

# Coordinating Provisional Communities

Laura Erber

Conviviality at IIAS is not merely a pro forma word. Rather, it is a reality in permanent construction. Naturally, the communality of the space is brought about by a shared background: all fellows are living in a strange country, in a transitory situation; some are already more professionally established but most are still on the move, dealing with a fast and ever-changing, highly-challenging academic scenario.

From the position of participant observer, I am increasingly interested in understanding the nature of the bonds and exchanges of transient communities, where knowledge and everyday living are inextricably intertwined. It is a pleasure to see that, in the texts that make up this commemorative dossier, some fellows have chosen to write their testimonies jointly, thus translating the dimensions of sharing and collaboration which we so value, and which is not always easy to develop in the academic environment – highly competitive and often refractory to spontaneous dialogues.

After this first year as the Fellowship Coordinator, it's more clear to me that one of my main tasks is to carefully listen to and understand each researcher – their unique demands, frustrations, and expectations.

As the coordinator of a programme for researchers involved in Asian Studies, I find that, despite all the critical perspectives one can put forth against Area Studies, the need for ever-deeper knowledge and experience of places and peoples achieved through informed discourse will not die out, and it is essential to the fostering of knowledge on global dynamics on a consistent basis. Place-specific knowledge is still very much needed. But, if it is to succeed, a fellowship programme like ours must indeed bring out – through the fellows and activities – the many disciplines that contribute to Area Studies – historians, philologists, anthropologists, and geographers, as well as literature, art, and culture specialists.

In the case of IIAS, this ephemeral community which lies at the heart of every fellowship is not guided by a false promise or by the idyllic scenario of living together, nor is it precisely a community that adheres to an edifying ethos. While knowledge is being built, we also find instances of deconstruction, questionings of and discussions about the ways of doing research and what it means to be a researcher today, given the demands

of the academic market. In a way, this community's ideal is to always envision a wide spectrum of possibilities, ranging from full and total integration into the academic system as it stands today, to the creation of alternatives and new areas that broaden one's understanding of what knowledge production is and means in an extremely unequal and complex world.

We greatly value the quality of our fellows' academic and intellectual production, as well as their unique individual professional careers and engagements in activities outside the academic sphere. More and more, the objective of IIAS is to facilitate the full development of each fellow's career in a space conducive to academic and intellectual exchanges, a space that values a critical approach to hegemonic academic cultures and practices.

We hope that the fellows, coming from different fields and countries, and working with a wide range of theoretical-critical perspectives, will benefit from the cross-domain understanding of academia, and that, through the proposed group activities, they can renew or deepen their vision of the place and dynamics of Asian Studies

When people ask me what it is exactly that I do at IIAS, I like to say, jokingly but truthfully, that my job is to create and sustain transient communities. A community without leadership, devoid of masters or guides, in which bonds are forged and continuously transformed.

in today's world. This may well be easier said than done, but in practice it means creating real conditions that are conducive to dialogue between real people at a given moment in their lives.

Coordinating a programme like IIAS involves the art of listening and the art of promoting encounters, conviviality and conversations as an open-ended and unpredictable horizon of experiences. However, the hardest thing for someone in my position to deal with is precisely the provisional dimension of the programme. Yet this is also what makes the period of exchange much more free-flowing and intense, leading to results that may be difficult to express in and be computed by bureaucratic reports, but which, hopefully, will nevertheless leave a positive imprint in the intellectual and professional future of every person who was once part of the IIAS fellows community.

Laura Erber is Coordinator of the Fellowship Programme at IIAS  
l.rabelo.erber@iias.nl

## Fellowship Selection

As member and chair of the Academic Committee for the IIAS fellowship programme, it has been my privilege to be a part of a selection process that paves way for early and mid-career scholars to visit IIAS for research stays.

This fellowship programme attracts applicants from across the world, which is, in itself, a testimony of its reach via its work and in particular, its Newsletter. We are a small committee, and we bring our multi-disciplinary expertise from various facets of Asian studies to the table. A key challenge in our selection process has been to strike a balance – between disciplines, themes, areas, and indeed less represented geographies. For incoming fellows, IIAS offers a haven for social and intellectual camaraderie – a goal indeed, for the

fellowship programme – but also a particular milieu that the university town of Leiden itself provides, where a contained atmosphere for writing can be generated. Fellows have many opportunities for exchange with Leiden University's excellent Asian Studies scholars. Over the years, I have seen many long-term collaborations and friendships develop via such exchange. When I joined Leiden University back in 2012, I had the pleasure of meeting some of the incoming IIAS fellows, who have over the years, become dear friends, and I still recall the warmth such associations generated for us, as newcomers, both at the university and at IIAS. I have since witnessed fellows coming to IIAS with book projects – either writing monographs out of their PhD theses, or transforming their book projects, and taking them to new directions in dialogue with the transnational, and trans-disciplinary scopes that the IIAS milieu provides. I have also seen the long-term associations many of the fellows have built with the institute, particularly becoming parts of IIAS's global programs over the years. There is hence, a community building process, that the fellowship program plants the seed for.

It is a start, one could say, of potential associations – as much social as they are intellectual or institutional. Of course, at the core of the selection process is the uneasiness and regret even, of knowing that we are only selecting a mere handful of candidates from a rather exhaustive set of very good applications. It is often a narrow sliver of difference between the in and the out in that selection. Hence, as much as we joyously complete the long selection committee meetings with a happy selection, we are aware that we ideally would have welcomed more – and it is a particular pleasure when candidates we liked but couldn't select reapply – and indeed, we can welcome them in subsequent rounds. That institutional memory makes the selection process human – something that the cold professionalism of fellowship applications and such committees often lack.

Sanjukta Sunderason (University of Amsterdam) is the Chair of the Fellowship Selection Committee at IIAS.

