

Interview of Kauko Laitinen (高歌)

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Laitinen: Professor Chen, you are asking about my family background. I come from a small town of Kangasniemi located in Central Finland. There my ancestors had been cultivators of land and forest for generations. My wife Akemi comes from a completely different cultural background, from Tokyo where her family had lived already for three generations or so, after moving there from other parts of Japan. We have one son, Aki, and one daughter, Minna.

Chen: And your school was in your hometown?

L: Yes, I went to elementary school there in 1958 and to middle school four years later, in 1962. At that time it was pretty rare to go to middle school in the Finnish countryside, in fact I was the only one in my class to proceed to middle school.

C: So you were the best at your school and that allowed you to go further?

L: No, I wasn't. There was simply no atmosphere of competition in my elementary school. I suppose it very much depended on the parents if they wanted their children to continue to middle school. It turned out that my father had himself decided, not really consulting me, that I should get some schooling. Despite my reluctance I somehow passed the entrance exam to the 5-year middle school. I continued to rebel for two more years until I finally decided to accept my fate and began to take studying seriously. After middle school I continued to the local 3-year high school which I graduated in 1970. Now it was the time to move to a big city, Helsinki, and start my studies at the University of Helsinki, Faculty of Social Sciences. My major was international relations and three years later, when still amidst my studies, I got a grant to go to the United States. There was a small college in Columbia, Maryland, called Dag Hammarskjöld college named after the 2nd secretary-general of the United Nations. We had a lively community of international students and teachers there. By coincidence I shared a dormitory room with a Japanese student, Kunio Tatsuta. Originally I had planned to write my MA thesis for University of Helsinki on the voting patterns in the general assembly of the UN during my year in America. I even got an opportunity to visit the UN and make interviews there. On the other hand, Japan was already known as an economic miracle and through my roommate I became even more interested in Japan. I joined a course led by Professor Mikio Kanda which included a one-month fieldwork trip to Japan in February 1973. Like most first-time visitors to Japan, I was fascinated by the beauty of the country and the friendliness of its people. And not only that, Kanda-sensei used his excellent connections with Japanese academics and

politicians to organize joint meetings with them— one of the highlights was a meeting with the prime minister Takeo Miki. During the fieldwork I came to realize that in order to understand Japan well, one first had to familiarize with China's history and culture, which so strongly had influenced Japan already during the Sui and Tang dynasties. So that's how I became interested in China. Luckily I later got opportunities to study in both China and in Japan.

C: Where in China did you study?

L: In 1975 I got a Finnish government scholarship for study at Beijing Language Institute (北京語言學院). It was an interesting time to go to China, as – according to the view at that time - the Cultural Revolution had ended just a few years earlier in 1969. Only after Mao's death it was decided in China, that decade from 1966 to 1976 was all Cultural Revolution. Nowadays many people in the West and also in China have the view that all of China was in similar chaos for the whole decade, while in fact the years 1966-1969 were the worst. So when I got a scholarship to go to China, I dared not tell my parents that it was for three years, as they still had the news of the late 1960s chaos in China in memory. So I only told them I would be away for just one year. After the first year I sent them a letter telling: "Good news - I have got a one-year extension to my China scholarship!" They already sort of accepted it and one year later I again told them: "Wonderful news again! One more year extension!". In fact the Ministry of Education that granted the scholarships said that they were not sending anyone to China for one year only - Chinese was considered to be such a difficult a language that one should stay there for three years. So, I stayed three years in China: after the first year at the Beijing Language Institute, I moved to Peking University studying Chinese ancient history there. My third year as a student I spent at Nanjing University learning modern and contemporary history.

C: In Chinese or in English?

L: All courses were in Chinese. Of course it was tough, but I had already been studying Chinese language for one year at Beijing Language Institute and even before going to China I had taken Chinese one year as a hobby here at the University of Helsinki; there were already lecturers here sent by China at that time. Although I had a very good teacher in Helsinki, professor Zheng Dexin, after my arrival to China I had to start again from elementary level in China. I first felt a little bit disappointed, but this turned out to be advantageous to my Chinese as I now learned the pronunciation properly.

C: Did you also learn Japanese at that time?

L: I believe most China scholars get interested in Japanese at some point because Chinese characters are also used in Japan. In my case that happened during my third year in China, at Nanjing University. Knowing that my time in China was soon going to end, I was wondering if I should go back to Japan some day because at that time – in the late 1970s - the employment opportunities for China experts in Finland were scarce. I started studying Japanese on my own Nanjing: I bought a radio course textbook. Even now I still have it on my bookshelf somewhere. The content was totally about China, not about Japan, but this did not prevent me from learning grammar and vocabulary.

C: And your Japanese teacher was Chinese?

L: I guess the teachers in that radio course were all Chinese. When I later went to Japan, with the help of the course and my knowledge in Chinese, I didn't have to start from the elementary level, but went straight to intermediate level.

C: You mentioned there were not many opportunities back in Finland. Were you concerned about what you would do in the future after all this learning?

L: Naturally I was. After returning from China to Finland in 1978 I started my military service; it is still even now mandatory in Finland¹. After it I was lucky enough to receive a Japanese Ministry of Education scholarship to go to Japan. I spent the first half a year learning Japanese at the Osaka University of Foreign Studies 大阪外國語大學 which is now part of Osaka University 大阪大學 . After that I moved to Tokyo University where I studied for four years or so, in its International Relations Programme. I was using Japanese all the time.

C: Was that PhD or Master level?

L: First I spent one year as a visiting student because the professors wanted to see my level, after which I was admitted to the PhD programme. I already had an MA degree from my home university. By the way my MA thesis, written in 1975, dealt with the Tibetan question in Chinese history. As I mentioned earlier, when I was in the US, I had planned to write on the UN, but because of my new interest in Asia, I changed it to Tibet.

C: Did you write it in Finnish?

L: Yes. At that time I could not yet make use of Chinese sources yet. As Tibet was a big issue in international politics, a lot of material was available in English - much of it quite controversial, of course. In that context I made my first visit to the Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies (SIAS) in Copenhagen. There I found plenty of Indian sources, and there was also an India specialist working at the institute.

C: Why did you choose Tibet? Was that a very popular topic in Finland? Were people fascinated by it?

L: It was still a very big topic internationally, because there had not only been Dalai Lama's exile from Tibet to India in 1959 but also because of the Sino-Indian War of 1962. Those were still hot issues and relations between India and China were tense. In international relations that was an interesting topic.

C: So, your master's degree is from the department of social sciences. Who was your supervisor?

L: My supervisor was the professor of international relations, Göran von Bonsdorff². He was an expert on UN issues. He was a good supervisor although he did not know so much about Tibet itself.

¹ The minimum length of military service in Finland is 5½ months for the normal privates, 8½ months for those privates who are serving in challenging tasks and 11½ months for non-commissioned officers, reserve officers and the privates in the most difficult tasks.

² 18.3.1918 Helsinki – 18.10.2009 Helsinki

C: So, you finished this and went to Japan to do a PhD. Was it also on Tibet or a different topic?

L: No, it was on Zhang Taiyan (章太炎 or Zhang Binglin 章炳麟).

C: Oh, OK! And why did you have such a change of topic?

L: Well, I didn't think I should make a PhD about Tibet, because then I should really go deep into Tibet, learning its language, maybe studying there. When I was at Tokyo University, I noticed that in the revolutionary movement leading to the 1911 Revolution there had been one very important person who was relatively unknown in Western sinology, Zhang Taiyan. He was and is well-known as a guoxue dashi, a respected scholar in classical Chinese learning. Like quite a few other Chinese intellectuals in late Qing Dynasty, he went to exile in Japan where he offered his learning for the cause of the revolution and became the editor of *Minbao*, the journal of Sun Yat-sen and other revolutionaries. Zhang Taiyan's fierce attacks in this journal against reformists soon defeated the competing journal *Xinmin congbao* edited by Liang Qichao and other reformists. Dr. Sun is of course known as the main revolutionary, but there were others who were really important and Zhang Taiyan was one of them. When I chose his propaganda activity as my research topic I didn't quite know how difficult the task was. Anyway, I finished my dissertation in three years.

C: You wrote your PhD in Japanese?

L: I wrote it English, although all the seminars at the University of Tokyo were in Japanese. My professor was a well-known China specialist, Etō Shinkichi (衛藤藩吉).

C: So, were your resources in Chinese or Japanese?

L: Most of the sources were in Chinese, but I profited from research done on Zhang Taiyan by Japanese scholars such as Kondo Kuniyasu and Takata Atsushi. Without this support from previous research, it would have been very difficult to concentrate on Zhang Taiyan's writings only. He frequently referred to China's history and philosophy in his articles, which were classic in style.

C: Are you the only Finnish scholar who has such an interest in past? You did your PhD in Japan and it was about China. Are you the only person in Finland?

L: Certainly not the only one. From today's perspective I may seem to belong to the early ones in Finland. The earliest scholars, however, were mostly of missionary background, followed by the poet and translator Pertti Nieminen.

C: How has the training in Japan influenced you? I think that is rather difficult to write a PhD in Japan based on my observations. How could you finish in such a short time?

L: Well, with a good Japanese scholarship I could concentrate on my work full-time in an inspiring academic environment of Tokyo University, which was just a few blocks from my dormitory. I also profited a lot from the opportunity to use such excellent libraries as the Tōyō Bunko (東洋文庫).

C: How was Japan's relationship with China at that time?

L: When I was in Japan a lot of exchange was already going on. In fact the relationship was surprisingly optimistic on both sides. It was the first honeymoon between the two countries after the bitter war years. Already in 1975 there were Japanese students in China, but they were not ordinary Japanese. They were sent either by the Japanese Communist party or by the Japanese Foreign Ministry, which trained its personnel in the Chinese language by sending them to China as students. Understandably these two groups differed a lot from each other.

C: What happened after you finished your PhD?

L: After I finished my PhD I returned to Finland, where I worked as a researcher for half a year at the University of Helsinki. The department of Asian and African studies existed already. Then I got another working opportunity in Copenhagen, Denmark, where my new employer was the Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies (SIAS). It was now under restructuring and a new director was needed to head the reorganization of the whole institute.

C: What did you do exactly?

L: Since its establishment in the 1960s SIAS had had a profile of linguistic and cultural studies. Now the financier, the Nordic Council of Ministers, had given new priorities to the institute: instead of covering the whole Asia ancient and modern, it should concentrate on contemporary societies in East and Southeast Asia. These priorities had already been decided before my arrival, so I had to hire some new personnel there while some old researchers had to find new jobs. It was a challenging time for a new director. Even the name of the institute changed, now it became Nordic Institute of Asian Studies. The staff was about ten people.

C: How long were you there?

L: Three years, from 1987 to early 1990.

C: So, in between, I think it was good time for you to have networking with all the Nordic experts.

L: Exactly, at that time I knew virtually every Nordic scholar involved in Asian studies.

C: I think the restructuring there also occurred in other Nordic and European countries. They wanted to re-focus on contemporary. Is that so or is it so only in the Nordic countries?

L: I believe the tendency is the same everywhere – the old institutions are expected to reform themselves, otherwise their funding will discontinue.

C: How about those scholars who were focused on linguistics and culture? Were they feeling that they were suddenly not important anymore? How did you handle the situation?

L: Of course everyone understood that it was not my fault that they were not anymore appreciated by the financing side. As far as I know, they found other jobs because at that time the Nordic countries were pretty well off and there were also support plans for unemployed scholars. Some of the older ones retired, so I don't think there were any human catastrophes. From my part I supported them by writing good recommendations.

C: Were you also trying to cultivate a younger generation to do more contemporary issues?

L: We were not an educational institution, but we received plenty of visitors from universities, including students writing their theses. We gave them guidance they needed. We also encouraged the birth of different Nordic researcher associations on Asia by supporting them financially. One of these, established after my time in 1991, is the Nordic Association for China Studies (NACS).

C: Currently there is one, EACS, but I'm not sure if that's what you are talking about.

L: EACS comes from the European Association for Chinese Studies. Nordic only refers to Northern Europe. During my time the Nordic Association for South-East-Asian Studies and the Nordic Association for Japanese and Korean Studies were inaugurated. NACS which I just mentioned, bears the relatively new concept of China Studies in its name— giving attention to the contemporary Chinese state and society.

C: So, there were already Japanese, Korean and Southeast-Asian studies before the Chinese studies became more prominent. Is that so?

L: Chinese studies is older and broader as a concept than China studies, the former includes for example linguistics and culture. I think in the Nordic countries Chinese studies already existed before Japanese, Korean or Southeast Asian studies. The pioneer was the Swedish professor Bernhard Karlgren, a famous specialist on Chinese historical linguistics. He had three students who later continued the tradition of Chinese linguistics as professors in the Nordic region: Søren Egerod in Denmark, Göran Malmqvist in Sweden, and Henry Henne in Norway.

C: And you were the one kind of representing Finland at that time.

L: No, I belong to a much later generation anyway. But professor Aulis J. Joki from the University of Helsinki should be mentioned here because of his role. He listened to Karlgren's lectures in Stockholm and later invited professor Göran Malmqvist to Helsinki to teach a Chinese language course here. And many others from Finland had worked at SIAS before me, such as Harry Halén. You have probably heard the name.

C: No, I haven't.

L: He's one of the widely learned Asia scholars in Finland. He used to work as the amanuensis of the Department of Asian and African Studies at the University of Helsinki. He's a self-learned scholar who, according to students, knows everything. Students used to say each other: "If you can't find an answer to a problem, ask Halén".

C: Does he speak any Asian languages?

L: As a linguist he speaks many languages, including Chinese. Although retired already for many years, he concentrates on his research and is doing it full-time.

C: Still?

L: Still. There were scholars from this department who spent months or even years at SIAS already in the sixties. Asko Parpola, later professor of South Asian Studies, was one of these early scholars there. For them SIAS (now NIAS) offered a unique opportunity. In today's world NIAS is not that

important anymore. It has become a part of the University of Copenhagen, although it still uses a Nordic name.

C: I think it was affiliate to the Faculty of Political Science.

L: Nowadays yes, previously it was linked to the Faculty of Arts.

C: Did you move back here from Denmark?

L: Yes, after Denmark I spent one year in Finland as a researcher of the Academy of Finland and then I moved to Beijing. I worked for our embassy for about two years as an interpreter. Being an interpreter means that one does a lot of other work also, not just the translating. I was mainly a kind of cultural officer there.

C: Do you think that was a valuable experience for you to know more about diplomatic work?

L: It was a valuable experience. It was actually my second time. After I had finished my doctorate at Tokyo University. I was employed as a Japanologist at our embassy in Tokyo. I stayed two years there. I did not want to stay longer, as I felt I should try some other work as well. Anyway, my second opportunity came at the embassy in Beijing and it was very useful to learn to know how an embassy operates in China.

C: What was the Finnish government's stance or official policy towards China at that time? Was the relationship warm or cold?

L: We have always had good relations with the PRC. From the very beginning. As you know, Finland was among the very first countries to recognise the new China. I can say our relations with China were also good when I was working there. The Tian'anmen Incident 1989 had just taken place a couple of years before. In fact Finland had been the first Nordic country to send a cabinet member to visit China only a few months after the incident .

C: Why so? To show support for the Chinese government? What was the logic?

L: The Finnish foreign policy tradition is to keep contact with friends under all circumstances. Of course we, like most other countries, condemned the massacre that had happened in China. Yet even after such an unfortunate incident life must go on. We Finns are pragmatic.

C: I guess that was also one of the reasons why Finland was one of the very first countries to recognise the PRC right after it was established. Is pragmatism a part of the Finnish tradition because you are located geographically between Russia and Sweden?

L: Yes, we have probably learnt a lot by being next to a big country.

C: Is the Finnish way of handling China still so? Is it still very practical?

L: I think there is no change, even if we now belong to the EU.

C: Having worked at the diplomatic front line, do you think that China pays attention to Finland? Of course you try to be very pragmatic towards China. How does the Chinese side respond? Do they pay attention to you?

L: In my opinion they pay attention to us. I mean, we are a small harmless country. At that time there was very good dialogue at high level with the Chinese officials. Zhu Rongji visited our embassy. But I do not think this was so exceptional: already in the 1950's Mao and Zhou Enlai came to our embassy.

In the 1950's the situation was slightly different; at that time we also had a close relationship with the Soviet Union. We didn't like that but it was our destiny; after the war we had to pay attention to Soviet Union under the Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance between Finland and the Soviet Union³. It was a must for us.

C: But China and the Soviet Union had a somewhat bad relationship.

L: Of course that was a very mixed relationship.

C: So, how did Finland place itself? Or maybe that was never a problem as you don't want to offend anyone.

L: In the 1950s there was pretty much exchange between Finland and China, such as trade and cultural delegations, but no state visits. The Sino-Soviet split of 1960 affected us, but the relations were quite promising until the Cultural Revolution started in 1966. During the Cultural Revolution we still kept our embassy in Beijing. Again it was important for us to maintain the contact with China during these years which were so difficult to the Chinese people. One of the Finnish diplomats even kept a diary of those years. In the early 1970s the student exchanges started again. Our minister of education visited China in 1973 and China started sending lecturers of Chinese to the University of Helsinki.

C: How did the Asian studies in Finland develop after you returned to Finland?

L: I returned to Finland already in 1992; I could have stayed much longer, but I was asked to work as acting professor of East Asian studies at the University of Helsinki, which I did for three years. The programme of East Asian studies had started already in 1987. Songmo Kho and Pertti Nikkilä had worked as professors before me. At that time the chair also included Japanese studies. Now since 1995 or so Juha Janhunen has been the professor of East Asian studies in Helsinki.

C: How about other universities here in Finland; did they have East Asian studies at that time? Or was the only place here?

L: Helsinki was the only place for many years. For quite many years from the beginning of the programme all the students had four obligatory languages: Chinese, Classical Chinese, Japanese and Korean.

³ Known in Finnish as *Ystävyy-, yhteistyö- ja avunantosopimus* or *YYA-sopimus* and *Vänskaps-, samarbets- och biståndsavtalet* or *VSB-avtalet* in Swedish, in Russian *Договор о дружбе, сотрудничестве и взаимной помощи*, it was a forced treaty between Finland and Soviet Union which existed from the 6th of April 1948 until 1992.

C: They had to learn all of them? In four or three years!

L: One of these languages had to be chosen as the major. In the other three languages they had to take the minimum of an elementary course.

C: They also had to learn other things, not just the languages?

L: Yes, as today.

C: How many students did you have at that time, many or few? Because now it seems we don't have many here.

L: My impression was that we had more then than we have now, because it was easier to join the programme at that time.

C: Was it easier to come to the University of Helsinki or to our programme?

L: Maybe both. I may be wrong but I have noticed that we don't anymore have students who take East Asian studies as their minor. According to requirements, one could actually study one's minor subject up here to the master level, but recently I have not met any student doing so. Maybe it's because of the new degree structure that the students are so bound to their major subjects; they don't have time to make their side major at the Asian studies.

C: In the old days; I think, the study years were more flexible.

L: Yes, they were more flexible. So, maybe we had about the same number of students at Chinese and Japanese studies as we have now.

C: And Korean studies?

L: We have also had a lecturer at Korean studies ever since the establishment of the programme. Although students are less than in Chinese or Japanese studies, Korean studies has produced many MA degrees and even a few PhDs.

C: At that time, did you teach anything about Chinese political science, international relations and things like that?

L: Yes, I taught.

C: I assume you were the main person teaching that because other people focused more on linguistics.

L: Besides me and the language teachers we had many extra staff teachers focusing on various topics, We had funds to pay to those who didn't have a formal position here to teach here. I even once got Taiwanese funding for that extra staff teaching.

C: They come and go.

L: Of course. But in fact many liked to repeat their courses at regular intervals or taught different things every year. This was because we had funding for their courses.

C: How about the Confucius Institute? When did it become a part of the university?

L: I should tell about the backgrounds first. After I had finished here, I went to Japan and worked as a press and cultural councillor at our embassy in Tokyo. It was already my second time, I stayed four years there. In 2000 I returned and we established the Programme of Asia-Pacific studies here. The idea was to bring modern Asian studies to the University of Helsinki. It was supported by the Japan Foundation for the first three years. With the support from Tokyo Foundation we could invite visiting professors who came here for half a year - two professors from Waseda University came at different times. Then we thought that it would be nice to get visiting professors from China on a similar arrangement. There are now different programmes to invite professors here, but at that time there were not so many. In January 2006 I wrote to the Chinese embassy in Helsinki if they would be interested to found some kind of a research institute which would also give some teaching together with us. The embassy actually showed interest in our proposal, but at the time when the reply came, I had already visited Beijing to find out what the new Confucius Institute system was about. When I went to Beijing to visit Hanban, or the Chinese National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (國家漢語國際推廣領導小組辦公室), they even had an agreement on the table ready for a signature. Of course I had no authority to sign anything, but I had a very informative discussion with two young staff members in charge of Europe. I learned that the Confucius Institute as a new concept was not fixed. Only about 50 CIs had been established by then. I was myself convinced that a Confucius Institute in Helsinki was worth trying, since it very much depended on our initiative about what we wanted to do.

C: How about the university? Were they okay about that?

L: I had quite close relations with the rector and other top officials of the university, because I had been helping them in contacts with Asian universities for years. The university officials were interested in the idea, but of course I was in no position to push it through. On the other hand, the university was approached by the Chinese embassy and the rector even asked me if I knew about the Confucius Institutes. The momentum for the institute came during the summer 2006, when the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to Finland in the context of an ASEM-meeting in Helsinki was being prepared. In September 2006 a protocol of intent to establish an a Confucius Institute in Helsinki was signed by representatives of University of Helsinki and Hanban. Premier Wen and his Finnish colleague Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen attended the ceremony.

C: So, both sides also understood the diplomatic significance of having the Confucius Institute here.

L: Yes. In addition to its diplomatic significance they understood the potential of the Confucius Institute if it is run well.

C: So, I assume it took some time to prepare before it could really open.

L: The institute started operation one year later, in September 2007, when the first lecturer arrive from Beijing. The grand opening took place in October, attended by Rector Ilkka Niiniluoto from the University of Helsinki and President Ji Baocheng from the Chinese partner university, Renmin University of China.

C: And you were the director right at the beginning?

L: Yes.

C: Were there a lot of students in the beginning? Were people interested in it?

L: Yes, there was great interest in the institute among students both at our university as well as in other universities and the society at large. More than one hundred dignitaries from Finland in our opening ceremony, which gave us great publicity in Finland.

C: I forgot to ask, why Renmin University? Was it because there already was a relationship between Helsinki University and Renmin University?

L: I think I was somewhat influential in this choice of partner university. Of course, our oldest partner in China is Peking University, but we thought that it would be the time to make also new friends, so Renmin University of China, with which we already had a university-level agreement as well, came to our minds. And it was already a partner in operating a few other institutes in different parts of the world.

C: So, the Confucius Institute started running. Were there any debates on how to integrate the education there with the East Asian Studies here?

L: I would say that there was not that serious debate. Of course at the time when we established the Confucius Institute there were some professors in other departments of the same faculty who were asking why we needed a sort of China institute here although our Nordic Studies were more important and so on. But such questions were raised only in the beginning. Here in the department there were in my opinion no problems at all. Actually in the very beginning we were not part of this department but a part of the Renvall Institute of Area and Cultural Studies, the same institute that hosted the Asia-Pacific studies programme mentioned before.

C: How about the education of Chinese here? The classes of the Confucius Institute are recognised, but was it so right at the beginning?

L: Yes, right from the beginning, that was the common understanding between us and the Department of Asian and African Studies (now Department of World Cultures).

C: So, there was no concern that the teaching abilities of the Confucius Institute teachers coming from China would stand up to the qualities we have here. I think this was a debate in other countries.

L: There were questions like that, of course, but anyway, it's the duty of the Confucius Institute leadership to see that we get professional teachers and scholars from China. In our case they need not always be language teachers, they can also be teachers of other fields. It's the quality that is so important and apparently a challenge to some Confucius Institutes. Not all institutes are linked with universities. Some are outside universities and with varying profiles. This flexibility can be both the strength and weakness of the Confucius Institute system.

C: Were there concerns about the Confucius Institute. There are cases like in Sweden where the Confucius Institute has been shut down. Did that influence you?

L: We were of course asked questions. Many people asked me why the Confucius Institute in Stockholm was closed and I have also commented this in media.

C: I would like to understand why there is now Turku and probably other institutions that are interested in China.

L: Turku was our old capital until early 19th century and maybe they still have some sort of Helsinki complex, and therefore they want to do things maybe even better than we do in Helsinki - this is only a joke. In the early 1990's there was a governmental committee thinking about the future of Asian studies in Finland and I was a member of that committee because at that time I served as a professor here. It was the time when the Finnish economy was in not that good shape. It was our last recession before this current one and it was agreed that the government did not have any extra money to invest in Asian studies. So, then I took up this idea that we should have a network of universities joining their resources and offering them to students interested in East and South-East Asia. The idea was adopted. It was agreed that every university would host this network in turn.

C: So, they took turns.

L: Yes, it rotated. It started when the Ministry of Education decided that the Helsinki School of Economics would host the secretariat for the first three-year period and it did do that. Some courses were also started. Then the responsibility for coordination shifted to the University of Turku where it still is.

C: For many years, already. It doesn't rotate anymore.

L: No, it doesn't. It has been there for maybe the last seventeen years now.

C: So, the government have changed their policy and do not anymore require it to rotate?

L: I don't know if the government have changed their policy. The University of Turku just wanted to keep it there for as long as possible.

C: So, that means they received money from the government every year to run this.

L: They received money from the government until 2010 or so. During that time they also established probably with their own money the Centre of East and South-East Asian Studies, because they had a grant to have this network office there and some people could work part-time there and be paid by the network. Of course, they have the same premises. Anyway, in 2010, the government funding for this network university ended. It should have rotated until that, but it did not.

C: Did they still keep the name of the network? It's still there?

L: It's still there, although it's now a bit different network, because now the universities which want to be a part of the network have to pay a membership fee. Many Finnish universities are members, but for example the University of Helsinki is not a member. We also had the option to join the new network in 2010, but we felt that we should now invest more in our own resources.

C: That means there is some competition.

L: I don't think there's any serious competition; their concept is different. They produce network courses. Of course our students can also attend these courses but they have to pay for it.

C: I think that apart from Turku, they have a professor of Chinese studies in some university in the North; I don't know which. Is it the Lapland University?

L: In my understanding Lapland University has now employed a professor in Chinese studies but no degree programme is so far offered there.

C: So, the strongest hubs in Finland probably are Helsinki and Turku. What do you think about the future of the development of China studies in Finland? Finland is a small country. Can we really stand out and compete with other China studies programmes in Sweden and Denmark?

L: We need to cooperate. In all Nordic countries we feel that we are small and therefore we need to cooperate. I think cooperation is a very Nordic concept also and in reality we also have a lot of cooperation on the Nordic level. On the other hand, as an EU member state we of course also regard co-European cooperation as very important. Many of us even think that cooperation with Asia is more important than with our Western partners. I think both are needed.