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Change and continuity, transformation and commitment

Philippe Peycam

Change is the nature of things, and the last months have been rich in new developments for IIAS. The main one was the decision to resort to an online ICAS event, set to commence alongside the publication of this edition of The Newsletter. The online format is something we initially thought could be avoided until it became clear that the world was still in the grips of the pandemic. Since the decision was made, our colleagues of the ICAS Secretariat (Martina Van den Haak, Wai Cheung, Narutai Riangkruar, Paul Van der Velde) have worked tirelessly with their counterparts at Kyoto Seika University to ensure that the event would remain the vibrant and inclusive experience that has always characterized ICAS conventions. All that is technically and logistically possible has been done to ensure maximum accessibility and unconstrained interactions. I know how much our colleagues have been working, and are still doing so, so I want to take this opportunity to thank them on behalf of the whole IIAS team. The event, which will take place from August 24-28, will display a vast array of activities, bringing together nearly 2,000 contributors for a period of five days.

Another internal development within IIAS has been the recruitment of a new editorial team for the IIAS Newsletter as part of an overhaul of the institute's dissemination and communication strategy. For now, we are pleased to welcome Dr. Paramita Paul and Dr. Benjamin Linder as Newsletter Editor and

Assistant Editor, respectively. Their task began almost immediately after Sonja Zweegers formally handed the responsibility over to them. With Paramita and Ben, we plan to make use of the Newsletter's central visibility position to embed its production within a fluid series of online-based dissemination and communication instruments, from podcasts to the production of small films, while maintaining a strong textual component. The innovations developed by the ICAS team will certainly impact the way IIAS's own communication and dissemination will be organized. For now, however, we want to ensure a minimum of disruption in all of the IIAS communication operations.

In this period of transformations, many of which were accelerated – if not triggered – by the pandemic, I want to stress IIAS's unflinching determination to continue its work as promoter and facilitator of knowledge exchanges on, with and in Asia. We remain convinced that no academic endeavor which is not articulated in lived, experienced exchanges can really be considered as such. Whilst continuing to expand our capacities to offer new spaces for creative engagement, we still want to guarantee a high level of interactions, and that no one finds him/her-self left behind in a new digital divide, or as a result of the restrictions that are being enforced in our respective environments.

This point was reiterated in the way we have set the new implementation of the Humanities Across Borders (HAB) initiative to construct a humanist model of curricula development

across a network of partners from different regions of the world. With the sets of new objectives made in Chiang Mai in February 2020, and the enlarged consortium that has followed, with the renewed support of the Mellon Foundation, despite the new pandemic constraints – or perhaps thanks to them – we set out to empower four partners in four continents to anchor the four syllabi tracks based on themes of universal meaning (food, craft-making, words-in-use, space/place).

These are the University of Ghana, Kenyon Community College (Words), Ambedkar University (Space), and Leiden University College (Food). These 'anchor' partners will be responsible for shaping a curricular framework with the other members of the Consortium. Already, coordinators have been appointed by each institution. This model should enable HAB's pedagogy to move towards its acceptance as an accredited educational programme.

This new modus operandi should also enable IIAS to focus on another aspect of HAB, that of promoting special environments at the interstices of university-society, through which alternative models of intellectual engagement can develop. As I already referred to in this column, what we believe are often missing in academia are open spaces of academe-society interactions and transformations – like IIAS – able to civically ground scholarship and to better situate its endeavor in the global context.

Philippe Peycam, Director IIAS