

Asia – Europe Foundation (ASEF)

Improving mobility between European and Asian cultural practitioners
through encounters and information

Background

Historically, the principal obstacle to collaboration between European cultural practitioners and their Asian based counterparts has been a lack of information about each other and the relatively high costs of travel between the two continents. However, interest in engagement between European and Asian practitioners has noticeably increased in the past decade or so, not simply on grounds of mutual curiosity, but because of the greater economic importance and profile of several Asian countries.

The desirability of promoting better understanding between the peoples of Europe and Asia was recognised in the establishment of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) by the Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) of 15 EU and 10 Asian countries in 1997. Based in Singapore, ASEF's role is to strengthen intellectual, cultural and educational people-to-people contact. It now comprises 45 partners: the 27 EU Member States, 10 ASEAN countries (Association of South-East Asian Nations) and the ASEAN Secretariat, plus China, Japan, Korea, India, Pakistan and Mongolia.

ASEF's main areas of interest include intercultural dialogue and cultural exchange. In the promotion of cultural exchange it has focussed on youth arts exchanges, networking among cultural professionals, and dialogue on cultural policy and heritage. Three main programme areas have been developed to promote and strengthen cultural co-operation and mobility between Asia and Europe: cultural dialogue and heritage; cultural industries; and creativity in the performing and visual arts. It promotes these through organising or facilitating *conferences* (e.g. on Cultural Policy in Asia and Europe, held in Bangkok in June 2004), *seminars* (e.g. on the mobility of Asian and European artists at the 1st ASEM Arts Promotion Agency meeting in Singapore in November 2003), *workshops* (e.g. Pointe to Point 4th Asia-Europe Dance Forum, held in Warsaw in November-December 2006) and the building of *networks* (e.g. ASEMUS, the Asia-Europe Museum Network).

How it works

ASEF's cultural grants programme is primarily intended to support multilateral programmes for exchange. Mobility is encouraged through ASEF's young artists exchange programmes (e.g. in dance, music, photography, etc.). Support may also be provided via travel assistance to enable cultural professionals to attend network events (e.g. 26 delegates from Asia to attend the RES ARTIS meeting of representatives of artist residencies/ artist run spaces held in Berlin in September-October 2005), or workshops (e.g. five artists from Europe to attend the 'Fixing the Bridge' workshop on artists initiatives organised in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in December 2003), or the staff exchange pilot programme between European and Asian cultural centres in Shanghai and Berlin in 2005. In the delivery of projects, ASEF generally works with other funding partners, especially in the countries in which events are taking place. These might be governments, national cultural institutes, foundations, academia or cultural organisations.

Generally, ASEF's activities arise either as a result of proposals submitted to it by governments, organisations and networks, etc. or on the basis of in-house run initiatives. Whether reactive or proactive, any initiative has to be approved by the ASEF Board of Governors, which meets once or twice a year. In theory, Asia-Europe projects are open to participants with relevant experience from any of the ASEM member nations, though in practice the numbers from any single country will be limited to ensure the broadest possible geographical spread. In some cases participants will be nominated by

government officials, in others involvement may be on the basis of invitation. Participation will also be subject to ensuring there are sufficient funds (or funding sources) to cover travel and associated costs.

The need for instruments to improve information to facilitate contact and mobility between Asian and European cultural practitioners and organisations has emerged as an issue in several ASEF conferences and seminars in recent years. While Europe now has a complex ecology of online and offline cultural information sources that can be accessed by European professionals, the cultural information landscape in Asia has been relatively weak. However, there has also been a noticeable lack of awareness by European professionals of their counterparts in Asia. In December 2003, at the ASEM Conference on Culture and Civilisation in Beijing, a suggestion was made to create a cultural information portal that would link Europe and Asia. Subsequently in 2005, ASEF, in conjunction with the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts, Singapore, initiated a series of preparatory meetings of cultural policymakers, artists and networks to consider the content and scope of such a portal (1). They were assisted by research on cultural information sources in Europe and Asia and the technical potential of a portal (2). The findings of these meetings was presented to the 2nd meeting of ASEM Culture Ministers, held in Paris in June 2005, which agreed to further investigation on the potential of a cultural information portal. In doing so, ministers recognised that sustained communication between European and Asian cultural professionals is essential for the promotion of cultural diversity.

Results

The fruits of ASEF's research have been under development for some two and a half years with the aim of achieving a multi-disciplinary web-based instrument on contemporary arts in the ASEM countries that would serve as a gateway for the greater mobility of artists and policymakers. The result is called *Culture 360*, a new information portal that was given its first soft launch in Ljubljana, Slovenia, on 15th May 2008 in the framework of the Spring Plenary Meeting of IETM (International network for contemporary performing arts) which had been involved in the development dialogue. This provided an opportunity to discuss how new technologies and international communication platforms can contribute to mobility and other challenges faced by the performing arts. The second soft launch of Culture 360 took place on 19th May 2008 in Seoul, Korea, at the Asian Performing Arts Forum and it was officially launched in June 2008. Culture 360 also launched in 2008 "Wiki Collaborations", a method for professionals to exchange information and develop project ideas with others.

ASEF's programmes have enhanced awareness and facilitated contact between artists, curators, managers, policymakers and other cultural professionals in Asia and Europe. They have also enabled emerging young creators or young people at the start of their career to collaborate e.g. via initiatives such as the periodic I'm PULSE programme of the Asia-Europe Music Camp series. There are creative and intercultural benefits here and ASEF encourages participants in such encounters to continue post-event networking.

ASEF has begun to develop productive working relationships with European cultural networks e.g. Artfactories and Trans Europe Halles in a workshop on Independent Creative Art Spaces Leadership Training, held in Paris in October 2007.

The budget for the cultural programmes of ASEF in 2006 (April-December) was 1 million Singapore Dollars; in 2007 (January-December) it was 1.1 million SGD and 2008 (January-December) it is 1.4 million SGD (NB 1 Euro= 2.10 SGD in August 2008); a similar sum has been budgeted for 2009. More than 3 000 artist/practitioners have taken part in ASEF programmes since 1998, see table below:

Table 1: Number of Alumni at Cultural Exchange Events, FY1998 - CY2008

Pillar	FY98	FY99	FY2000	FY01	FY02	FY03	FY04	FY05	FY06	CY06 ¹	CY07	CY08 ²	Total
Young Artists' Exchange	0	0	36	41	61	48	75	138	131	37	116	29	712
Process-Oriented Platforms for Exchange*	0	174	130	44	80	149	261	173	149	34	80	96	1370
Dialogue On Policy and Culture	110	154	190	52	166	45	100	127	0**	0	0	0	944
Culture360: An Asia-Europe Cultural Portal***	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	25	21	47	0	10	103
Total	110	328	356	137	307	242	436	463	301	118	196	135	3129

Notes: FY refers to Financial Year 1 April to 31 March;

¹ CY06 refers to Calendar Year 1 April to 31 December 2006;

² CY08 refers to Calendar Year 1 January to 30 June 2008;

* Process Oriented Platforms: SEA -Images and Culture -ASEF till Mid 2009.

** Due to budget cut, no project was held in FY2006, CY2006 & CY2007;

*** First project was held in FY2005;

Given the financial constraints under which ASEF continues to operate, it may be the area of accessible information that holds the key to advancing mobility between the two continents. The hope is that Culture 360 will grow to become a comprehensive portal that enhances opportunities for cultural professionals in Europe and Asia to engage with one another. Certainly, it has the potential to reach a greater number of professionals than those who have been directly involved in ASEF's conferences, seminars and workshops, important though they may be. Culture 360 will complement two specialist online platforms that ASEF already supports: Culture-ASEF, an information system for the visual arts (<http://www.culture-asef.org/>), and the SEA-Images website (<http://sea-images.asef.org>) on cinema, film production and distribution organisations etc. launched in 2004 to improve Asia-Europe film co-operation. Meeting the travel costs arising from the great distances between the two continents is likely to remain an obstacle to mobility, but at least ASEF actions have begun to facilitate greater engagement, especially at the level of young creators.

Sources

Email correspondence with Katelijn Verstraete, ASEF

Various issues of *ASEF news* and ASEF's Annual Reports;

Culture 360 website: <http://www.culture360.org>;

Author's experience organising contributing to, providing research for, or editing a report on, three ASEF projects in 2003, 2004 and 2005

Notes:

- (1) Three of the team members in the present ERICarts study on Mobility of Cultural Professionals in Europe – Ritva Mitchell, Rod Fisher and Andreas Wiesand – were participants in one or more of these preparatory meetings.
- (2) Rod Fisher was the co-author (with Lidia Varbanova) of a mapping paper of cultural information sources in Europe commissioned by ASEF for these meetings.

Author

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