

The Double Degree in Critical Heritage Studies

A most rewarding challenge

Edwin Pietersma

In March 2018, I graduated with an MA in Asian Studies from Leiden University, opting for the IIAS Double Degree in Critical Heritage Studies. Through this programme, I also graduated with an MA from the Department of Anthropology at National Taiwan University in January 2020.



Edwin Pietersma in the 'Sweat Room' of the Leiden University Academy Building, where after graduation he was allowed to sign his name on the wall, in accordance with university tradition.

My studies in Leiden and then at National Taiwan University (NTU) are experiences that I will remember for the rest of my life. I became interested in Asian Studies during my first year as a bachelor's student of History at the University of Groningen. I soon got fed up with the Eurocentric approach to history, where everything eventually ended up with historians feeling the need to include Europe as the main protagonist, and I decided to change my direction and do a minor in 'Non-Western History'. It led to a fascination for Japanese history, in particular Meiji history and Japanese colonialism. After this, as I had developed a more profound interest in the country, I decided to go to Japan and learn the language. It led to a year abroad at Osaka University, where I reached the N2 level in Japanese (B2/C1 according to the CEFR), and was able to conduct research in Japanese that would form the basis of my two theses; and later led to a new adventure, which was Taiwan.

I was the second person following this track of the IIAS Double Degree programme in Critical Heritage Studies at National Taiwan University. Learning from my predecessor, I had understood that proficiency in Mandarin was recommended but not necessary. Instead, a show of commitment would suffice. Given my experience with Japanese, I knew learning Mandarin would not be easy yet crucial for a

successful stay. Therefore, from August 2018 to February 2019, I enrolled in a Mandarin language centrum affiliated with NTU (the Chinese Language Division). I was extremely fortunate to be granted the *Huayu Mandarin Enrichment*-scholarship from the Taiwanese Ministry of Education. These six months of 15 hours of class and 25 hours of self-study each week were a fantastic start to this adventure, as it allowed me to settle into the country smoothly. Even though I had acquainted myself with the Chinese characters before my relocation, I knew it would be near impossible to master the language this soon. Assuming that this would not be a problem, I continued my application and was accepted into NTU in November 2018.

Before, and after, my acceptance into the programme, I often met with the Faculty's director, Dr Lin Kai-Shi. With extreme kindness and concern, his door was always open for anyone needing guidance and advice. However, these discussions soon revealed a misunderstanding about the language requirements: while the first candidates of the Double Degree programme could still circumvent the (official) language requirements, this would no longer be possible for future students. He advised me that I should just try. Language indeed became my biggest struggle, as most of my classes were in Mandarin.

A stark difference between Leiden University and NTU, which became more

apparent in the second semester with the arrival of two other students from Leiden, was the class structure and setting. Being accustomed to the education system of the Netherlands, I was unaware of how privileged I was. At home, classes last no longer than two hours with a limited number of assignments and readings, carefully mapped out in a set number of hours translated to ECTS. In Taiwan's case, which is American-based, credits are calculated based on the number of hours spent in class each week. This means that a three-credit course is three hours per week of class, excluding assignments and readings. Often, there is a syllabus with minimal information. This situation allows room for the teacher's creativity and freedom and for more dynamics in the classroom. However, this system also leads to notable differences in the work-load of the various courses with a similar number of credits. For one class, I only had to show up every week while having no readings and a final writing assignment of two pages. For another, I had to read a book of over 400 pages before class, write a reflection before and after class, join an extra two-hour reading group, and write an end-of-term paper. Both classes were awarded the same number of credits. Therefore, it was hard to plan and at the end of the semester I felt like I had been on a rollercoaster. There were also other miscommunications, such as about the necessary credits to fulfil. An added challenge was that Taiwanese students usually spend three years on this programme. I was trying to do it in one year, in a language I did not yet fully master.

Several factors led to the completion of the degree. First of all, it would not have been possible without the kindness and flexibility of the professors. I was fortunate to have already received such kindness from IIAS and again in Taiwan. Secondly, the vibrancy and beauty of the country also helped a lot. For example, in Taipei and on Green Island, I visited heritage sites of the martial-law period. Traveling around the country allowed me to reconsider many of my previous assumptions on topics I had already researched for years, something I had not imagined possible. Another bonus was the food markets, one found just across campus, allowing me to have a small moment of indulgence every day. Thirdly, I was equally blessed with my partner living in Thailand and our plans to meet every month, either in the countries we lived or somewhere in between. This allowed me to intensify my experience with different perspectives across Asia and appreciate how much I learned from classes and living in Taipei.

After completing the degree, I moved to Thailand as my immediate future plans were unsure. However, due to the pandemic I had to return to the Netherlands by the end of March. In the meantime, I have been applying for jobs and academic opportunities. I have not yet been able to return to Thailand, Taiwan, or Japan. Currently, I am working for the Dutch Health Agency in tackling the coronavirus by helping people get tested for the virus. I often look back on the Double Degree programme with pride and happiness. In the future, I hope to find a job or PhD position to which I can apply myself with the same amount of excitement and determination as for the Double Degree. And to pay forward some

of the received kindness. Here, I want to express my gratitude to IIAS, particularly Dr Elena Paskaleva, Dr Willem Vogelsang, Dr Philippe Peycam, and all the professors and staff at the National Taiwan University, including Dr Kai-Shi Lin, Dr Cheng-Heng Chang, Dr David Cohen, and Hui-Xuan.

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Over the past few years, IIAS has been intensively engaged with the Leiden University Institute for Area Studies (LIAS) and targeted Asian partners in the development of a special master's (and PhD) track in the field of 'Critical Heritage Studies'. The uniqueness of this initiative is that the MA in Leiden will be combined with a parallel set of courses at a number of Asian universities, allowing for the students to obtain a double degree at the end of their training.

To date, the Asian partners involved are National Taiwan University in Taiwan and Yonsei University in South Korea, and contacts with other possible Asian partner institutes have been established.

At Leiden University, students can opt for a specialisation in Critical Heritage Studies of Asia and Europe within the MA Asian Studies track 'History, Arts and Culture'. Inspired and supported by the IIAS Asian Heritages research cluster, the curriculum allows students to explore the contested character of all representations of culture, the plurality of notions of heritage in Asian and European contexts, and the way distinct and conflicting values of indigenous, local communities and official state discourses are negotiated.

Upon successful completion of the whole programme, the students will obtain three diplomas in total: the Leiden University MA diploma, the partner university MA diploma (two-year programme, of which the Leiden MA qualifies as one year) and a separate certificate for the Double MA Degree in Critical Heritage Studies of Asia and Europe, issued by IIAS.

The 'Double Degree in Critical Heritage Studies' programme is supervised by Dr Elena Paskaleva (IIAS/LIAS), coordinator of the Asian Heritages cluster at IIAS.

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More information:
<https://www.iias.asia/programmes/critical-heritage-studies>



Above: Visiting Kaohsiung, Taiwan, with family.