

Amsterdam sojourns

OOI Keat Gin is an award-winning author whose scholarly works have been published by internationally renowned publishers. He has held fellowships at institutions in the UK, Europe, and Australia. Elected as a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society (London), Dr Ooi's fields of interest are the socio-cultural and socio-economic history of South-east Asia with particular preoccupation on Borneo. He has had several reference works commissioned by British and American publishers, including bibliographies and historical dictionaries. Presently he is professor of modern history and coordinator of the Asia-Pacific Research Unit (APRU) (www.hum.usm.my/APRU) in the School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and founder-editor-in-chief of the International Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies (IJAPS) (www.usm.my/ijaps). He is series editor of the APRU-USM Asia Pacific Studies Publication Series (AAPSPS).

OOI Keat Gin

IIAS WAS HONOURED TO WELCOME OOI Keat Gin as an affiliate fellow in 2002-2004 at our Amsterdam branch, and so we invited him to tell our readers a bit about his experiences in the Netherlands, and at IIAS.

Meeting Amsterdam

Amsterdam conjures pleasant images for me. It has been more than a decade since I was first beholden with the picturesque canals and assortment of bicycles and cyclists whizzing through the cobbled, narrow streets of this enchanting city. The 'red-light' district was undoubtedly an attraction equal to the art museums showcasing the Dutch Grand Masters and the irrepressible Van Gogh that bestowed to the world indeed an indelible 'Impression'. Regardless of all the intriguing, memorable, and delightful sideline distractions and attractions, the real aim of my initial visit and subsequent sojourns were of an intellectual nature, relating to research, study, and writing. This intellectual preoccupation has led me to return to Amsterdam on an almost annual basis, and to maintain an off-and-on relationship with this Dutch city.

My first short-stay in Amsterdam, more of a village than a city, was in 2000 when I was on an exploratory visit. My intention was then to survey the ground – the archives and libraries – for the possibility of embarking on work relating to the Pacific War (1941-5), on what was then termed Dutch Borneo. Having spent close to half a decade examining the war years in Sarawak, Brunei, and North Borneo (present-day Sabah), it was only logical and inevitable that I moved onto the vast southern and eastern portions of the island, comprising Indonesia Kalimantan. I visited both the library of *Universiteit van Amsterdam* (University of Amsterdam) and the archives of the *Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie* (NIOD, Netherlands Institute for War Documentation). My first impressions were comical and daunting; I was initially not able to even find the bookshelves at the former, while overwhelmed by the collections at the latter.

My next visit was late November 2001. It was auspicious, as well as a little traumatic because I lost my passport. It was a great honour to be an invited speaker at the conference 'The Asia-Pacific War: Experiences and Reflections', jointly organized by three Dutch institutions, viz. NIOD, International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), and The Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV). The venue was split between Amsterdam and Leiden. Dr Elly Touwen-Bousma of NIOD, who had invited me, requested that I deliver two papers for the conference; one in Amsterdam, and another in Leiden. It was during this trip that I met up with Dr Remco Raben who was instrumental in my return to the Netherlands.

Meeting IIAS

Between 2002 and 2004 I was an IIAS Affiliate Fellow. Dr Remco Raben certainly had a hand in my appointment. I opted to be at the IIAS Amsterdam Branch Office – which was unfortunately closed at the end of 2011 – to allow the convenience of my research, largely at NIOD. At the same time I also made repeated visits to the *Nederlands Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken* (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives), and *Algemeen Rijksarchief* (National Archives)

in The Hague. My research sojourns ranged from three to four months allowing me to celebrate Queen's Day and savour *loempia* (Vietnamese eggroll) during Amsterdam's spring months. It was then that I had the acquaintance of a most helpful 'angel' in Heleen van der Minne, then secretary at IIAS Amsterdam Branch Office. Professor Mario Rutten was branch director in those years; he on his part introduced me to the paraphernalia and excitement of Dutch football.

Life as an Affiliate Fellow was rather pleasant and privileged with an office with most of the usual facilities including an internet-accessed PC, a comfortable chair, and plenty of space to 'arrange' books and files. Quietness was what I remembered best in my office, literally 'hear-a-pin-drop' scenario. I was indeed grateful for this serenity where contemplation and deep reflection could make one productive. The small but comfortable studio I was accommodated in was literally on the edge, or perhaps part of Amsterdam's 'red-light' district. Initially the cacophony of conversations, laughter, and shouting from the establishment (night club?) across the narrow street extended my waking hours past midnight; however, as I adapted, I slept soundly thereafter from the disruptions of the first few nights. I was equally productive in the cosy studio as I was in the spartan office. Breaks from the latter took me over to the main office to share coffee, a cookie or two, and conversations with Heleen. Fortunate or unfortunate I did not seem to be able to meet up with other Fellows; only occasional brief encounters in the corridor. I supposed everybody was preoccupied and socializing was perhaps the least of their priorities.

During my 2002 stay in Amsterdam, Dr Sikko Visscher paid me a visit that subsequently led me to organize a workshop for the 'Brokers of Capital and Knowledge' research group at the Centre for Asian Studies Amsterdam, Amsterdam School for Social Science Research (CASA/ASSR), *Universiteit van Amsterdam*, led by Professor Otto van den Muijzenberg. As coordinator of the Asia Pacific Research Unit (APRU), School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, I played host to these Dutch scholars and their colleagues from various countries. In a sense, through them I reconnected to Amsterdam and the Netherlands.

Back east again, over dinner at a hilltop restaurant in tropical Singapore, a gentleman guest to my right inquired of my current project. I was then in the preliminary stages of editing a three-volume reference work on Southeast Asian history. He immediately offered to launch this work upon its completion; not in Leiden where he was then based, but suggested Amsterdam, that according to him was more to my temper and taste. This was Professor Wim Stokhof, then IIAS director, who kept his word when he later invited me to Amsterdam in mid-November 2004 to attend the IIAS-launching of my *Southeast Asia: A Historical Encyclopedia, from Angkor Wat to East Timor*, 3 volumes (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2004). The ceremony was held at the historic hall where the *Heeren Zeventien* (literally: The Gentlemen Seventeen, who comprised the board of directors of the VOC) had once discussed the affairs of the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC, [Dutch] United East India Company), from the early seventeenth century to the late eighteenth century. Earlier in the morning of that auspicious day I chaired an



IIAS roundtable seminar themed 'Southeast Asian Studies in Europe: Reflections and New Directions'. Thanks indeed to Heleen in securing the historic venue for a historic occasion in my annals. Wim kept his promise and I am ever grateful to him for his faith, confidence and recognition of my labours.

Further sojourns

My involvement in the 'Indonesia in the Pacific War Project', headed by Dr Peter Post led to my appointment as Visiting Research Fellow (2006) of NIOD. I reconnected with Remco whose desk was in the same room as mine. In the early part of my three-month stay, Amsterdam was wet and cold, but towards the last fortnight the weather turned hot and steamy. Window shopping along the Kalverstraat and browsing through bookshops were my Saturday afternoon delights.

I returned to Amsterdam in late May 2007 to deliver a public lecture at the International Information Centre and Archives of the Women's Movement (IIAV), organized by the Asian Studies in Amsterdam (ASiA) in cooperation with IIAV. It was Sikko, then at ASiA, who liaised with IIAV to realize this occasion. I was visibly impressed with the enormous collection of materials housed at IIAV. Three years later in August 2010 I was again in Amsterdam as an invited participant of the 21st International Congress of Historical Sciences (ICHS). On both occasions I presented work related to female domestic labour.

In my more than a decade-long connecting and re-connecting with Amsterdam, the comings and goings of researchers at NIOD was as baffling as the continuous shifting of premises of the IIAS Amsterdam Branch Office. This mobility and change fortunately did not affect Amsterdam itself as *de wallen* remained as they had been since my first arrival and Van Gogh's masterpieces could still be admired. The never-ending renovations and/or numerous facelifts to *Centraal Station* were an enduring feature throughout my intermittent visits.

My Amsterdam sojourns in no small measure contributed to two of my book-length works, namely *The Japanese Occupation of Borneo, 1941-1945* (London: Routledge, 2011), and *Post-war Borneo, 1945-1950: Nationalism, Empire, and State-building* (London: Routledge, forthcoming). And through the years there were numerous other journal publications here and there, in between Schiphol and Penang.

On reflection, being an IIAS affiliate fellow, based in its branch office in Amsterdam, I could access immense opportunities to tap the resources beneficial for my research. This affiliation certainly 'opened' doors with institutions throughout the Netherlands. This affiliated fellowship allowed me to 'refresh' myself intellectually each year between 2002 and 2004, away from my home campus routine back in Penang. I am indeed grateful for this experience. And as an IIAS alumnus the *Newsletter* certainly keeps me 'connected', kudos to those whose efforts are greatly appreciated.

I am scheduled to return to the Netherlands for a sojourn in Leiden, during the second half of 2013. I will be based at the Department of History, Leiden University, but I shall certainly visit IIAS to hopefully reconnect with its many exciting and thought-provoking talks and seminars, and if opportunity arises, I might deliver a paper or two. Amsterdam certainly will be on my itinerary; it is where Swee Im, my wife and I spent wonderful and memorable times in the past. Did I also mention the succulent duck bought from Amsterdam's Chinatown with which we home-cooked a most agreeable curry? For that, and the fresh salmon at the Albert Cuyp Market, another visit is more than worth it. *Dank u wel.*

OOI Keat Gin, School of Humanities,
Universiti Sains Malaysia.