Jews citizenship rights with reference to their engrained inability to integrate [31, p. 121]. Michaelis looked at the contemporary Arabs to gain a perspective on the ancient Israelites. That view of the past, formed the base for his view on German Jews [34]. Hess's conclusion was made taking into consideration the entire oeuvre of Michaelis. If one takes into consideration solely the one hundred questions that Michaelis prepared for the expedition, the issue of antisemitism appears marginal or absent [35].

A comparable mix of pure and tainted, real and alleged motivations may be found in Area and Regional Studies today. Two motivations supporting such studies today are security perceptions and the possibilities of economic gain. Sometimes, the two are combined. A country like China may be feared, but, on the other hand, the same country offers seemingly endless economic opportunities. As mentioned above, the Confederation of Danish Industry has openly lobbied for language studies because such competence furthers business prospects. Political and military interests do not lobby as openly for Area or Language Studies, but any corner of the world could and should attract studious attention, if it affects national security. Acknowledging the legitimacy of all three drivers — political concerns, economic interests and the quest for knowledge — may seem academically blasphemous. Area Studies has often been accused of being a cover for security concerns. Instead of trying to deny this, one may take security concerns as legitimate concerns. Each country must have a critical mass of reliable specialists, who can analyze and contextualize threats and opportunities. Ignorance is not bliss. Knowledge is a common good, not least in times of information wars that build on systematic disinformation. Area and Regional Studies, including Asian Studies, helps to build cognitive resilience and a “historical spine”.

Most students of language and culture tend to specialize. Those who study China, do not study India, and vice versa. My third illustrative vignette seeks to make the argument that because Area Studies tends to be narrow and specific, it is important to maintain an eye for larger areas. This includes one's own. From a Nordic perspective, the entire Eurasia should be provincialized in a positive sense. Established disciplines, such as political science, routinely compare countries. Such functional knowledge based on systematic comparisons lends credence to generalizations, while the scarcity of such explicit functional knowledge within the humanities detracts from their credibility.

I would argue that the anchored, grounded and bounded knowledge that characterizes Area Studies should be augmented by what I will refer to as “Avian knowledge”. My idea of “Avian knowledge” stems from birdwatching. Contrary to what one might suspect, birdwatchers do not necessarily seek out lonely isolated places. Most birdwatchers, start birding where they live, but gradually they expand their area of operation to other parts of their country, neighbouring countries and outwards to distant locations in a geographical progression dependant on the availability of cheap air travel. They seek out the places likely to hold interesting and rare birds. As other birdwatchers do likewise, they meet up⁵. Over the years, good birders build up impressive field skills and an encyclopaedic knowledge based on observations of hundreds, or even thousands, of different bird species seen or heard locally, nationally, in the Western Palearctic, or across several biogeographical zones. In this way, birders create finely-textured, yet extensive, bodies of “Avian knowledge”, some of which can be transferred when, for example, knowledge gained to identify a bird in one place is redeployed to identify the same species in another place. Birders, thus, show a degree of fidelity to their home region, but also a degree of compulsively opportunistic, explorative, and even marauding behaviour. This calculated infidelity turns them into potential cosmopolitans. They appropriate wide expanses of space, honing their field skills and ticking off new species along the way, while interacting with other birders at impromptu open-air seminars at birding hot-spots across the globe.

By comparison, many area specialists remain focused on the smaller cultural area of their chosen specialization. They may be dismissive about their own country or region, and they may not try to familiarize themselves with affairs across the entire Eurasian space. As a countermeasure, I suggest area specialists should cultivate a higher degree of “Avian knowledge”. To make knowledge avian as well as grounded, each researcher must cover more in order to connect the dots. This is also important to control the bias that Area Studies generates. Anyone who has spent decades studying a particular place is likely to be biased in favour of this place, whether the person was born there or not. In addition, political preferences associated with one’s chosen field of study may distort analysis. “Avian knowledge” counteracts this natural inclination to myopia, which is especially counterproductive in narrow academic fields with few escape routes for non-conformists⁶. The humanities may not have methods enabling controlled experiments, but redundancy in cultural meaning extends over large civilizational expanses. By cultivating a broader geographical perspective, scholars in the humanities should be able to navigate space and time with a better sense of proportion.

Sanjay Subrahmanyam, and before him Christopher Bayly, are among the historians who have approached Asia or Eurasia in this vein. Avoiding the term “global history”, Bayly used the term “transnational history” about his work. Subrahmanyam [38, p. 24] uses the term “connected history” about his work which aims “to tear down the compartmentalization between national histories and ‘cultural areas’” [39]. His is a flu-

⁵ I thank Alexander Matveev for drawing my attention to *The Magus* by John Fowles, where birdwatching is (wrongly) associated with living in “vast fir forests” in “pure Strindbergian melancholia” [36, chapter 44].

⁶ In recent years, the field of Arab and Islamic Studies has been particularly intensively patrolled. Tina Maggaard is perhaps the clearest Danish example of a scholar of Islam, who has been sidelined and silenced by her peers for her politically incorrect “Islamophobic” findings [37].

id multiverse that blurs the sharp edges. Where Samuel Huntington was able to glean global trends from his cursory reading of the history of civilizations, Subrahmanyam's much deeper reading of the same histories delivers fewer conclusions distilled for take away. Subrahmanyam does not want to produce a global narrative. He moves "laterally" [39, p. 14], and he is scornful of Huntington, who appears in his text for "comic relief" [38, p. 22]. Such *besserwissen* apart, Subrahmanyam's manner of doing "Avian history" has many merits, some of which surface in recent Nordic scholarship. For example, in 2017 a group of Danish historians and anthropologists published five volumes of Danish colonial history set in the contexts of Greenland, West Africa, the West Indies and India with one volume about Denmark itself [40]. These ethnographically rich volumes succeed in thickening the webs of knowledge by connecting the dots of disparate histories into a greater narrative that moves "laterally" back and forth across the continents.

Prospects

The historian Richard Eaton (pers. comm.) once remarked that "any department or discipline whose last name is 'studies' is in trouble." I am affiliated with a small non-teaching institution called the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies or NIAS. According to Eaton's dictum, the prospects of NIAS are bleak.

NIAS was created in 1968 by the Nordic Council of Ministers to add weight to Asian Studies. Its first director, Søren Egerod, was a sinologist with a broad interest in the humanities. The institute was initially known as the Central Institute of Asian Studies or CINA, an acronym that betrayed a bias in favor of China. This bias was later rectified, but the focus has remained on East Asia and to some extent Southeast Asia. South Asia and Central Asia have remained under-prioritized, and the Middle East was never seriously considered a part of Asia.

In 1986, towards the end of Egerod's rather autocratic reign, an evaluation carried out by the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth and others recommended that CINA should no longer have a small permanently employed staff, but instead host many visitors and fellows on the pattern of the Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala in Sweden [41]. For a period, NIAS became more of a post-doctoral think tank, and currently it has become more of a service institution with close to zero salaried researchers. NIAS now offers stipends to students from Nordic countries, provides database access to 26 Nordic universities, arranges conferences, coordinates a range of Asia-related activities with e.g. the Asian Dynamics Initiative, and houses the NIAS press. Throughout its existence, NIAS has been hosted by the University of Copenhagen, but it has shifted physically from the humanities to the social science campus, signalling a shift away from classical studies and archeology to contemporary Asia. In 2015, an evaluation by NordForsk recommended that NIAS

"...undertake a strategic overhaul aiming at identifying a few (2-3) strategic research orientations that combine the strengths of Nordic research with emerging public debates and trends in Asian societies to be developed in a comparative perspective between Europe and Asia. Examples could be welfare and care, social cohesion, governance, culture and identity, gender, media and communication" [42, p. 4]

The evaluation further observed that:

“NIAS’s new research priorities should be of contemporary relevance, while retaining their anchorage in a deep-seated historical, linguistic and cultural context. Rather than NIAS shifting from the humanities to the social sciences, we recommend that it uses its historical strength to bridge the humanities and the social sciences.” [42, p. 10].

These creditworthy recommendations have not yet been fully turned into reality with the result that the economic base of NIAS has been eroded. On 10 April 2018, the Nordic Council was to decide whether to phase out its economic support to NIAS and three other institutions over the period 2020–23 [43]. The Nordic Council, however, postponed making a decision. It would seem that some of these institutions with names that end in “studies”- endure despite the odds.

In pursuance of the arguments that I have made above, I will, therefore, conclude this survey by reiterating that any institution engaged in Asian Studies should be expected, among other tasks, to generate reliable, unbiased, relevant, grounded knowledge about Asia, as well as wider and wilder “Asian knowledge” that eschews formulaic scholarship, but remains open to Grand Narratives, and which thickens the web of knowledge that any country, or group of countries, must cultivate in order to retain a degree of cognitive resilience in the face of ignorance and misinformation. Such finely-grained intensive and extensive knowledge is universally important as Asian Studies move from biblical exegesis and comparative philology to Area Studies and Cross-Cultural Studies⁷.

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⁷ For a detailed and vivid account of early Nordic studies in Arabic and Persian sources, see Eggen [44].

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Азиатские исследования в Северной Европе: состояние, актуальность, перспективы

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Статья посвящена истории, актуальному состоянию и перспективам азиатских исследований в Скандинавском регионе. Отправной точкой исследования можно считать инцидент недавнего закрытия нескольких языковых дисциплин в Копенгагенском университете Дании. В статье рассматриваются азиатские исследования в Швеции, Норвегии, Финляндии и Исландии с учетом университетского финансирования, предпочтений студентов и сотрудничества с правительствами стран Азии. Кроме того, затронут вопрос об актуальности азиатских исследований в регионе: проанализированы три иллюстративные «виньетки», касающиеся образовательной роли музеев в Дании и России, уязвимые общества Крайнего Севера, разнообразные предпосылки для экспедиции Королевства Дании в Аравию в XVIII в., вопрос о полезности обширного паневразийского знания, которое развивают орнитологи. Утверждается идея о том, что, культивируя частные и общие знания о прошлом и настоящем, исследователи Азиатского региона могут противодействовать истощению и искажению знаний, а также вносить свой вклад в развитие различных экономических и политических интересов.

Ключевые слова: азиатские исследования, региональные исследования, изучение языков, Северная Европа, Дания, Норвегия, Швеция, Финляндия, Исландия, Россия, Сибирь, финансирование университетов, музеи.

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