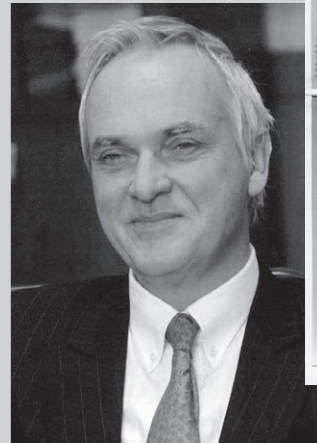


4 The Fiftieth Issue

The Newsletter's first editor

Paul van der Velde is the founding father of *The Newsletter*. As editor-in-chief from 1993 to 1998 he produced 17 issues. He left IIAS at the end of 1998 to work at the University of Amsterdam until, at the beginning of 2006, he returned to IIAS as senior consultant. For this special 50th issue, we profile the man and reveal what his plans in Asian studies are.



MY BACKGROUND IS IN HISTORY AND SINOLOGY. After two years of studying sinology my father died and I had to take over the running of his textile company. During that time I was still enrolled at the history department of Leiden University, and in those days it was relatively easy to combine studying with my business obligations. After my BA in history, I went to Middleburg College in 1982 for an intensive Chinese course, which was supervised by the sinologist Perry Link. I spent the latter part of 1984 and 1985 in Taipei at Taida University, studying Chinese and Art history, and specifically temple sculpture. In 1986 I got an MA in modern history, minoring in Chinese language, history and art. I then worked for a while for the Dutch multinational OCE van der Grinten, a company which produces high-end copying machines. When my proposal to start producing their machines in Taiwan was rejected, I decided that a life in the service of photocopiers was not for me!

Between Deshima and biography

In 1988 I took a part-time job at the Institute for the European Expansion and Reaction (IGEER) at Leiden University. It was a stimulating environment where I met a lot of researchers from Asia. I became editor of the Deshima Diaries Source Publication Project and worked closely with its supervisor the Asia historian Leonard Blussé. The idea to make the diaries accessible to the international scholarly community involved indexing the diaries written by the Dutch heads of the VOC factory in Nagasaki and making summaries of the entries in English. I worked through 80 diaries consisting of 20,000 pages of 17th century handwriting; some were almost impossible to decipher! I wrote a couple of articles based on the discoveries I made but the most significant consequence of my daily diary reading was developing a vivid interest in biography. At that time biography wasn't taken very seriously as an historic genre in The Netherlands. For me, writing history runs through my veins, and so I started popularising this genre as history writing.

By this time I had become president of the *Historisch Platform* (HP, 'Historic Platform') an organisation for young historians in Holland, and was co-founder of its periodical *Historisch Nieuwsblad* which approached history from a journalistic angle. At first it was looked upon by my colleagues with suspicion but within a couple of years it had gained in popularity, something it maintains to this day. Opinions towards HP began to change following its ground-breaking conference on biography and also with the publication of my provocative article 'Who is Afraid of the Historical Biography'. It wasn't long after that HP founded the Committee for the Historical Biography which, together with other initiatives, have helped biography become an accepted and popular genre among historians.

During this time I began work on two biographical projects of my own. Together with Jaap de Moor I edited the complete works of Jacob Haafner, a Dutch novelist who wrote five very readable books on his stay in South Africa, India and Sri Lanka. He was an ardent anti-colonialist and multiculturalist. The biography 'He Who Lives under Palm Trees. The Sublime World of Jacob Haafner (1754-1809)' – was published in Dutch last year. My second project was a biography of the Dutch ethnographer, geographer and populariser of the Dutch Indies P.J. Veth. In fact, I had proposed this as a subject for a PhD, and had been offered a job by the then director of IGEER, Henk Wesseling, as a PhD student, but I declined. While I have always been drawn to the academic world, I realise that teaching is not my cup of tea, so a traditional academic career is not an option. It was a risk, declining such a job offer, especially as my contract with IGEER was coming to an end, but then, in 1993 – as a *deus ex machina* – the editorship of the IIAS came my way.

The world of Asian Studies

What was originally a part-time job quickly evolved into more than a full time job, and I became responsible for the communication division of IIAS. This meant being editor-in-chief of the *IIAS Newsletter*, arranging all IIAS public relations and publications, setting up a database of Asia scholars. The mission outlined by the then IIAS director, Wim Stokhof, was unambiguous: 'Increase the visibility of Asian studies and make IIAS into a well-known facilitator of these studies worldwide.' This was easier said than done, because the world of Asian studies was completely scattered. We did not have the faintest idea, for example, about who in Europe was doing what in Asian studies. So we started to build a database. This became the basis for publishing the *Guide to Asian Studies in Europe* in 1988. This work on the database established that there were more than 6000 people working on Asian studies in Europe. Of course they all became welcome recipients of the *IIAS Newsletter*. Of equal importance, many academics in the field became aware of each others existence and networks were created. Now, with the 50th edition of *The Newsletter* before us, it is hard to imagine that this was the situation 15 years ago.

We saw *The Newsletter's* primary role as a means of communication for a community in the making: that of Asia scholars. It was devised as a source of information on new developments in the field. It was available online from

its inception (even though many scholars at the time asked what the use of such an (electronic) newsletter was!) I still remember a trip Wim Stokhof and I made to the Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) in Washington in 1995. The only thing we took with us was 1500 newsletters and a huge pile of bags with the IIAS logo on them. By the end of the meeting all the bags and newsletters were gone and as we looked around the conference hall our logo was staring back at us from all quarters! Everybody was talking about this new International Asia Institute. *The Newsletter* soon reached a circulation of 15,000 copies worldwide and became one of the premier channels of communication among Asia scholars.

The US and the Eurasian space

At the beginning of 1997 I made a trip to Ann Arbor to see the then Secretary-Treasurer of the AAS, John Campbell, to discuss the idea of an International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS). He agreed that in view of the increasing internationalisation of Asian Studies such a meeting could be a good idea. Although AAS Annual Meetings receive between 2-3000 visitors, they were overwhelmingly American. A more international set-up could be hugely beneficial. Needless to say, IIAS took a big risk organising the first ICAS. Five days before the deadline there were hardly any registrations but then the phenomenon which has come to be known as the 'ICAS miracle' occurred and by the time the deadline passed we had well over 1000 participants from 40 different countries representing the rich tapestry of research traditions in Asian studies.

With the first ICAS under our belts and IIAS well and truly on the map, it was time to focus on finishing my seriously neglected PhD. This I did while Executive Director of the Institute of Comparative Economic and Political Institutions at Amsterdam University (UvA). I finally attained my doctorate in 2000 (*A Lifelong Passion. P.J. Veth and the Dutch East Indies, 1814-1895*). In that same year I became senior policy advisor at the UvA and decided it was time to make a fresh start as a freelancer and independent scholar.

ICAS and EUforAsia

After a successful ICAS 2 in Berlin (2001), Wim Stokhof and I established a secretariat in order to better monitor the ICAS process. We made another important decision to move ICAS to Asia and ICAS 3 was organised in conjunction with the National University of Singapore in 2003. We initiated the ICAS Book Prize which is now in its third edition and has taken on a life of its own (see article on pp. 34-35). The nearly 100 books sent in this time around clearly mark a shift away from traditional to contemporary Asia, with a substantial increase in social science submissions. In 2008-2009 the ICAS publications series will present eight edited volumes, with themes such as Asian material culture, identity and nationalism in Asia and reframing Singapore, based on papers presented at ICAS 4, Shanghai and ICAS 5, Kuala Lumpur. These will be published by Amsterdam University Press.

Without realising it my world has come to revolve around Asia and Asian Studies. I very much look forward to the next ICAS in Daejeon (6-9 August 2009), and we are also looking ahead to ICAS 7 which will be jointly organised with the AAS in Honolulu in 2011. It has the potential of becoming not only the biggest but also the most interesting convention yet.

Most of my time now, however, is focused on the EUforAsia project, the Europe-Asia Policy Forum initiated by IIAS which has received three year funding from the European Commission. The project, in co-operation with the Asia-Europe Foundation, the Singapore Institute of International Affairs and the European Institute for Asian Studies in Brussels will be officially launched on the 29th of April 2009 and there will be an electronic newsletter fully integrated into www.euforasia.eu - and yes, we will, without a doubt, link up with *The Newsletter!*

