

# Programmes and initiatives – moving forward

## Rethinking Asian Studies in a Global Context

A three-year IAS pilot programme (2014-2016) supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation



THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR ASIAN STUDIES recently received a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, New York, for a three-year pilot programme aimed at strengthening and redirecting Asian Studies as part of the foundation's efforts to reframe area studies in Western universities. The programme is built on a practice of a close interaction between Asian, European and American partners. It aims to foster new humanities-focused research and educational opportunities in the field of Asian Studies on the basis of a trans-regional inter-disciplinary platform. In the process, the programme seeks to shape academic communities around new themes of research, emphasising the inclusion of young and aspiring scholars from the three world-regions, and beyond.

Both the research orientations and the architecture of the programme are meant to enable participants to think in terms of decentering knowledge about Asia, exploring alternative narratives of Asian history, questioning conventional spatial configurations of 'Asia' through the study of cities, exploring the complexity of the local-global nexus, or suggesting alternative approaches from those developed in Western – or Asian – academia. Much of it is being done with the intention of transcending the frame of the nation-state and its avatars, while bridging the often artificial divide that regularly exists between 'noble' and 'vernacular' knowledge.

The programme is incorporated in the overall research strategy of the IAS, which focuses on three thematic clusters, namely Asian Cities, Asian Heritages and Global Asia. The pilot initiative will include a range of scholarly activities in five topical areas, or 'forums', that cut across regions and disciplines. In the third year, a Roundtable will be organised, in collaboration with Columbia University, to evaluate the programme's outcomes and discuss a continuation of the initiative.

### The five forums are:

#### Forum 1: 'History and Asian Intellectual Traditions: Modal Epistemology and Theory for AmEurAsia' (META)

The META Forum is based on the understanding that the humanist theories of knowledge often depend on culturally bound European concepts, which may be less universally applicable than generally assumed. The Forum's objective is therefore to uncover the varied ways in which Western and non-Western understandings of humanist concepts diverge or converge and how they construe different epistemological modes. In the context of this Forum, two workshops will be organised that address theoretical, but closely related foci, namely the notions of 'text' and 'source'. In these workshops, non-Western knowledge systems will be represented by scholars of Asian Studies who are specialised, for instance, in Chinese art and literature, classical Indian epistemology, Persian poetry, or Tibetan philosophy and historiography.

#### Forum 2: 'Uses of Culture and Cultural Heritage in Asian Contexts'

This Forum addresses the modalities of cultural heritage production, its management and its reformulation in Asia. It explores the plurality of the notion of 'heritage' and its local variants, some of which depart significantly from European models because of powerful local religious, philosophical, conceptual, and political traditions. Three key questions take prominence: what kind of heritage is preserved, for whom, and through what process? The Forum will focus on vernacular knowledges as they are practiced in mainland Southeast Asia. It will include a Summer School in Chiang Mai, Thailand, at the university of the same name, and a workshop in 2015.

#### Forum 3: 'Asian Spatialities'

This Forum aims at overcoming the spatial limitations of nations and empires, past and present. It addresses the flows, interactions and community agencies across seas and landmasses of Central, South and Southeast Asia. This Forum is subdivided into three sub-themes, namely:

*'The Indian Ocean World – Belonging across the Bay of Bengal'*  
A sub-project which will focus on contested notions of belonging across the Bay of Bengal. It includes two workshops, 'Belonging across the Bay of Bengal: Migrations, Networks, Circulations', and 'The Bay of Bengal and Area Studies: Space, Scale and Location.' Both workshops will reflect critically on recent efforts to foreground ocean-centred historical geographies of the South and Southeast Asian littoral zones.

*'Central Eurasia – New Rulers, New Histories, New Identities'*  
This sub-project concentrates on the massive landmass of Central and Inner Asia. It includes two workshops. The first is planned to immediately precede the international conference on 'Changing Patterns of Power in Historical and Modern Central and Inner Asia (Ulaanbaatar, 7-9 August 2014, co-organised by IAS – see opposite page) by addressing 'National and Historical Contexts of Independent Knowledge Production'. The second workshop, 'External Religious and Ideological Influences', planned for the summer of 2015, will discuss the influence of transnational religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Islam) and ideologies (capitalism, democracy, socialism) on identity formation, national developments and international relations.

#### 'Across Southeast Asian Borderlands'

The third sub-project of the Asian Spatialities Forum builds upon the dynamics initiated by the Asian Borderlands Research Network established by IAS in 2008. Two workshops in this sub-project will study Southeast Asia on the basis of networks, processes, transitions, polyvalence, and fluidity, in opposition to the concepts of the 'nation-state' or the 'region'. The first workshop, 'Communities in Between: Redefining Social Spaces in Southeast Asian Borderlands', will revisit state-society relations through the perspective of the borderlands as they can be seen as products of a social and political negotiation of space. The second workshop, 'Beyond the State's Reach: Casino Spaces as Enclaves of Development or Lawlessness?' seeks to better understand the 'transitional zones' that have emerged in the wake of the encounter between local communities, new migratory circulations and the global economy.

#### Forum 4: 'The Idea of the City in Asian Contexts'

This Forum is based on the Urban Knowledge Network Asia (UKNA), an IAS-led and EU co-funded programme of scholars working on Asian cities. Cities constitute distinct domains worth examining in both local and global contexts. They often share more characteristics with one another than with their own hinterland, and, being at the forefront of economic growth, Asian cities are being re-imagined everyday by their residents, commuters, immigrants, civil society groups, planners, politicians, business groups, and visitors. The project will involve three activities, corresponding to the thematic research areas of the Urban Knowledge Network Asia (UKNA). Two small workshops will be held in 2014, on 'subaltern urbanism' and on the 'public versus private city'. In 2015, a larger Roundtable called 'The Idea of the City' will explore the local/global city.

#### Forum 5: 'Views of Asia from Africa'

Major changes are underway in the interaction between Asia and Africa, where a massive economic, political and demographic Chinese presence is rapidly transforming the terms of this interregional relationship. This Forum will be prepared together with the Association of Asian Studies in Africa (A-ASIA) established in 2012 in Lusaka, Zambia. The A-ASIA's maiden conference is planned for February-March, 2015, in Accra, Ghana, and this event will offer the present project the opportunity to situate the Asia-Africa academic axis within the larger realm of the study of Asia, including the role of academic institutions in the North/West, by organising two thematic roundtables. The first meeting, 'De-centering the Discourse on Asian Studies' will discuss the movement of the study of Asia from a Western-centred model to an Africa/global initiative; the second event, 'Creating a Sustainable Model of Asian Studies in Africa,' will discuss existing capacities and perceived gaps and needs to shape a sustainable Asian studies intellectual community on the African continent.

A Roundtable will be organised in the second half of the grant period to discuss the IAS Mellon initiative in its entirety and consider suggestions for a new humanities-informed framework with which to approach 'Asian Studies'. Inspired by an event organised in November 2011 by IAS entitled 'Shifting Patterns in Global Interactions and Identities', which investigated new topographies of power in North-South and South-South geopolitics and what these mean for the academic study of Asia, the roundtable will bring together researchers engaged in the five Forums as well as external experts from Asia, Europe, North-America and beyond.