

The Newsletter is a free periodical published by IIAS. As well as being a window into the institute, The Newsletter also links IIAS with the community of Asia scholars and the worldwide public interested in Asia and Asian studies. The Newsletter bridges the gap between specialist knowledge and public discourse, and continues to serve as a forum for scholars to share research, commentary and opinion with colleagues in academia and beyond.

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Beyond the 'competitive' model

Philippe Peycam

After the frenzy of ICAS 11, the IIAS team has been taking stock of what this exceptional event meant not only for future ICAS events but also for the institute and its other activities, along with its capacity to do things in an always more innovative, inclusive and meaningful fashion.

One of the important meetings that took place at ICAS 11 directly dealt with the question of the role of 'area studies' academic institutions such as IIAS and the ways in which they can best serve as interdisciplinary, transcultural/national platforms. I am referring to the workshop "Institutional Support for Area Studies in Europe – Trends, Opportunities, Limitations", a joint IIAS/GIS-ASIE roundtable organised under the aegis of the European Alliance of Asian Studies (EAAS). The workshop was significant in that it sought to freely discuss the situation in which – in the context of Europe, and a perception shared by many institutions devoted to Asia studies – their work of developing a contextualised comprehension of regions and societies of the world, and 'their' entanglements with 'ours', has not always been well appreciated within academia and within society.

Area (Asia) studies must be recognised as a unique vector of knowledge with its multiplier effects, not just in terms of scholarly research 'impacts', or the direct benefits of training language and country or region 'specialists', but in its potential to formulate new methodologies (comparisons and connections), new pedagogies (transcending mental and institutional boundaries), and new relationships (between societies, between situated experiences, between the academic and non-academic communities).

In the last two decades at least, the restructuring of higher education and the trend towards its corporatisation characterised by a sharp decline in funding support, especially after the 2008-10 financial crisis, has meant that area studies scholars and their institutions have been subjected to an increase in narrow bureaucratic scrutiny and an exacerbated competition to prove their economic 'sustainability', a process resulting in soaring precariousness for their members and for the development of these organisations.

Against this Social Darwinist trend, a number of institutions have set out to move beyond the current prescribed logic of competition by exchanging their experiences while trying to revisit some of their programmatic, even epistemological, models with a renewed interest in globally connected, reciprocated collaborations. At stake for these organisations and the individual scholars in their midst, is a recognition on the part of the public (state), civic (society) and private (foundation) sectors of the need to better support their unique research, educational and service capabilities, including the importance of continuing to train in languages.

One challenge they are facing is to engage substantively with national and international (EU) agencies that are meant to fund them, a task few feel qualified to achieve by themselves, hence the existence of the European Alliance for Asian Studies, and along with it, the organisation by two of its members of the workshop at ICAS. The critical aim of that exploratory meeting was to ascertain to what extent European and national state structures as well as foundations could be included in conversations about the (re-) working of Asia (area) studies in our always more entangled and diverse societies. One question was whether some of the existing funding programmes (Marie Curie, ERC, VIDI, ANR, etc.) could be better adapted, and supplemented, to promote the consolidation and renovation of 'area studies' in Europe.

A reality that the discussions in Leiden highlighted was a sense of disconnect that presently exists between these support mechanisms as they operate today and the actual working of area/Asia studies programmes. There is a shared view among the latter that when funding schemes exist, they are usually too rigidly framed to fit their needs. That they tend to privilege projects with prescriptive responses, often promoting quantifiable if not positivist approaches that do not properly reflect the subtle shifts intervening in today's post-Cold War, post-colonial world, and the practice of area studies that draws from it.

Also, these mechanisms tend to stress systemic competition among individuals rather than the need for more collaborative

capacity building initiatives. They (EU's Erasmus Mundi for instance) create complex bureaucratic models often at the expense of organically developed modes of cooperative engagement. As is similar in other branches of the humanities and the social sciences, these programmes follow a quantitative evaluation system originating from the hard sciences, with insistence on 'metrics' rather than substance, and on short term 'deliverables' as opposed to long term transformative processes.

One way to remedy the current marginalisation of area studies, as proposed by the workshop participants, is to encourage more direct, reciprocal collaborative immersions in the regions under study, and to do this in relation to other areas so as to facilitate comparisons. A model of decentred, multi-polar learning should in turn facilitate the capacities of scholars to grapple with urgent topics of global concerns, which a narrow definition of 'Asia' no longer helps to elucidate: phenomena of ecological mutations, digitisation and media, mass urbanisation, ubiquity of English at the cost of other languages, opposing medical systems, issues of political and academic freedom, etc.

To achieve this, academic area studies programmes and their institutional funders should learn to work together in a more horizontal, proactive fashion. More regular interactions and more flexibility in collaboration is needed to support diversified approaches of engagement, beyond the rigid 'competitive' individualised metrics-based grant model. Long term cooperation between European academic organisations and their Asian and global counterparts, in close interaction with their respective social environments, should be encouraged. More than ever, there is a need for all players involved, funding agencies included, to re-invent Asia/area studies by recognising the ever-growing interconnection of societies, aspects of historical permanence and fluidities, while acknowledging that movements of people and ideas continue, even if restricted and orientated.

Philippe Peycam
Director IIAS

Call for applications

We invite applications for the Chair of Taiwan Studies at Leiden University. The Chair provides a Professorial Fellow position of five or ten months for a visiting scholar in Taiwan Studies to teach and conduct research at Leiden University and the International Institute for Asian Studies (Leiden, The Netherlands). The Fellowship covers (one or both of) the two semesters September 2020-January 2021, and February-June 2021.

To facilitate the Taiwan Studies Programme at Leiden University, the Department of Cross-Strait Education of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of China, Taiwan, the Leiden University Faculty of Humanities and the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) have jointly established a Chair of Taiwan Studies, based at the Faculty of Humanities. The Chair provides a Professorial Fellow position for a visiting scholar in Taiwan Studies, preferably, but not exclusively, in the fields of Critical Heritage Studies, Urban Studies or the study of Global Asia, which are the IIAS' focal areas.

For five or ten months in the academic year 2020-2021, the position will be open to applicants from all universities and research

institutes in Taiwan or elsewhere. Candidates with a full professorial position at their home institution whose research focuses on Taiwan and preferably falls within any of the fields mentioned above are particularly welcome to apply.

The Chair of Taiwan Studies will teach and conduct research at Leiden University and IIAS. The Ministry of Education in Taiwan and IIAS at Leiden University will sponsor round-trip airfare, living expenses, accommodation, office facilities, as well as relevant expenses for one research conference.

The Professorial Fellow can invite one master's degree or PhD student affiliated with the Professorial Fellow's home institution to come to Leiden for a short-term study or exchange visit during the Fellow's stay in Leiden.

Professorial Fellowship for the Chair of Taiwan Studies at Leiden University, the Netherlands, 2020-2021



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands



Please submit applications (CVs in both Mandarin and English; one proposal in English) to the Education Division of the Taipei Representative Office in the EU and Belgium at belgium@mail.moe.gov.tw

Applications should include suggestions for a teaching course, or courses, at BA or MA level.

Application deadline: 16 April 2020

For further information,
please contact:

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