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# Reinventing the academic conference

Philippe Peycam



Two months have passed since the 11th International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS 11) in Leiden concluded. In the memory of most of the participants I met or talked to it was probably the best ICAS event we have ever organised. A number of reasons can be invoked. One of them, which has been repeatedly pointed out, is the particularly smooth organisation, a mark of the outstanding professionalism displayed by the IIAS-hosted ICAS team or 'Secretariat'. It was also the extremely friendly and dedicated team of staff and volunteers, many of them students at Leiden University, who gave a human face to the whole organisation. It was also the beauty of the old city of Leiden and the experience of walking between venues along canals and cobblestone streets. Also, the perfect weather: not too cold, not too hot.

Behind this collection of factors, was a number of choices that were made, and the adherence to certain values that inhabited the minds of the organisers. They proved critical for what I consider to be a reinvention of the academic (area studies) conference model.

## In the community

It was first the idea of fusing the conference, the university and the city of Leiden into one single experiential thrust. That the activities of the entire event could take place simultaneously in different venues and spaces, contributed to blurring the lines between spheres dedicated to academic activities and public areas or 'commons', where citizens move freely.

Associated with this embeddedness is the fact that ICAS events have become platforms on which different modes of intellectual expression and exchanges are allowed; this, in addition to the usual panels enshrined in more prescriptive modes of communication. Of course, panels and roundtables are important, and they constituted the bulk of all the discussions that took place. But there were other modes of conversation: interactive visits to museums and their (Asian) collections, use of facilities such as local theatres for music and film showings, municipal buildings turned into art exhibitions, public parks in which acts of 'embodied knowledge' were demonstrated, a café-community centre turned into an open platform where participants discussed issues related to academic freedom (an IIAS initiative managed by its fellows). Perhaps the most emblematic of all events was the opening ceremony in the Hooglandse Kerk, one of the city's largest churches, an event preceded by a 'procession' through the old city centre, led by the city mayor.

This embedment of the conference stresses the civic role of academic pursuit, and that of its designated institutions. ICAS now runs an inclusive space in which different social

stakeholders – from academic to cultural institutions, from citizen associations to cities and regions – work hand-in-hand to promote scholarly knowledge in society. It was particularly refreshing to see the 444 year-old Leiden University engage with its societal and urban environments and closely work with the organising partners, IIAS and the French Academic Network for Asian Studies (GIS Asie), to serve the large community of scholars and practitioners of the world.

## A horizontal model

ICAS 11 in Leiden was a diverse platform in which no group – regional, national, disciplinary – overshadowed another. There was a balanced proportion of participants from Asia, Europe, North America, but also Africa, Latin America, and Russia, representing a wide array of academic disciplines and other forms of knowledge, from visual arts to journalism, social activism, diplomacy and policymaking. The variety of thematically defined events, moreover, rather than disciplinary or regionally-bounded ones, facilitated exchanges between people with different focus or backgrounds.

The 'horizontal' model of academic exchange, inclusive of the diversity of actors, did not call for 'keynote speeches' or top-down interventions by a handful of pundits setting the terms of discussions. There were a multitude of meaningful interventions delivered across the whole event. This diversity of approaches or positionalities does not of course preclude a common aspiration for an epistemological overarching coherence, what David Lowenthal describes as an elusive quest for the unity of knowledge. It just recognises that no single form of intellectual expression can claim exclusive ownership on knowledge-sharing.

Put together, these qualities contributed to making the ICAS 11 Leiden event a memorable experience for all its participants.

## Asia and Europe, Asia in Europe.

One key question for the organisers was how to negotiate the 'European' character of ICAS 11 to avoid falling into the old reification trap. With the motto 'Asia and Europe, Asia in Europe', our aim was to revisit the relation between the two constructed entities of Europe and Asia by acknowledging their existence while pointing to their own entanglement, hence the 'in Europe'. The conference touched on multiple sites of human agency in which the two world regions are enmeshed: transregional migrations, cultural intertwining as a result of past colonial and postcolonial connections, economic and political forms of integration, with for instance the Chinese-led Belt and

Road Initiative. What we sought to instil in the discussions is the need to problematise those reified notions that are Asia and Europe as well as those of the nation-states within them.<sup>2</sup>

An acute awareness to history was what allowed the organisers – IIAS, Leiden University, and GIS Asie – not to shy away from past legacies. It was the opening speech by Judi Mesman, Dean of the Leiden University College (LUC) in The Hague, who acknowledged the legacy of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia and the need for the youth in the Netherlands to learn about this chapter of their country's history. Judi organised the ICAS 11 pre-event entitled 'Asia and Europe: Histories of Entanglement' including discussions on the experience of young Dutch with Asian backgrounds growing up in a European city environment. There was the Experiential School 'Reading Leiden' organised by the IIAS Humanities across Borders programme in which young scholars from Asia and Africa dissected the city of Leiden and its multiple Asian and African connections, this with the collaboration of Leiden-based cultural organisations, reversing the trend of western/northern scholars doing their 'field' study in the south. Many other initiatives within ICAS contributed to this effort toward the decentring and recentring of Europe vis-à-vis Asia and the world.

All in all, these efforts to blur the lines appeared to have caught the imagination of the participants (as well as other citizens), individuals and institutions, who did not mistake ICAS Leiden for a European conference on Asia. They saw ICAS 11 as a global knowledge sharing event, with the added value of being situated in one regional cultural setting. In this way, Europe's relevance in Asia knowledge production was not only stripped of its old tinsels, but it found itself enhanced as a legitimate global centre of knowledge on and with Asia. This may be the enduring legacy of ICAS 11 Leiden.

Philippe Peycam  
Director IIAS

### Notes

- 1 The choice of appellations as broad and vague as 'Europe' and 'Asia' means, moreover, that a multiplicity of centres exist in the two regions. The European Alliance for Asian Studies, a platform representing institutions from different parts of Europe including GIS Asie and IIAS, played a very active role in ICAS 11.
- 2 One of the pre-conference meetings organised by the Engaging with Vietnam network named its own event 'Vietnam and Europe, Vietnam in Europe', pointing to the hybrid character of both European and Vietnamese notions as a result of many connecting threads woven throughout history.