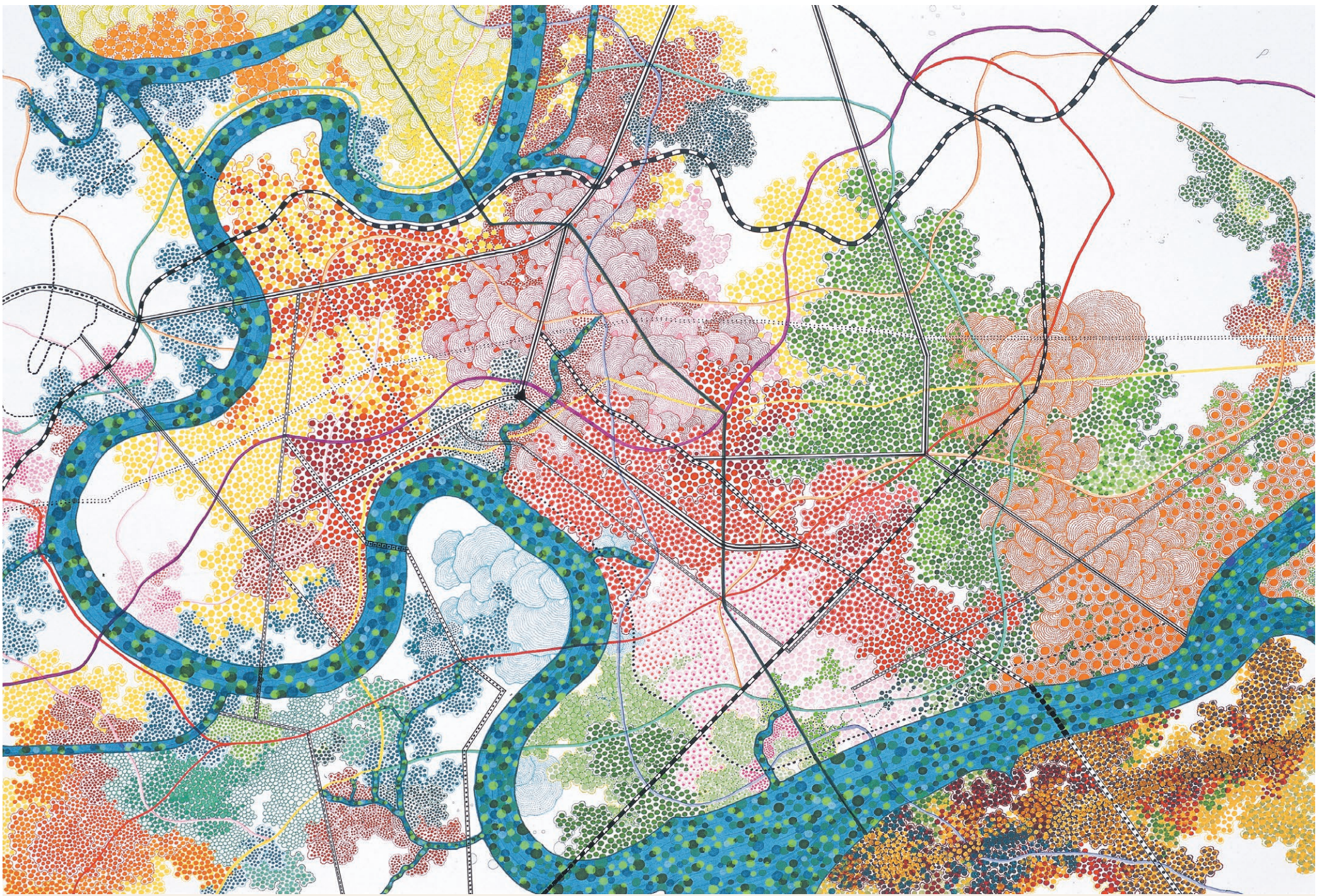


# Something old, something borrowed and something new?



Curiosity and consideration being the first requirements for contextualizing the studies of Asia in a contemporary setting, we would also need to think of how to substantialize our inspirations on this matter. From my experience of working in the field of Asian Studies from the managerial side, some observations spring to mind that are defining the work, and to some extent the course, of ‘the research project’.

Titia van der Maas

WHAT STRIKES ME MOST in my daily work is the uniformity of the research culture within the humanities and social sciences worldwide. Communicating about the outline and objectives of our research project, mostly digital, is just as easy and efficient with our colleagues in Hong Kong as it is with their counterparts in France, Cambodia or the US. Fulfilling agreements with our partner institutes in Jaipur, Accra or Shanghai, with regard to the organization of a conference or workshop, is both in content and logistics hardly a challenge as we can rely on our hardworking and very much motivated colleagues on site. We labor on the merit of a mutual interest: the advancement of our specific field of interest within Asian Studies and similar understandings about the education and networking aspects fundamental to the *mores* of the scholarly world.

The homogeneity within the way the humanities and social sciences are managed (and I'm sure this can be said for the wider scholarly world) brings enormous benefits to the studies on, with and in Asia. Think of the opportunities created by the use of a shared language, both conceptually and linguistically. The enhancement of interpersonal communications, exchange of ideas, and the growth of open access to publications and resources through the internet, is indeed exciting. Also, the institutionalized and often generic way in which academic knowledge and funding is acquired contributes to a continuity of the studies – albeit, this development is paralleled to a trend of diminishing funding and lack of general interest in the cultural and language studies. Lastly, the global interchangeability of knowledge concepts, students and academic staff is astonishing: the introduction of the BA and MA system worldwide, allowing shared notions of conceptual knowledge within the humanities and social sciences, and additionally, the tenure track system for those who aspire to a lifelong career as a scholar, providing continuity in global career moves.

### Alternative interpretations

So what does a working environment characterized by uniformity mean for the advancement of a research network aimed at ‘reframing’ Asian Studies? As mentioned above, the current academic infrastructure facilitates multiple opportunities for exchanging people, knowledge and money, in a way that may have been possible two decennia ago, but certainly not on such a scale and in such an efficient way as is possible today.

But this involves a challenge. Because how does one encourage alternative conceptual thinking in such an established scholarly world, in terms of research traditions, hierarchy on the work floor, and research funding requirements? When aspiring to provide the field of Asian Studies with alternative interpretations, this is in fact something to consider. The genesis of knowledge transmission remains the relationship between teacher and student. Recalling my own incentives to obtain an MA in history, I must mention the magnificent teachers I had for this subject both at secondary school and university. Their ability to visualize the past and explain its relevance to today's world still amazes me now, especially if you take into account the bunch of indifferent teenagers we were in school.

Even though factual knowledge and pedagogical skills are prerequisites for a lecturer, how does one teach their students to think independently or to be critical about the establishment? Even more so because the students are part of it themselves, or have the future promise of becoming so. During my time at university, the professors were all –with exception of a few –nearly pensioned, white men. Without being too cynical here, they were generally inappreciative of any criticism about their field of interest and, moreover,

Above: Image used in conjunction with the Artistic Intervention Roundtable reproduced courtesy of multimedia artist Tiffany Chung.

their theories that we had to base our essays on. So imagine you learned on-the-job in a Starbucks franchise, but you're eager to start your own coffee bar, thus competing with your former employer? It's not easy to find an investor and to oppose the almost dogmatic popular coffee market – if you'll allow me to use this metaphor.

### Defiance required

Parallel to the ‘franchised’ humanities and social sciences, which we benefit from for all of the above mentioned good reasons, institutes working on the advancement of Asian Studies should also facilitate ‘defiant’ thoughts, or at least stage alternative narratives. This will require getting out of our comfort zone in terms of interdisciplinary and inclusive thinking and with regard to the management of our personal and professional favoritisms. If we would like Asian Studies to remain relevant to a new generation of students and if we endeavor to link the field of studies to contemporary historical developments, we will need to invite the *unusual* suspects – young and creative people – into the existing academic infrastructure, promote new teaching methods, and provide scholarships – however small to start with – as seed funding for alternatives in conceptualizing, writing about and teaching Asian Studies.

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