The European Alliance for Asian Studies is a co-operative platform of European institutions specialising in the study of Asia. The aim of the Alliance, established in 1997, is bringing together the varied competences and expertise on Asia and Asian Studies found in Europe, strengthening this rich and unique tapestry of academic endeavour found in this region. The Alliance, moreover, facilitates a multi-level communication channel between its members, while it sets out to raise public awareness on the scholarly excellence they offer to the benefit of their constituencies on national and transnational environments.

The Alliance represents a community of institutions sharing a desire for transparency, collegiality and solidarity beyond national, institutional or disciplinary boundaries. It encourages collaborations, synergies and intellectual emulation among European academic institutions involved in Asian Studies and in collaboration with partners from Asia and the rest of the world.

The Alliance seeks to build high-quality border-transcending research, teaching and public services, including scholarly networks within Europe and beyond. It also encourages linkage between academic and non-academic actors, aiming to develop a model of how Asian studies in European academia could respond to political, economic and heuristic shifts and contexts.

The Alliance is not intended to merge the respective institutions, or blur their individual strengths, but rather to provide a framework for cooperation. Partners in the Alliance use the plurality of approaches, expertise and connectivities present in the network to strengthen research, teaching, collaboration and outreach.

Such a dynamic network works on various scales of expertise: (1) institutions based on policy-oriented research and competence; (2) institutions that seek to apply their Asian expertise beyond single locations and university frameworks, and (3) institutions combining research and teaching Asian Studies with an emphasis on humanistic and linguistic knowledge.

Members of the Alliance

As of 1 July 2019, the European Alliance for Asian Studies includes:

– the Centre for Asian and Transcultural Studies (CATS), Heidelberg;
– the Center for East Asian Studies at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (CEAO);
– the Centre for South and East Asian Studies (CESEAS), Lund University;
– the Department of Asian Studies, Radboud University, Nijmegen;
– the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne;
– the Faculty of Economics, University of Coimbra;
– the Institute of Global and Area Studies (IGIAS), Lund University;
– the Institute of Global and Area Studies (IGIAS), Hamburg;
– the Groupement d'Intérêt Scientifique Études Asiatiques (GIS Réseaux Asia), Paris;
– the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), Leiden;
– the Institut Roman de Studi Euro-Asiaitic (RRSEA), Bucharest;
– the Institute of the Middle and Far East, Jagiellonian University, Krakow;
– the Institute of Studies on Asia, University of Turin;
– the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIA), Copenhagen;
– the School of Oriental and African Studies, London;
– the Universität degli Studi di Napoli ‘L’Orientale’;
– the University of Vienna.

T he article below introduces the main research foci of the two projects and the institutional networks involved, inaugurates a regional section in The Newsletter that will be devoted to the research activities carried out by members of the EASS, and emphasizes the contribution offered by the University of Naples ‘L’Orientale’ within this framework.

Trends in historical research

Recent decades have seen the emergence of different trends of scholarship that are radically changing our understanding of the premodern history of South and South-East Asia, a macro-region that has important economic, political and cultural ties starting from the fourth century CE. The multiple paradigm shifts perhaps lies in the acknowledgement, as straightforward as it has been controversial, that history and a historical consciousness also existed in those areas before the colonial era, and that ancient and medieval textual traditions in India and South-East Asian languages, in whatever literary form they come, can and must also be studied as historical sources, even though we have nothing that closely resembles the genre of historiography as it has been defined in the European scholarly tradition. As Daud Ali wrote in 2012, such a premise—namely that what we call ‘medieval India’ (roughly the sixth to the fourteenth century) has a tradition of historical writing—would have been “barely thinkable just fifty years ago”.

The academic study of such history started more than 150 years ago, mainly with the pioneering efforts of mid-nineteenth century scholars who embarked on an enterprise to survey, collect and publish the voluminous bodies of inscriptions from that vast geographic area that Pollock has recently called the “Sanskrit cosmopolis,” which spans twelve modern countries in South and South-East Asia and encompasses a wide range of regional languages. Inscriptions from these areas are often the primary if not the sole means to investigate the history of the institutions, administration and economic systems of the medieval states, as well as the their processes of state formation. Yet scholars are still far from achieving an adequate comprehension of these factors, which have often been disregarded in light of the greater emphasis that has traditionally been placed on the study of the philosophical, literary and doctrinal facets of these cultures. Moreover, the objective difficulties encountered in the surveying and editing of inscriptions—due to their number,
The DHARMA and SHIVADHARMA projects

Hinging and expanding on these trends in research, the SHIVADHARMA and DHARMA projects are at present the vehicles of one of the histories of medieval inscriptions in many languages and regional traditions, the emergence of which can be observed as one of the main cultural phenomena of medieval and early modern times. Since this is a ‘Synergy’ project, which means that it involves a cooperation between various European institutions (cf. infra for details), researchers involved in the framework of the DHARMA project aims to be broad not only in scope, but also in terms of the quantity and diversity of the primary materials examined, and the expertise involved. The historical question of the origins of religious communities concern the complex interplay of state, society and religious institutions in the period spanning from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries in selected regions of South and South-East Asia. In order to tackle this issue, the project will focus on the emergence of ‘Hindu’ ecclesiastical foundations known in Sanskrit as Shrāmanas and mathas, monastic establishments that also evolved into centres that offered services to the community and participated in the administration of local revenues. The research encompasses the study of Brahminical settlements and the patronage offered by elites for the foundation and maintenance of these institutions. While the various primary sources considered in this study, inscriptions play a major role, both because these contain the most reliable information on the subject, and because one of the aims of the project is that of collecting, editing, translating and publishing a database called the ‘DHARMA-base’, broad corpora of inscriptions in medieval South and South-East Asia in order to render more available and easily searchable a body of primary materials that is still very patchily published, if not completely inaccessible. The testimony of inscriptions is matched with that of various other sources, including texts written in the local languages, art-historical sources, literary and historical inscriptions, and the contents of other primary as well as secondary sources.

The DHARMA project is a five-year Starting Grant project (December 2018 to November 2023) awarded to Florinda De Simini of the University of Naples ‘L'Orientale’. This research project set at one point or another to all of the transmitted texts available from this area, as the first generation of scholars focused predominantly on the impressive bulk of Shaiva literature, being chiefly concerned with the spread of a normative literature addressed to the framework of the SHIVADHARMA project, is some cases are still alive today and continue to and cultural elites—it adapted to the local and early modern times, and its study offers to the Śivadharma in the Tamil-speaking South, as well as on the Śivakarti tradition of these sources. The dissemination of EFEQO centres in South and South-East Asia also makes it possible for the DHARMA project to extend its network beyond the European consortium and expand its field of research in Indonesia, and with the EFEQO centres of Siem Reap and Jakarta as the core coordinators, and the support of the archaeological research planned in those areas. The DHARMA project is also involved in the DHARMA project in order to conduct research on texts, inscriptions and iconography with a focus on Tamil Nadu and South-Asia. Besides the institutionalized networks, countless cooperation agreements are planned for both projects with scholars affiliated with various other centres (such as Leiden, Oxford, Tokyo, Paris, Kyoto), which will allow for the integration of various types of expertise and reinforce ties between centres and scholars.

Future challenges

The recent experiences of these and other projects indicate that, in the contemporary academic milieu, collaborative research on textual materials is a viable option for pursuing ambitious scholarly achievements and attracting consistent grants. Future challenges include the question that Asian studies — and the Humanities in general — is an allotted in university departments and a research area in which it is difficult to join forces and cooperate on innovative research projects is one strategy that is helping us to stem the rise of this new phenomenon. This phenomenon is one that, super-institutional organizations such as the EAA, which try to address and coordinate research in political trends in Asian studies, can thus substantially contribute to creating fruitful connections and arrangements that will benefit the field.

Another idea that lies at the core of these two projects is that of a European network of centres, and which has both scholarly and institutional repercussions, is that we have to raise resources to support the DHARMA project in order to conduct research on texts, inscriptions and cultural objects accessible solely through online means, while also focusing on regional and South-East Asia in order to render more complete the study of Brahminical settlements and the patronage offered by elites for the foundation and maintenance of these institutions. While the various primary sources considered in this study, inscriptions play a major role, both because these contain the most reliable information on the subject, and because one of the aims of the project is that of collecting, editing, translating and publishing a database called the ‘DHARMA-base’, broad corpora of inscriptions in medieval South and South-East Asia in order to render more available and easily searchable a body of primary materials that is still very patchily published, if not completely inaccessible. The testimony of inscriptions is matched with that of various other sources, including texts written in the local languages, art-historical sources, literary and historical inscriptions, and the contents of other primary as well as secondary sources.