In 1965 the Volkswagen Foundation took the initiative and invited a group of specialists to discuss means and ways how to support modern East Asian studies in Germany. This led to the creation of a co-ordinating unit for contemporary East Asian studies attached to the Institute of Asian Affairs in Hamburg one year later. The necessity for an organisation that represents the various fields of contemporary East Asian studies was the reason for founding the German Association for East Asian Studies in 1968 which became the German Association for Asian Studies (DGA) several years later.

In the beginning strong financial support came from the Volkswagen Foundation and to a much lesser extent from the Ford Foundation. When these programmes ended in 1976 the DGA managed to survive on the basis of membership fees and considerable contributions mainly from the business community. The DGA has the major task to enhance contacts and to increase knowledge on contemporary developments in Asian countries in political, economic and social matters. These aims are pursued through annual conferences, intensive language courses as well as publication of the quarterly journal ASIEN.