

ICAS at the Crossroads

25 Years of Bridging Knowledge and People

Martina van den Haak and Wai Cheung

The first ICAS event in Asia, ICAS 3 in Singapore (2003), marked the beginning of transformations that have shaped ICAS into a global forum in Asian Studies, attracting thousands of participants from a broad spectrum of fields and backgrounds to 12 ICAS events so far, held in ten different countries, including six in Asia. These ICAS events, organised in collaboration with local hosts, progressively departed from the traditional academic conference model, over time bringing together both junior and senior scholars, researchers, experts, civil society members, artists, and many more. These diverse gatherings fostered a dynamic environment for intellectual exchange of ideas and insights on Asia and beyond, unexpected synergies, new networks, and collaborative initiatives. ICAS events attracted a critical mass of innovative academic and civic contributors, enriching and reshaping the field of Asian Studies in a more multi-centered, innovative, and inclusive manner.

One IIAS initiative that strongly embraced the ICAS model is the Africa-Asia (A-A) academic dialogue, titled 'Africa-Asia – A New Axis of Knowledge' [see also p. 45-47 in this issue]. This platform aims to create an autonomous epistemological and institutional inter-regional exchange space, free from agendas originating in the West/North. After Africa-Asia dialogues became a regular part of ICAS events from ICAS 8 in Macao (2013), the first major Africa-Asia conference was held in Accra, Ghana (2015), in collaboration with the University of Ghana, on the 60th anniversary of the Afro-Asian Conference of Bandung. A second significant event took place in Tanzania at the University of Dar es Salaam in 2018, with a special emphasis on Indian Ocean connections. Both conferences were founded on the inclusive and interdisciplinary model of ICAS events.

After the COVID-19 disruptions, IIAS and its African and Asian partners are collaborating with Cheikh Anta Diop University (Dakar) and University Gaston Berger (Saint-Louis) to organise the next A-A conference in Dakar, Senegal in the 2024-2025 winter season. This marks the first time an A-A conference will be held in a franco-phone African country.

In this special IIAS 30th-anniversary edition of The Newsletter, several longtime ICAS participants share the stories of their ICAS journeys. A reflection on what stood out about ICAS conferences for them and what makes it a conference worth (re)visiting. Besides being spaces where knowledge and people converged, ICAS conferences have also been places where many built new connections and fond memories.

Looking ahead: ICAS 13 and beyond

Since its inception in 1998, ICAS has evolved continually, ensuring that, even after the COVID-19 challenges, these events remain pivotal for fostering new forms of interaction and knowledge exchange. IIAS and partners are revamping the ICAS event model. This new ICAS 2.0 approach, named 'ConFest' (Conference-Festival), embraces a locally-inspired, sustainable, and participatory experience. ICAS 2.0 continues to uphold the ICAS tradition of encouraging dialogue across disciplinary, generational, national, regional, and sectoral realms.

Future ICAS events will draw inspiration from the human-ecological resources of our host location and partners, shaping discussions and creating integrated programmes involving local and global participants. ICAS 2.0 aims to shape together a vibrant learning and community-building experience. Furthermore, it will also foster innovative modes of engagement through a diverse range of activity formats.

ICAS 13, the first edition to embrace the ICAS 2.0 approach, is being organized in collaboration with Airlangga University (UNAIR) in Surabaya, the vibrant port-metropolis of East Java in Indonesia. This ConFest, scheduled for late July 2024, introduces a fresh approach to reimagining academic conferences. It aims to foster collaboration among academic, artistic, and civic partners and offers a unique platform for adopting a place-based approach to global questions. Titled *Crossways of Knowledge*, ICAS 13 will explore locally inspired yet globally relevant themes through various participatory formats, including panels, interactive roundtables, poster presentations, workshops, book showcases, film screenings, food fairs, exhibitions, and other local engagement activities.

Experience ICAS 13 and immerse yourself in the vibrant city of Surabaya in summer 2024! Don't miss this unique opportunity to be part of the first post-COVID-19 ConFest edition of ICAS. The Call for Proposals remains open until 25 October 2023 [see p. 30 of this issue, or visit: <https://www.icas.asia/icas13-cfp>].

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Notes

- 1 ICAS 1 Leiden (1998), ICAS 2 Berlin (2001), ICAS 3 Singapore (2003), ICAS 4 Shanghai (2005), ICAS 5 Kuala Lumpur (2007), ICAS 6 Daejeon (2009), ICAS 7 Honolulu (2011), ICAS 8 Macao (2013), ICAS 9 Adelaide (2015), ICAS 10 Chiang Mai (2017), ICAS 11 Leiden (2019), ICAS 12 Kyoto [online] (2021).

As IIAS celebrates its 30th anniversary, the International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS), which held its inaugural edition in the Netherlands a quarter-century ago, has evolved into a significant global platform for fostering interregional and transdisciplinary discussions. Initially conceived in the late 1990s as Europe's counterpart to the US-based Association for Asian Studies (AAS) conferences, ICAS swiftly distinguished itself by prioritising transdisciplinary and trans-regional/national themes over geographical regions, sparking cross-fertilisation of ideas.



As a scholar working on Southeast Asia, I attended multiple ICAS and Africa-Asia conferences these last years. But the most striking experiences were, for sure, the two conferences in Africa: Accra (Ghana) in 2015, and Dar Es Salaam (Tanzania) in 2018. I was personally touched, as it reminded me of the eight years of my childhood on the campus of the University of Lovanium, which became the University of Kinshasa. Indeed, my father, a Vietnamese scholar educated in Louvain (Belgium), went to teach in independent Zaïre, working with Zairian colleagues but also scholars from Belgium, India, Iran, and Vietnam, according to my memories of our neighbours. Thanks to ICAS conferences on the grounds of the campus, I was able to experience the great dynamism of Ghanaian and Tanzanian universities in the field of Asian Studies. Moreover, the civil society dimension of the conference offered me the opportunity to exchange ideas not only with scholars and students, but also artists and practitioners.

I was very excited to chair the panel "Vietnam and Africa" organized by Pham Van Thuy (Vietnamese National University) and one of the first African scholars who had worked on Vietnam in the nineties, Webby Kalikiti (University of Zambia), and to hear comparative papers on anti-Colonialism movements and Decolonization as well as trade relations between Vietnam and Africa. The incredible number of panels allowed me to enrich my knowledge about the Asia/Africa longstanding connections, and to renew my courses on Southeast Asia, a major crossroad region between the two continents, not only from an East/West perspective, but a South/South one, too.

Claire Tran, Université Paris Cité, France

CAS 1, held at Leeuwenhorst Congress Centrum, near Leiden, the Netherlands (1998), was the first international conference I attended. It opened my eyes to the challenges and opportunities this kind of event represents. Impressed by the size of the convention of Asian studies in Europe and beyond, with sessions and presenters transcending boundaries between disciplines, nations, and geographic origins, ICAS 1 brought together incredibly diverse perspectives on themes and issues of Asian studies, some of them most relevant for my own research interests. It was also a place to meet people, a good mix of scholars from Asia, North America, and Europe, and to make connections, some of them still alive today.

During the next decade, I attended ICAS 2 to 5 convened in Berlin, Germany (2001), Singapore (2003), Shanghai, China (2005) and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (2007), respectively. Again, I was greatly excited about the venues, the ICAS Asian Studies Book Fair, Book Prize, and excellence of the organization. Being a Sinologist by profession and also engaged in East Asian Arts, I especially appreciated the ICAS editions in Singapore's Raffles City Convention Centre and Shanghai's Exhibition Centre. Unfortunately, I had to cancel my participation in the meetings at Chiang Mai, Thailand (ICAS 10, 2017), and Leiden (ICAS 11, 2019) due to some unforeseeable reason.

The global pandemic caused many limitations. It affected academic life and all kinds of activities, among them ICAS 12 in Kyoto, Japan (2021). The success of the first virtual ICAS edition proved that the Convention always, and even in times of crisis, has been a platform that provided meaningful gatherings which ensured participants, from academic beginners to renowned scholars, to feel welcomed and engaged. The ICAS in-person meetings, on top, did not only show the social face of academic get-togethers, but also created an inspiring environment (different from the normal environment with our computers or phones in office or at home), in which experience of place and space in Asia and elsewhere were designed to spark creativity and inventive thinking crossing national, cultural, or interdisciplinary borders.

Ulrike Middendorf, University of Heidelberg, Germany



My first attendance at the International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS) conference took place twenty years ago, in Singapore, in 2003. It was the third instalment of ICAS, known as ICAS 3. For this conference, I took the initiative to organize a panel titled "State and Society in Asia: Political Economy of Globalization." The panel featured Professor John Clammer of Sophia University and Vedi Hadiz, both of whom were colleagues at the National University of Singapore. They presented papers on Indonesia and Japan, respectively. ICAS 3 marked a significant event in post-SARS Singapore, with 258 panels and 13 poster sessions.

What struck me most about ICAS 3, which was held at the Raffles City Convention Centre, was the remarkable breadth and interdisciplinarity of the conference. It covered a wide range of topics, from digitalization, science parks, and the impact of globalization to heritage, memory, and the performing arts, such as classical dance in South and Southeast Asia. Notably, the conference delved into the historiography of colonialism. Many distinguished intellectual figures of that period were present, but one encounter stands out vividly in my memory: my chance meeting with Ms. Sangeeta Isvaran, a renowned classical dancer and scholar who presented a paper at the conference. In the academic world, it is rare to witness, let alone meet, stars of the performing arts like her.

The ICAS conferences consistently bring together established and emerging social scientists and historians from diverse academic fields, including arts, classics, history, and various branches of social sciences. I had the privilege of attending and presenting papers at subsequent ICAS conferences as well. ICAS 7, held in late March 2011, joined forces with the American Asian Studies Association conference in Honolulu, Hawaii. ICAS 8 took place in Macao, hosted at a renowned Casino Hotel. ICAS 9 was held in Adelaide, Australia, where I had the honor of meeting former Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke, who attended our session. Lastly, ICAS 10 was organized in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in July 2017. That year, together with Dr. Mara Matta of Sapienza University of Rome, I coordinated several sessions on memory and nostalgia. Notably, one of our presenters was an active service ambassador of Poland, who presented a paper on Polish Air Force officers in the early Pakistan Air Force – a subject that was largely unknown.

ICAS conferences serve as a meeting ground for scholars, artists, public intellectuals, and hidden talents who defy easy classification within existing disciplinary boundaries. Recalling these conferences evokes a sense of nostalgia, reminding us of encounters that transcend the ordinary and inspire hope in the pursuit of knowledge, even during times of despair and gloom.

Habibul Haque Khondker, Zayed University, United Arab Emirates



My first encounter with IAS and ICAS was in 2003, in Leiden, when I was a young research fellow at EIAS in Brussels. I then joined ICAS 4 (Shanghai in 2005) as one of my first international conferences as a fresh PhD student and learned many things there. Throughout the years, I joined ICAS 6 in Daejeon (2009), ICAS 8 in Macao (2013), ICAS 9 with a partial participation through my paper (2015), ICAS 11 in Leiden (2019) and finally ICAS 12 in Kyoto (2021).

Looking back, I think about my participation in each ICAS – the different countries, different convention themes, different papers, and the many familiar faces and friends – the same feelings of being in a such an intellectual and interdisciplinary environment remain. I now realize that I have been growing up with each ICAS, becoming a young researcher, then spreading ICAS news in Japan, enhancing my research each time. Later on, I joined my university as a lecturer, then came back to Leiden in 2019 as a researcher and lecturer, as well as a mother talking to my daughter about ICAS. Finally, I shared the joy and pride of bringing ICAS to Kyoto, Japan in 2021. Though we were all online, we were still very proud and even more delighted to be able to start the ICAS Book Prize Japanese Language Edition.

Lastly, I must mention dear Paul van der Velde, whom I first met at the IAS office in 2003 and then at each ICAS meeting. He has always supported my work and encouraged me to start the Japanese Language Edition of the ICAS Book Prize. Thanks to IAS, ICAS, the ICAS Book Prize, and Paul for playing such a crucial role in my academic journey. I wish many more successful events, research programs, and ICAS conferences to connect even more with a diverse range of academicians, researchers, artists, publishers, and students in Asian Studies of all ages. Happy anniversary!

Aysun Uyar Makibayashi, Doshisha University, Japan

