

Asia and Beyond: My Journey with IIAS

Thien-Huong Ninh

One of my current research projects examines the comparative significance of “ethnic” Marian depictions – specifically, (indigenous Mexican-looking) Our Lady Guadalupe and (Vietnamese-looking) Our Lady of Lavang – in global social justice movements. On the surface, the project may appear to be only tangentially situated within Asian Studies. However, I must admit that this study owes its inspiration to IIAS. Through participation in many IIAS programs and activities, I have come to appreciate the importance of anchoring Asian Studies within global and comparative contexts.

In August 2012, I flew from Japan (where I was holding a position as a Japan Society for the Promotion of Science fellow) to Leiden to participate in the IIAS World Wide Asia Summer School. Although I had known of IIAS, this was my first direct engagement with the institute. The event gathered twenty-two graduate students and researchers across academic disciplines and regions of the world in Leiden. Over four days, we examined how the flows of people, goods, capital, and ideas within and from Asia have been transforming the global landscape. These stimulating discussions injected exciting new energy into my dissertation writing and drove me to the finish line the following year. Equally important, I made many long-lasting friendships with colleagues in the programme that later bore several reunion meetings around the world.

Because of this wonderful experience, I continued to intentionally keep in touch with IIAS. In 2015 and 2016, I had the opportunity to spend my summers in Leiden through the Research Associate Fellowship at IIAS. I was given the perfect place to write – an office on the third floor of the IIAS building. It was quiet and had a window that looked out into the beautiful canals that run along Rapenburg. And yet, at the same time, IIAS was a vibrant place full of intellectual energy. Whenever I wanted to tinker with an idea or explore a new direction in my writing, I could easily walk across the hall or go downstairs to immerse myself in conversations with colleagues from all parts of the world. The many international conferences and workshops held at IIAS and Leiden University during my stays also constantly kept me on my feet, such as the 2016 “Heritage as Aid and Diplomacy Conference” that I participated in.

Between 2017 and 2019, I had the honor of serving on the International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS) Book Prize Committee. In 2018, while I was conducting research in Korea, I had the chance to make a presentation at a conference on Korea and Vietnam that was organized by IIAS, Seoul National University, Leiden University, and École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. During the same year, I flew to Tanzania to participate in the Africa-Asia conference organized by IIAS, the University of Dar es Salaam, and the Association for Asian Studies in Africa.

Through IIAS, I have been able to engage with and contribute to intellectual productions that critically reflect on Asia and beyond. This kind of productive, transformative and non-normative entanglement is particularly important for junior scholars like myself, who are still shaping their intellectual path. My current interest in studying Our Lady of Guadalupe and Our Lady of Lavang is a step on this path. Today, whenever I think of “Asian Studies” or “area studies,” I immediately think of IIAS. Congratulations to IIAS on its 30th anniversary!

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出会い Deai: Encounter

Widya Suryadani

This poem was born during the 2016 In Situ Graduate School “Mapping the Aesthetics of Urban Life in Asia: A Dialogue with the Arts in Kyoto,” organized by IIAS and the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Japan (CSEAS). I composed the poem within a workshop where the main theme revolved around the dialogue between urban life and the arts. The word ‘ENCOUNTER’ was the title of our sonic performance, where we thought of city as an orchestra. We captured the sounds of the city: the irashimase, the chatters, the noise of the arcade, the crisp of the

walked-on snow, and more. We combined it with music, dance, and heart-felt words: this poem. Everything we did was new for us. We learned that experiencing a city was more of a chance encounter, while this workshop was all about chance encounter. We met with a new way to experience a city, we were challenged to present a new way of representing a city, and we met with new people from various backgrounds to learn from, to learn with, and to learn about.

Widya Suryadani, Institut Teknologi Nasional (Itenas) Bandung, Indonesia

Steps to the temple, Kyoto. Photo courtesy of Widya Suryadani, 2016)



出会い Deai: Encounter

Within the silence
of Hieizan I saw you
Under the cloud,
this cloudy day
Distant,
Hazy,
Far down below

I trembled
as the wind passed me by
And the leaves rattled
as the wind passed through

Descend I go to where you are
as your soft murmur is getting louder

Footsteps echoing
Bells ringing
The birds bow to the sun

This is the crossroad where we met
The destiny of our encounter

Chance meeting.
Will you be there?
I will be there when you unfold

Within the distant chatter I am with you
And I arrived with the whole me
I arrived at you
with you

I arrived in you