

Connecting new forms of knowledge

The release of this 77th issue of the Newsletter coincides with the tenth edition of the International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS), which will take place in July in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in collaboration with Chiang Mai University. Such occurrence is an opportunity to reflect on ICAS, its constant departure from the conventional academic conference model into a large-scale local-global clearing house, and its pioneering facilitation of decentralized intellectual exchange platforms in Africa, Latin America and the Indian Ocean. Through its collaboration with ICAS, IAS continues to work as a global connector and incubator of new forms of knowledge.

Philippe Peycam

ORIGINALLY ICAS as a network-based programme may have in some way matched the traditional convention model developed in the United States in which hundreds of panels and meetings are organized in parallel, in one location, during a four-day period. To these discussions and their rigidly structured format were added a number of customary activities such as 'keynotes', an exhibition area, etc. Efforts were, however, deployed from the outset to encourage presentations from different disciplines or country focus into dialogues by grouping individual papers in thematic panels or by promoting unusual side events. The ICAS Book Prize (IBP), for instance, was from the start organized around broad interdisciplinary bases ('Social Sciences', 'Humanities') instead of the traditional geographic or disciplinary compartmentalisation. The IBP is now the most internationally recognised book prize in Asian studies.

Yet the very mechanisms of a self-contained ritual called 'academic convention/conference' remained enforced. In its *modus operandi*, and finality, this academic model of event continued unquestioned. It gained its place in the mainstream international academic landscape as the necessary process through which aspiring individual scholars gather to take inspiration from established pundits or fellow 'rising stars', where one needs 'to see and be seen' by members of the profession. If the American appellation given to these conferences, 'meat markets', may be exaggerated, it reflects a perception shared by many young scholars nowadays that these forums are primarily places for individuals to 'sell themselves' on the academic market stage.

ICAS has only ever partially fit this description. Its biennial conventions have always attracted a proportionate balance in the origin and specialization of its participants. With an equal distribution of contributors – the majority are young, and from Asia, North America, Europe and the rest of the world – ICAS events have never been dominated by one single cultural academic group or model. More features distinguish ICAS from other academic conference networks; and they are compounded by the organization's fundamental collaborative and nomadic natures. Every event is built on a close partnership with a host institution, always in another country or world region. This nomadism at the trans-regional level reinforces ICAS's inclusive and global character. From 2007, it was decided that the biennial events should alternate between being held in Asia and in another region of the world where 'Asia' is being studied. And since 2013, the ICAS Secretary, hosted by IAS, has been assisted by an International Council made up of representatives of past and future partner institutions as well as organizations in Asia and the world involved in the study of (and in) Asia.

Three parallel evolutions further set ICAS apart from traditional academic gatherings: its transformation into an open platform serving an increasingly diverse range of participants, institutions and sectors of knowledge on Asia; its efforts to anchor its biennial events in the very local intellectual, social and political context in which they are held; its engagement – with IAS – in favour of the establishment of new academic networks.

Perhaps the most challenging of our efforts is to continue to transform the ICAS biennial events into dynamic forums at which collective collaboration around shared ideas and projects prevails over the atomization of individuals into competing academics.¹ One way to achieve this involves introducing sectors of knowledge situated beyond institutionalized academic categories with the objective of nurturing more inclusive and meaningful exchanges. Artists, cultural and social actors, scientists, community activists, policy makers, diplomats, journalists, artisans and even academic administrators should not be excluded from scholarly exchanges. They should contribute to shaping academic debates, the same way these sectors of activity should gain from being more intellectually situated. Though the necessity of trans-sectoral dialogues is now well accepted, the difficulty in developing the right modes or formats of encounter and exchange remains. Two IAS programmes – 'Humanities Across Borders' and 'Southeast Asian Neighborhoods Network' – each in their own way, through experimental methodologies of exchange, address this difficulty (see page 53). A number of exploratory steps will be attempted at ICAS 10. IAS is for instance supporting events involving specialised academics alongside urban 'practitioners' or university administrators. Meanwhile, our partners Chiang Mai University (CMU) are deploying great efforts to mobilize multiple segments of the northern Thai civil society to act as meaningful contributors. No less than twenty exhibitions and other public events are planned, by far the largest number ever introduced at an ICAS event. Regional NGOs, think-tanks, and art groups will also feature at the conference. Their presence, we hope, will encourage participants to engage in collaborative activities where new modes of thinking and acting can be explored. The forging of ICAS events into spaces in which thematic trans-sectoral collaborative experiences can occur should, we hope, expand the reach of what is (still) called 'Asian studies' as a knowledge-connected inclusive space shaped by multiple stakeholders.

For some time already, IAS has been working on better anchoring ICAS into local realities by working with host institutions, to co-create content that can draw from local experiences, or vice versa, to use home-grown issues to ignite universal questions. Our partnership with CMU

is a case in point, with a number of joint events like the CMU-IAS roundtable on universities' social engagement, or a plenary roundtable where prominent Southeast Asian intellectuals reflect on their efforts to promote democratic rights in their country. ICAS 10 will have a distinctive Chiang Mai mark. The challenge here is not just to move away from the stale academic convention model – usually held in international chain hotels offering the same standardized recipe for a repeated *entre soi* among disciplinary and country-focused colleagues. It is about relocating Asia and knowledge-making processes within living communities and realities, in Asia or outside.

In 2019, ICAS will return to Europe, to where it began; in Leiden, in The Netherlands. As in Chiang Mai, we will seek to confer the event with a local – Dutch and European – 'feel', with as an overarching theme, "Asia and Europe, Asia in Europe". With our host partner, the University of Leiden, we will not only seek the participation of 'area studies' academics but also members of different sectors of knowledge as well as non-academic contributors from all over Europe and beyond. We hope ICAS 11 will bring new light to the complex history of interactions between the two regions.

Another way IAS and ICAS are facilitating a confluence of localized 'connected knowledges' in and with Asia resides in collaborations they have initiated with a number of networks in regions other than Asia, Europe and North America. Here too, ICAS plays a critical role in decentring the landscape of knowledge on and with Asia. One way to do that has been to diversify the language basis of ICAS Book Prize (IBP), in collaboration with new partners. From ICAS 10 onward, the IBP will award publications in Chinese, Korean, French and German languages, alongside English. This collaborative effort also led to the support for the establishment of the first pan-African independent academic network on Asia, the African Association for Asian Studies (A-ASIA), and the organization of the A-ASIA maiden conference in Accra, Ghana in 2015. ICAS is now also supporting the development of a pan-Latin American network on Asian Studies (see page 48). An LA-Asia conference is planned for 2019, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Recently, ICAS participated in the creation of an Indian Oceanic exchange platform effectively linking the shores of Africa, Arabia and Asia. If this initiative somewhat overlaps with that of Africa-Asia, the two are not mutually exclusive. In November 2018, A-ASIA, ICAS and the University of Dar Es Saalam (Tanzania) will organize the second Africa-Asia conference in the capital city. The event will be preceded by the first of a series of roundtables on the Indian Ocean on the adjacent island of Zanzibar.

As this note suggests, ICAS is an ongoing project. Its transformation into a global clearinghouse, serving an always larger community of people and institutions engaged in intellectual discussions with Asia and Asian societies as background or as focus, is continual. We will persist in making ICAS's events always more accessible. In my view, ICAS as a signature programme deserves to be supported, including financially, for it serves a truly public mission. More needs to be done in this respect. But for the time being, we should enjoy ICAS 10 in Chiang Mai. I want here to thank our colleagues from CMU and from the ICAS Secretariat for their hard work and dedication. Beyond every effort and features that I briefly described here, there are these unexpected encounters, and the pleasure one finds in sharing new ideas with people one did not previously know, that will keep the magic of ICAS alive.

Philippe Peycam, Director IAS

Reference

- 1 I discussed the critical importance of collaboration in IAS's mission and programmes in the previous issue of the Newsletter.

The Newsletter and IAS

The International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) is a post-doctoral research centre based in the Netherlands. IIAS encourages the multi-disciplinary and comparative study of Asia and promotes national and international cooperation.

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