

## FINAL REPORT

### AN OVERVIEW OF ASIAN STUDIES IN THE RAE

As a result of the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise the Asian Studies Panel awarded ten grades of four or above to thirteen institutions. This at first sight would appear to suggest a gratifying improvement in the standard of Asian Studies as compared with the 1996 RAE, when only twelve institutions made submissions to the panel. A closer look certainly reveals that once more work of international distinction was very widely spread throughout the institutions involved, and indeed this time we were impressed by a number of studies of quite remarkable excellence: an incomplete sample list is attached to this report as an appendix. But a disturbing number of problems also have become apparent.

First, the increase in the number of institutions submitting disguises a more complex pattern, involving not only progress but also retreat. In 1992 nine institutions with roots in Asian Studies mostly dating back to the last academic review of our subject area forty years ago were joined by one institution with a background as a polytechnic. In 1996 a further two such institutions made submissions. This time one of those institutions did not make a second submission, while the other showed evidence of considerable organisational progress.

One consequence has been that South Asian Studies have made a certain advance, with teaching and research in a modern South Asian language – thanks largely to a split appointment – now present in four centres instead of only two. Teaching and research in more than one modern South Asian language, by contrast, only takes place in one centre, where a pattern of gains and losses has itself become apparent in recent years.

Another consequence of the changes since 1996 is that research and teaching in the language of the largest Muslim society on the planet, which threatened perhaps to reach the same level as Egyptology (three centres) still lags behind. In fact South East Asian Studies is now less well established as a whole in terms of centres of research and teaching than was envisaged forty years ago. The sole surviving provincial centre will, we understand, still be subject to threat despite its fine showing in our 2001 exercise. We consider it very important that this national resource be maintained, even if some scheme of redeployment becomes necessary.

It is moreover not possible to tell whether the two new submissions in this RAE will in future result in stable teams capable of supporting long-term advances in our studies. At present they shelter a total of only three researchers, one in Chinese Studies, one in Chinese Religious Studies and one in South Asian Religious Studies. Even the 1992 newcomer has developed an excellent research profile in no small part because of the strength of a single scholar's work. In Asian Studies infrastructural elements, such as library provision in Asian languages, are necessarily difficult to build up. So a policy of committing a minimum number of staff and then waiting to see which new ventures will either sink or swim seems inherently wasteful, as well as disheartening to those concerned.

Secondly, as non-UK experts have made clear, the aggregation of culturally and linguistically entirely unrelated subjects under the single heading of Asian Studies often disguises considerable disparities between the state of these subjects even within one institution. These disparities in 2001 have not amounted to more than one rating grade of difference (as the verdicts of these experts confirm) so we have been unable to flag them. But frequently when other factors - such as the age profiles within very small groups of researchers - are taken into account, some very alarming patterns again become apparent. In Scotland, for example, solid international excellence is largely confined to a third of the researchers submitted, who are senior figures mostly concentrated in a single subject area. One of the subject areas in Asian Studies is entirely absent in Scotland; no subject area there can be counted on as secure for the foreseeable future. As a national picture, the situation in Scotland is less than reassuring.

Thirdly, the aggregation of statistics across unrelated subjects also disguises some important trends in the United Kingdom as a whole. It would appear that one feature of the 2001 exercise has been the amount of caution displayed by many institutions in submitting research. The desire for higher ratings has caused the exclusion of researchers whose publications were of an uncertain quality, leading to some diminution in the overall numbers involved. Here Asian Studies would appear to be in line with overall trends. But we suspect that this is only because of the considerable support given by the

Funding Councils since 1996 to Modern Chinese Studies, and that there has been a corresponding decline in research in Japanese Studies. This is intrinsically quite plausible: a famous Chinese philosopher once said that education was like supporting a drunk down a street – prop him up on one side, and he falls down on another. But we have no means of confirming this beyond our own count of work read – the funding statistics provided, for example, give no clues whatsoever what specific areas between Karachi, East Timor and Sakhalin are attracting financial support, nor (except in the broadest terms) from whom.

An optimist would say that there must have been research (including, one would hope, good research) which we did not see, because it was carried out in departments other than those submitting under Asian Studies. The system of cross-referrals, however, did not work as well as expected to bring such work to light. We are convinced that this research would make a significant contribution to the full picture of Asian Studies in British universities, were one to be composed. But we do feel that the departments whose work we read, responsible as they are for most of the language training essential to good research in our field, provide for better or worse the backbone to our current efforts at understanding Asia.

Here, however, a fourth problem becomes apparent. For in Asian Studies by far the largest category of research support is simply indicated as coming from overseas. Without this income, it is doubtful whether Asian Studies in the United Kingdom could in any sense meet the minimum level to support diplomatic and commercial activity to the degree that is currently required. Yet support from overseas is subject to political and other vagaries quite beyond the control of anyone in the United Kingdom at all. We do not even know at the moment just what types of bias in our research priorities this may have created. This would not normally be crude, politically overt bias, to be sure, though some rumours on this matter do circulate, but rather more subtle deformations of research agendas away from topics deemed to be harmful to good form in international relations.

True, Asian Studies do not lack for support derived from British taxpayers, either. The United Kingdom can even boast one metropolitan institution that has been in recent years carefully monitored so that it has succeeded in maintaining a world class reputation. In this way such a wealth of human and material resources has been concentrated in one place that the nation's view of the wider world has become patently vulnerable to hostile action. Any dispersal of existing resources would help no one, but the equally careful nourishing of a far broader base of expertise in Asian Studies could perhaps produce a society whose awareness of Asian cultures and their worldviews would not rely on a small cadre of predominantly metropolitan researchers. What might be the costs and benefits? Such issues, however important, cannot even be debated as yet, since existing statistics tell us so little about vital matters of detail.

Fifthly, the broad brush approach to something termed 'Asian Studies' does nothing to illuminate the considerable strains and tensions within a number of subject areas which, despite the low numbers of researchers, are just as complex as those represented by full panels. Chinese Studies, for example, has been singled out for special support since 1996, but still has not achieved the level of representation in British academic life reached by Russian Studies forty years ago. There seems to be no rationale for this, and again selective support for one aspect of the subject has created problems just as severe as those of balance between different subject areas. Classical Chinese is a language in far greater contemporary use than Latin: it is of immediate commercial importance to historians of art, and remains, for example, the dominant liturgical language of the whole of East Asia. Yet it is difficult to find a researcher under forty that specialises in this subject, and most are so far in advance of that age as to threaten the continuation of its teaching in the United Kingdom over the longer term. Similar imbalances may be found in other subject areas, sometimes in even more extreme forms, yet only detailed consideration of the situation subject area by subject area will reveal them. The collective labours of nine panellists whose subject areas are largely unknown to each other, and who cannot even find room at all as yet for representatives of such important areas as Korean Studies, will not.

In short, we cannot see in principle why our different subjects are denied recognition by separate panels like Russian or Italian. Surely Asian Studies, on the analogy of European Studies or American Studies, should be reserved for subjects involving cultural or political interaction within Asia, and other perspectives broader than those based on a single culture. Even then, China or South Asia as cultural areas are more populous than and just as deep-rooted historically as Europe taken as a whole, to say nothing of America. The obvious answer is that there are too few researchers nationally to support

separate panels. But why is that? Why are there so few departments nationally in these subject areas? Because in times past they were considered to related to places too far away and exotic, if not actually too culturally inferior, to merit attention. But the far away and exotic can impinge on all our lives quite dramatically at any time now. In an age of jetliners and satellite telephones, nowhere is far away. Numbers remain small because we have not been given a level playing field; the free publicity of teaching in compulsory education has been denied us. Let every secondary school be obliged to teach a non-European language, as they are obliged to teach technology or business-related topics, and matters would be very different. Our education system would for the first time be calibrated to cope with the world as it is, not as past imperialisms sought to re-fashion it.

We deliberately bring our overview of the current situation to a point well beyond our remit, or those of the Funding Councils. Yet none of our work makes sense without contemplation of this bigger picture. And the world in which we live is clearly a dangerous place. Before September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the United States spend untold billions on defensive measures, including millions if not billions on intelligence. Yet educating enough people to read what they had decoded in Arabic or Farsi was assigned a low priority - too low, as it turned out. If we are not prepared to pay for education - and we do not deny that education in Asian Studies is expensive - we may incur other costs, less quantifiable but certainly not more bearable. Surely the time is right to look at our studies more carefully than the scope of the RAE allows.

#### APPENDIX: SOME EXAMPLES OF GOOD RESEARCH

The following items culled from those submitted to us were amongst those noted in the process of assessment as particularly significant, but the list is by no means exhaustive. Much good and useful work was done even in areas such as South East Asian Studies where no work was singled out for special praise. Younger researchers in some areas, such as Japanese Studies, made good progress in getting substantial works into print, even if they did not achieve the impact of books by more experienced scholars. Occasionally, however, the first publication of a young researcher showed such definite signs of promise that we considered their work worthy of mention. Two members of our own panel will find their work listed below – in both cases their fellow panel members, unbeknownst to them, considered that their publications could not be ignored simply because they were of our number.

John Brockington: *The Sanskrit Epics*

Anna Dallapiccola: *Sculpture at Vijayanagara* (with A. Verghese)

Susan Daruvala: *Zhou Zuoren and an alternative Chinese response to modernity*

Glen Dudbridge: *Religious experience and lay society in T'ang China*

Peter Kornicki: *The book in Japan*

Mark Lewis: *Writing and authority in early China*

James McMullen: *Idealism, protest and the tale of Genji*

Lucy Rubenstein: *The Devotional Poetry of Svami Haridas*

John Smith: *The electronic text of the Mahabharata*

Chloe Starr: "Shifting boundaries: gender in *Pinhua Baojian*", *NanNu* 12.1 (1999)

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