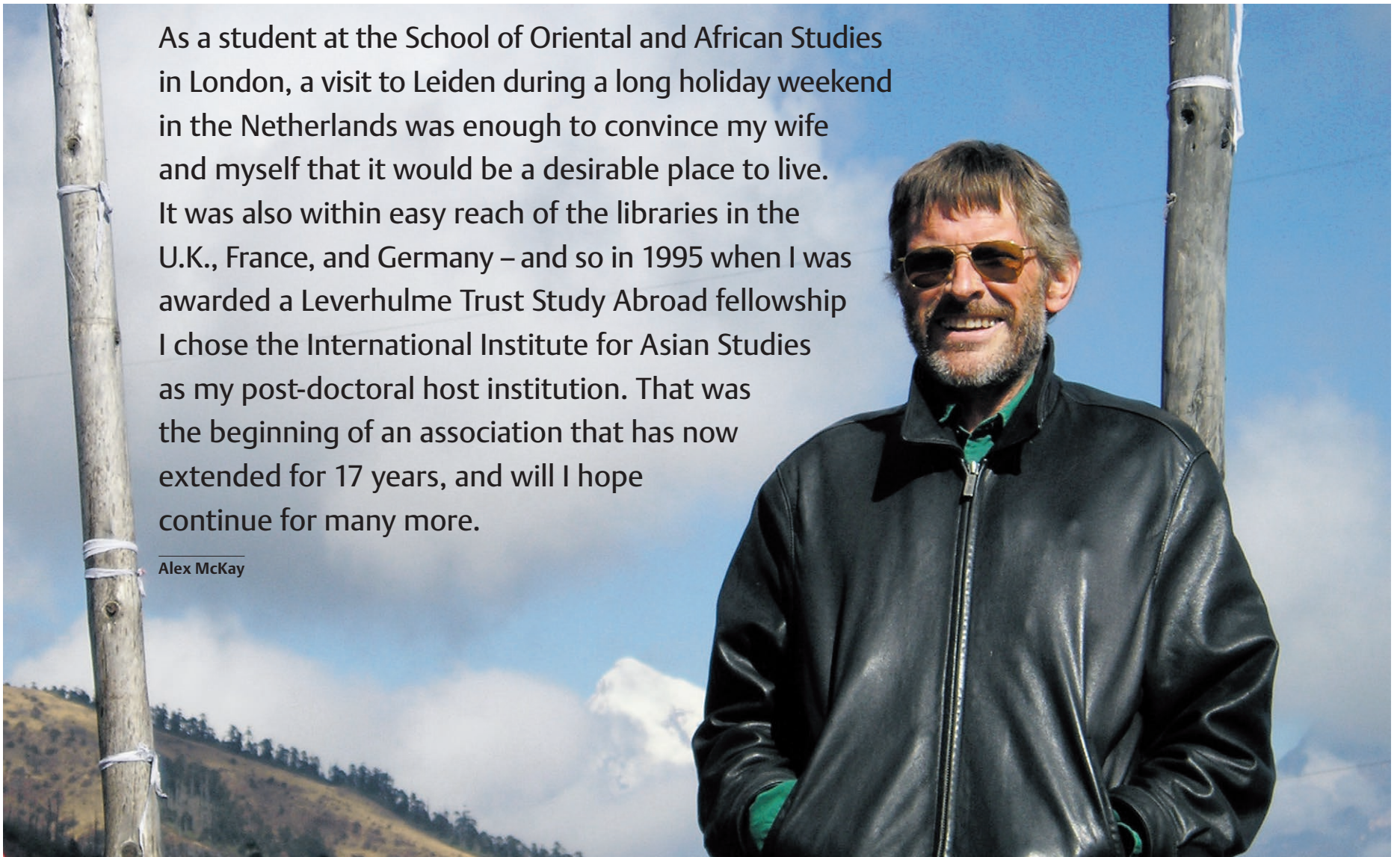


# Cakes, canals, and conferences: 17 years of IIAS

## The Alumnus

As a student at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, a visit to Leiden during a long holiday weekend in the Netherlands was enough to convince my wife and myself that it would be a desirable place to live. It was also within easy reach of the libraries in the U.K., France, and Germany – and so in 1995 when I was awarded a Leverhulme Trust Study Abroad fellowship I chose the International Institute for Asian Studies as my post-doctoral host institution. That was the beginning of an association that has now extended for 17 years, and will I hope continue for many more.

Alex McKay



WHILE THE INITIAL BUREAUCRACY involved in taking up residence in a new country was time-consuming, the IIAS proved the perfect place to be a post-doctoral research fellow in my field of Indo-Tibetan history, and Leiden proved to be a delightful place to live. I confess to having been a complete novice in regard to my new country, indeed I wasn't even quite sure if Leiden was the same town as Leyden, place of publication of so many of the old books I studied! But I soon began to imbibe the cultural history of this remarkable country, to distinguish its regional traditions, and to glean some inklings into the religious and historical forces that produced the unusual blend of social liberalism and familial conservatism that governs this unique land. I also discovered the depth and antiquity of the Leiden tradition of Asian studies, symbolised by the presence of botanical gardens, museums, and that most distinguished of academic publishers, Brill (with whom I now serve as a series editor for their Tibetan Studies Library).

We quickly adapted to shopping at the Saturday market and – after extensive research – became authorities on the cake shops of Leiden. We also ensured we were punctual and learned not to walk on the cycle paths, qualities essential to integration into Dutch society. We even learned to trust public transport timetables, having been accustomed to their entirely fictional English equivalents.

From our 17th century apartment near the corner of Kaiserstraat and Rapenburg, overlooking the canal from above a convivial restaurant, I had just a hundred metre walk along cobbled streets – or even frozen canals – to the IIAS offices, which were then located in the Nonnensteeg. I was given a room overlooking the gardens of the Hortus Botanicus, which I shared with Michel Hockx, now Professor of Chinese at my old university. We turned out to be perfectly matched roommates, both revelling in the opportunity to devote ourselves fully to our chosen subjects. Mine was a history of the pilgrimage to Mount Kailas, a convenient peg on which to hang whatever enquiries I was making, though I also wrote my first book there, on the British-Indian officials who served in Tibet, and edited another with Paul van der Velde.

One of the greatest joys was the chance to bury myself in the Kern Institute – as remarkable a library as SOAS for the Indologist – and the luxury of heading off on a research tangent. Such tangents arose easily at the Institute, with its eclectic mix of scholars. Lunch was communal, and it was there that you could be introduced into the world of Persian poetry or Japanese hunting rituals. Adding to the attraction of IIAS was that the partners of visiting fellows had access to a handy support network in the shape of the International Centre, which offered a meeting place and a programme of tours and events for those whose partners were working in the Leiden academic world.

IIAS was then still a relatively new institution, not necessarily easily slotted into existing university structures. But it reflected the dynamic personalities of 'founding father' Professor Frits Staal (1930-2012) and particularly the Director, Professor Wim Stokhof. He was the driving force behind the development of a truly international Asian research centre, one that served to facilitate and stimulate the encounter between East and West. Stokhof exemplified that vision and oversaw its fulfilment. He supported an extraordinary series of new initiatives, not least the creation of the International Convention of Asian Scholars (ICAS). This has become the leading gathering of Asian scholars in the world today, and I was delighted to be present in my capacity as a judge of the ICAS Book Prize, when Professor Stokhof's initiative was formally recognised at ICAS 7 in Honolulu in 2011. ICAS 8 will be held in Macau in 2013, and already the judging process for that book and dissertation competition is underway.

Essentially, IIAS offers its research fellows a place for them to develop their ideas and to build their careers. You are given an opportunity: whether you take it or not is up to you, but the number of prominent IIAS alumni in the world of Asian studies proves the success of the ideal. IIAS has never been overwhelmed by bureaucracy. Requests for support received prompt and decisive answers and there were opportunities also for fellows to repay that support. For example, after presenting my paper at an international conference in Hungary I took up position at a well-equipped IIAS stall from which I duly offered free IIAS shoulder bags and a copy of The Newsletter to anyone passing. After an initial period of wary suspicion that testified to the atmosphere endured for so long by so many of our colleagues in places such as Iran and Eastern Europe, I was mobbed, but left with no doubt that the gifts had raised the Institute's profile from the Persian Gulf to the Siberian hinterland, and added to the considerable uptake of The Newsletter.

Since my initial stay in Leiden I have returned on a number of occasions, as often as possible in fact. In 2000 my visit coincided with the 10th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, organised by another IIAS fellow, my new roommate and now Leiden university lecturer Henk Blezer. For a week at least, Leiden was the centre of Tibetan studies, and with similar influxes a regular event, the character of IIAS and the streets around it constantly changes as it reflects the regional orientation of such gatherings. I had organised a much more modest event in 1996, with a gathering of specialists on pilgrimage in Tibet, and testifying to the lasting links such events can create, five of the twelve who presented at that conference were present when I acted as Convenor of the 2008 Golden Jubilee Conference of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok, Sikkim. Those links remain among fellows, too, creating world-wide

networks of scholars. I encounter IIAS colleagues across the globe; Hans Hägerdal in Korea, Tak-Wing Ngo in Hawai'i, Ken Wells in Canberra ... the list goes on.

We have been fortunate enough over the years in Leiden to witness so much of what it has to offer; the wonderful formality and tradition of a doctoral viva, the riches of the Ethnography and other museums, herring, and parties on 3 October, the Netherlands scoring five goals against Germany, and the extraordinary, unique spectacle of the Elfstedentocht. Who could have imagined that a cross-country skating race could be so captivating? Then there is Queen's Day, which happens to coincide with my wife's birthday, and musical memories such as Mozart in the Pieterskerk, a string quartet in a small stone room on Breestraat after a viva, or emerging into the winter snow after a concert by the Aboriginal band Yothu Yindi had almost convinced us we were in the Australian desert.

On my most recent visit to IIAS I felt like a senior scholar, or perhaps a living relic, with only my old friend and colleague Paul van der Velde and the soon-to-depart computer wizard Manuel Haneveld still left from the staff during my first visit. IIAS had moved to a new location on the Rapenburg, with a new Director, Professor Philippe Peycam, and boasted an even more complex coffee machine. But behind the doors new visiting scholars were labouring over their books and computer screens, planning new conferences and publications, and developing new networks. The work of IIAS persists, and The Newsletter maintains its window onto current academic events and subject trends. Long may they continue.

**Alex McKay is a specialist in Indo-Tibetan history and culture. He is the author of nearly 40 academic articles, has edited a number of works, including the three-volume *History of Tibet* (RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), and is the author of two monographs (*Tibet and the British Raj: The Frontier Cadre, 1904-1947*, Curzon Press, 1997; and *Footprints Remain: Biomedicine Across the Indo-Tibetan Frontier, 1870-1970*, University of Amsterdam, 2007). He has recently completed a third monograph, a history of the pilgrimage to Mount Kailas, and his current interests focus on Sikkim and Bhutan. He has held various fellowships at the IIAS, and research and teaching posts at London University SOAS and UCL.**