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A New Fellowship Coordinator for a Revamped Programme

Philippe Peycam

The recent hiring of Dr. Laura Erber as the institute's new Fellowship Programme Coordinator gives me the opportunity to introduce readers of *The Newsletter* to our new colleague, and through this, to IIAS's ongoing effort to revamp one of its most important initiatives, its international fellowship programme.

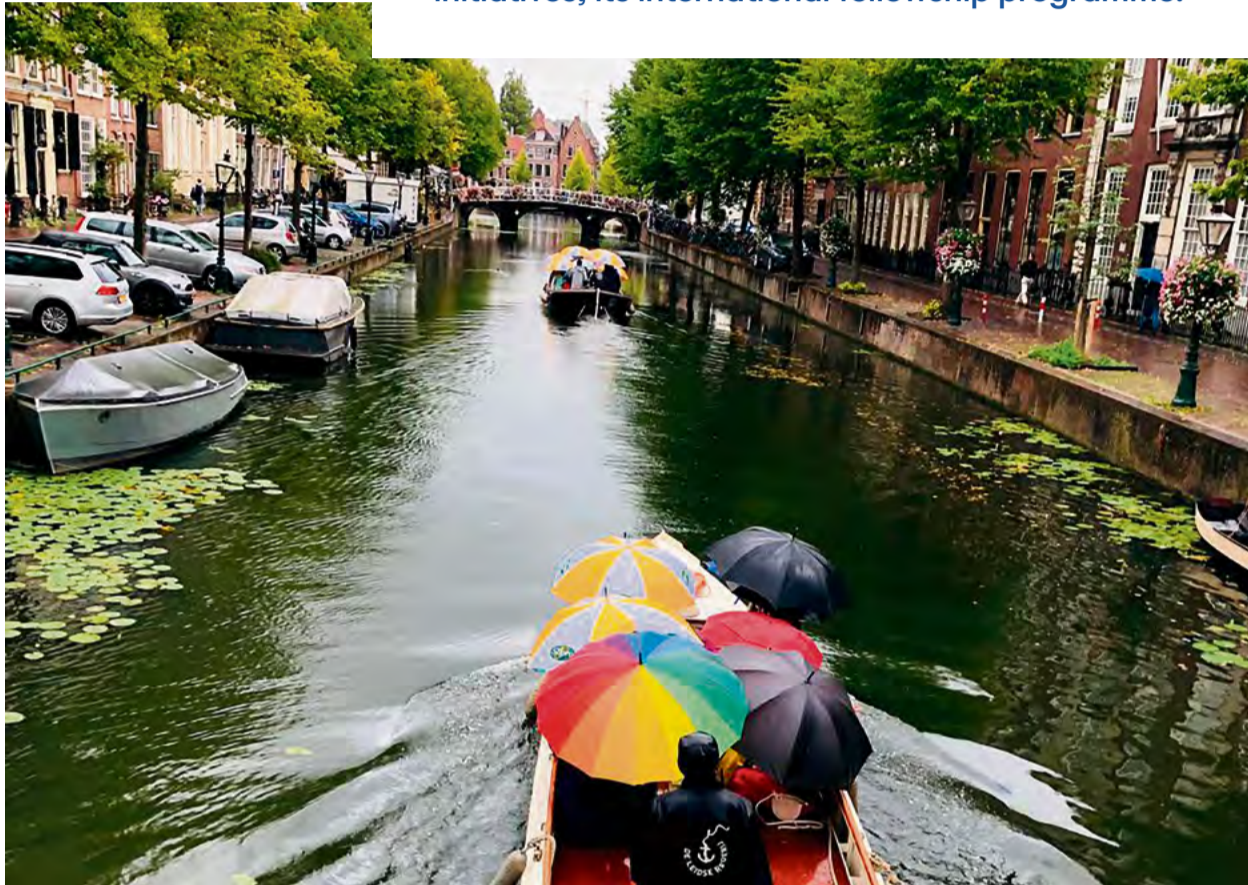


Fig. 1: Tourboats on the canal in Leiden. (Photo by Laura Erber, 2022)

Laura's personal profile is unique. At first glance, her background would seem not to fit entirely with what the position requires. She is not an 'Asia specialist' per se. Also, although she is a full-fledged scholar in critical literature studies, her range of academic, cultural, and artistic engagements far exceeds that of a traditional single-discipline, country-specific area studies scholar. Working in her native Brazil as well in different parts of Europe – as a poet, a fiction writer, and a visual artist, but also a literary theorist – she brings with her a rare combination of approaches and experiences to the practice of knowledge generation and transmission, beyond traditional area studies. Sure enough, Laura has plenty of experience working with scholars and artists, traversing across and mediating between both worlds with ease. Her trajectory between Southern and Northern academic contexts, moreover, places her in the position of being able to critically assess prevailing valuation norms. This confers a capacity to appreciate trajectories that may have escaped dominant evaluation standards. Such an itinerary should enable Laura to undertake her mission of creatively revamping the IIAS fellowship programme by broadening its reaches in close synergy with the other programmes and activities of the institute.

This brings me to the fellowship programme itself, one of the oldest of the institute, and one that has remained largely unchanged since IIAS was established in the 1990s. The IIAS fellowship programme is, indeed, one of the most coveted and well-established postdoctoral spaces for Asian Studies of its kind. When it was set up, it sought to open the field by privileging inter-disciplinarity and comparative methods, creatively and seamlessly combining traditional humanities with the social sciences as they apply to Asia. From the outset, it sought to support individuals from diverse backgrounds, generations, and conceptual orientations, offering them the

chance to share their ideas and research with a wide audience. With time, the programme has contributed to the process of epistemic diversification, and, I would say, even to the decolonization of scholarship on, in, and with Asia. Hundreds of scholars now active in the field were once fellows of IIAS, contributing thereafter to the transformation of the academic landscape.

My experience of working in Cambodia, like IIAS's present work with colleagues from South Asia, Southeast Asia, or Africa, has continued to alert me to the perpetuation of an unequal distribution of opportunities, notably for people whose talents and capacities are rarely assessed or recognized on their own merits, beyond rigid or blind criteria. Against an academic trend that may itself verge toward more conformity in its compliance with a single model, IIAS and its Academic Committee have tried to maintain the most open and fair selection process. By regularly reviewing the application questionnaire and by introducing questions that more clearly link the candidate's personal trajectory to their research project, we seek to refresh the institute's commitment towards more diversity, notably by reaching out towards individuals whose profiles and careers do not necessarily conform with the norms and codes that quantitatively define academic profiles. These are often restricted to scholars who have access to conference networking, archives, online journals, libraries, and recommendations from influential scholars in the field.

Similar to its other areas of intervention, IIAS seeks for its fellowship programme to be also opened to people with different experiences and walks of life, from regions, institutions, and communities that too often are absent from 'mainstream' area studies circles. We still have too few fellows originating from Southeast Asia or South Asia, who studied in their regions (beyond a handful of institutions in Singapore or Delhi). Likewise, we hardly receive any applications from people originating from world regions

as vast and populous as Africa, Latin America, or Central Asia. This same sort of blind spot in our programme also applies to people with different modes of expression and other formats of narration, including (but not exclusively) what we now call scholar-artists.

Laura's appointment, thus, comes at an appropriate time, when we want to better align the institute's fellowship programme with other IIAS activities, many of which have long gained in inclusiveness stemming from the institute's responsibility as a highly innovative supporter of intellectual engagement on, in, and with Asia, in the world. Luckily, the institute offers a wide range of initiatives and a diverse set of platforms that should be of benefit to future fellows. We want to offer them an ever-adapted and diversified environment, one that not only supports area, disciplinary, and topical specialisations, but also, when possible, promotes approaches privileging inter-contextual comparisons and connections. This means mobilising the institute's vast network of individual and institutional partners. It also means offering an extensive range of situated intellectual ecosystems, which should help fellows better prepare themselves for today's transformed academic and professional landscape. Whilst remaining open to all kinds of profiles – including the 'traditional' ones – we thus want to offer a dynamic multidimensional model that embraces different knowledge generation processes and situations, an increasingly diverse range of sources, and more versatility in accessing them. Such a model gives a chance to candidates emanating from less obviously 'connected' milieux than those that often operate as unconscious 'gatekeepers' of the field, an environment prone to encompass people from different backgrounds so long as they enrich the field and the learning community of Asia.

Philippe Peycam, Director IIAS