

# Reframing my memory of visiting IAS

## The Alumnus



characteristics of the great works by Johannes Vermeer, Rembrandt, Van Gogh and other artists and sensed the differences between the Dutch paintings and the Chinese ink paintings. Isn't it also an interesting topic to compare the oriental artistic traditions with the European traditions on the study of cultural heritage?

The Netherlands is a country famous for its water – canals, maritime, navigation technology. According to the philosophy of *Zhouyi*, 'water' is the imagery of 'flowing', which contains the abstract meaning of 'time', 'changes' and 'danger'. Combining these meanings we can deduce a new metaphorical meaning: 'chances'. This implies the promotion from an old status to a new level of life. Life is full of miracles, and my visit to IAS at Leiden University in the Netherlands was no doubt a unique one. I hope someday I will have the chance to revisit IAS, and to contribute my research outcomes, especially on the study of culture and cultural heritage.

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My visit to IAS in Leiden, from August 2010 to August 2011, was based on the cooperation signed by IAS and the Taiwanese Ministry of Education many years ago. I was told by Manon Osseweijer, the previous Deputy Director of IAS, that I had been the last 'European Chair of Chinese Studies'; as of 2011 the position became known as the 'Taiwan Chair of Chinese Studies'.

Dennis Cheng

I HAD VISITED EUROPE a few times previously – Italy, Germany and Hungary – but never the Netherlands. This was the second time I had visited an international academic institution focusing on Asian studies; the first had been ARI (Asia Research Institute) at the National University of Singapore, where I served as a senior visiting research fellow from 2007-2008. Following the terms of the contract, the Taiwan MoE provided me a stipend, while IAS provided me a quiet and favorable environment for research, as well as adequate material support in every aspect.

Serving as an international research hub for academic exchanges, IAS recruits new visitors and research fellows from time to time. It was very fruitful for me to know different people from different places through various activities, including brown bag lectures, seminars, drinks and lunch gatherings. By the time I arrived, Professor Philippe Peycam had just reported to duty to serve as the Director of IAS, and I learnt from the Institute's webpage and Newsletters that IAS would start concentrating on the research and promotion of the study of cultural heritage under the leadership of Philippe. Being an expert on *Zhouyi* (*Yijing*, The Book of Changes), which is an ancient Chinese political and philosophical Scripture, as well as a fundamental and theoretical classic for Chinese cultures and religions, I understood that this was what I could contribute to the study on Asian cultural heritage in terms of both material and immaterial aspects.

In my presentation at the 'IAS Fellow Seminar' I gave a brief introduction on "Two types of cosmology in ancient Chinese thought: philosophies of the 'Taiyi shengshui' and the *Yijing*." Obviously my talk was rather new to most of the fellows at the Institute, but provided an interesting perspective on looking back to the ancient spiritual tradition in Asia.

I also offered two courses at Leiden University and organized one workshop on behalf of IAS. To echo the research program of the Institute, I focused my courses on *Zhouyi* and the Asian intellectual tradition. The workshop was entitled "Reading matters: Chinese and Western traditions of interpreting the classics" and extended into the arena of 'hermeneutics'.

My purpose was to build a bridge between the German and the French hermeneutic traditions and the Chinese tradition from a global view. I admired IAS's academic orientation in the field of cultural heritage, focusing more on issues like urbanization, policy and governance, preservation of heritages and education. Obviously emphasizing the long existence of Asian spiritual traditions and working more into the historical and philosophical aspects should be something I could specifically contribute to IAS. I hope my efforts were somewhat useful in providing IAS a certain uniqueness on the study of cultural heritage.

The IAS visit gave me chances to acquire a lot from personal exchanges, and I am glad that until now I am still in close contact with a few scholars (say Professor Funayama Toru from Kyoto University who is a renowned scholar on Buddhism in Medieval Age Asia) and the PhD students I met at IAS. I even had a chance to successfully recommend the student Mr. Rens Krijgsman of Leiden University during his application to the PhD studentship at Oxford University. In Chinese we use the term *yuanfen* [fate, destiny] to describe the occasional yet meaningful gathering of people, and for sure all kinds of gatherings need an instigator (either a person or an institution) to bring people together, to create new outcomes, and this is exactly what IAS successfully achieved. Quite different from the disciplines of natural sciences, in humanities and social sciences, conference rooms and discussion panels are our 'laboratories', while all the chemical changes happen in the minds of the attendants. What can be more helpful and meaningful to visitors than to create an active and friendly atmosphere for research and discussions?

My one year visit in Leiden also provided me a chance to know the Netherlands. Visiting Museums with the Annual Museum Card was my most enjoyable pastime during my visit. The Mauritshuis, the Rijksmuseum and the Van Gogh Museum are among my favorites. Before my visit, I had not yet had a chance to taste the European paintings and observe the subtle techniques, as well as the fantastic thoughts embedded within the materials. One by one I carefully looked into the details of these paintings; I started to recognize the creative

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