

Forging new connections

I am writing this just as we are completing, in collaboration with our African and international partners, what was perhaps the most daring initiative by IIAS or by an institute of its kind: the extraordinary conference 'Africa-Asia: A New Axis of Knowledge' (Accra, Ghana, 24-26 September 2015). With more than 300 participants coming from 30-plus countries, mainly from Africa and Asia, about 60 panels and roundtables focusing on as many subjects, and despite all the logistical difficulties such an undertaking entails, something quite special took place during these three magical days at the University of Ghana, exactly 60 years after the historic Bandung conference. An "epiphany", was how one of our Ghanaian hosts described it. The next issue of The Newsletter will go into further detail about this remarkable event.

Philippe Peycam

THE FOCUS SECTION of this current issue of The Newsletter is titled 'The New Asia Scholar', and has been compiled by my colleagues Sonja Zweegers and Paul van der Velde. What is apparent in this study is the ever more complex and plural nature of the field of Asian Studies. Not only has its transformation resulted from an exponential increase of voices from Asia and other non-Western regions or institutions, but the field itself is undergoing major epistemological shifts, as found in the multiplicity of approaches and themes chosen beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries and even across professional sectors of knowledge. Asian Studies, moreover, is witnessing a blurring of its various geographic determinations, with the subdivisions 'Southeast Asian, East Asian, South Asian, Central Asian' becoming increasingly obsolete. As many scholars have long pointed out, even the concept of 'Asia' is problematic. Can it be geographically determined? Can it be said to represent a coherent historical system or rather a collection of interwoven genealogies or histories? If so, how deeply connected are these with other 'world regions' and their societies?

These issues are among those that the current IIAS-led Mellon-funded programme 'Rethinking Asian Studies in a Global Context' has been seeking to address, not only by exploring alternative geographic configurations of Asia, but also new spaces of academic engagement, like for instance, the city and the study of Asia through an urban prism, or else, by including perspectives taken outside Asia or Europe, with for instance the Africa-Asia axis of knowledge interactions. The programme also seeks to explore other potential fields of intellectual inquiry, for instance those articulated by craft makers or artists, as both 'embodied' forms of knowledge, and their contributions, from the margin or below, to discourses on Asian cultures and heritages.

Because of the different alignments of its networks, IIAS is in an exceptional position to capture some of the transnational trends that somewhat define Asia taken "as a method", to quote Kwan Hsinh Chen. For instance, the massive urbanization phenomenon currently taking place in most Asian countries is one unique way to appreciate the new social patterns that are emerging in our age of global connectivity. If we just take China, 150 million people are to be forcefully urbanized within the next decade, with their lifestyles and social patterns changed forever; it's a phenomenon of unprecedented scale. This is a theme that will be discussed at an upcoming workshop in Shanghai, 'City Theory for the New Millennium' (October 2015). For almost four years of its existence, the 17 member institutions and over 100 researchers of the interdisciplinary trans-sector IIAS-led Urban Knowledge Network Asia (UKNA), have been researching and exchanging knowledge regarding these transformations, interrogating what today's notion of 'city' now means, and for whom.



Above: Some of the participants at the 'Africa-Asia' conference in Ghana (September 2015).

Similarly, IIAS explores new spaces of social agency through its appreciation of patterns of cultural transformation and their uses. IIAS not only looks at how communities seek to withstand top down cultural discourses and policies imposed upon them (a theme covered by two international conferences, in Singapore in January 2014, in partnership with the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; and in Taipei in December 2014, with Academia Sinica), it also encourages critical explorations of cultural policies (see the upcoming conference 'Language, Power and Identity in Asia', in Leiden, March 2016, in partnership with the LeidenGlobal platform; and the 'Heritage as Aid and Diplomacy' conference, scheduled for May 2016, also in Leiden).

At all levels, creative forms of expressions and representations are being explored: from the invention of a 'heritage of shame' (Professor Jung-Sung Han's presentation 'Making of Dark Heritage in Contemporary Japan', September 2015, at IIAS), to the discovery of the multiplicity of identity in today's decentralized Indonesia (a collaboration between IIAS and the Indonesian Heritage Society BPP). If this recognition of multiple identities is somewhat familiar to the people of India, it is now fast becoming common in a number of Southeast and even Eastern Asian societies.

Another IIAS focus, on 'global Asia', interrogates the pervasiveness of Asia in the world, through Asian diaspora, Asian commodities, businesses, ideas, cultural productions, etc. What does this Asian ubiquity mean for the current trend of geopolitical realignment, with the erosion of Western references and models in all parts of the world? We consider this phenomenon by facilitating dialogue between African and Asian scholars (as per the Africa-Asia conference in Accra, and the A-Asia/IIAS roundtables 'Asia through an African Lens' and 'Towards a Sustainable Model of Asian Studies in Africa'), and, within Asia, by exploring communities beyond the state's reach, at the Asian Borderlands workshop and conference (Lyon, 2014 and Siem Reap, 2015).

This constantly shifting definition of Asian Studies is reflected in IIAS's flagship activities, including ICAS, the IIAS Summer/Winter Schools, and The Newsletter. These platforms of intellectual engagement seek to bring together local and global perspectives, to decentre their production, with the desire to promote new spaces of conviviality and sharing, and above all, an urge to weave together singular 'interstitial' elements with broader trends in time and space.

Take the IIAS Summer/Winter Schools. After a number of very successful instalments, IIAS is now receiving requests from numerous universities and their cities to host this intensive weeklong academic exercise. They seek access to the unusually diverse range of participants and academic conveners (selected by IIAS from its various networks), knowing that these participants and their conveners will not just engage with each other, but will equally interact with their hosts and the local place, to ultimately develop new knowledge and output. This is exactly what happened in Leiden in 2011 ('Heritage Conserved and Contested in Asia and Europe') and 2012 ('Migrations and Interactions'), in Macau in 2013 ('Postcolonial Urban Hybridity'), in Chiang Mai in 2014 ('Politics of Craft') and no doubt, what will happen in Kyoto in January 2015 ('Building Urban Societies through the Arts').

Out of these intensive training events, participants gain more than theoretical and factual content. They forge new and unexpected connections, thanks to the diversity of backgrounds and approaches, but also due to the places in which the Schools embed their activities. With some slight adjustments, I could say the same about the ICAS events or The Newsletter, all meant to serve as spaces of inclusive knowledge, exchanges, and shared experiences.

Philippe Peycam, Director IIAS

The Newsletter and IIAS

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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IIAS Main Office

International Institute
for Asian Studies
PO Box 9500
2300 RA Leiden
The Netherlands

Visitors

Rapenburg 59
Leiden
The Netherlands
T +31 (0) 71-527 2227
F +31 (0) 71-527 4162
ias@ias.nl

Colophon

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Managing editor: Sonja Zweegers
Editors of The Focus: Paul van der Velde & Sonja Zweegers
Regional editors: Terence Chong (ISEAS) & Yunjeong Joo (SNUAC)
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