

Asia in the World

Reimagining Fellowship in a Multipolar World

Laura Erber

We are excited to announce a significant transformation of the IIAS Fellowship Programme. Responding to the evolving landscape of global knowledge production, we are reimagining our fellowship structure to better reflect the multipolar and interconnected nature of contemporary scholarship. Our new fellowship format, titled 'Asia in the World,' marks a deliberate shift toward a more globally integrated approach to Asian Studies. This change recognizes that understanding Asia today requires perspectives that go beyond traditional geographic, disciplinary, and epistemological boundaries. By redesigning our program, we aim to create a more polyphonic intellectual environment where diverse voices and methodologies can flourish in conversation with one another.

A fellowship program acts as a lens that zooms in on the politics of knowledge. Within Area Studies, it reveals something crucial: how we delineate and define regions for academic inquiry reflects deeper assumptions about how knowledge is organized and valued. These divisions – whether geographical, cultural, or epistemological – reflect not just academic traditions but complex regional histories of understanding, interpretation, and interrelation.

The history of residential fellowships also reveals something crucial about the space in which knowledge is shaped. When

Rainer Maria Rilke arrived at Duino Castle in 1911, he discovered how a change of place could transform his thoughts into poetry. This tradition is continued by countless artists and scholars who have found in the temporary spaces of fellowship programs that rare alchemy between solitude and community that fuels creative and intellectual breakthroughs.

At a time when critical or creative thinking and the Humanities and Social Sciences are increasingly marginalized, the IIAS Fellowship Programme creates exactly this essential space where different perspectives meet and new questions emerge. This is not

just about reimagining Asian studies – it is about participating in a crucial conversation about the place of humanistically driven research in our times, a conversation that asks not just what we know but how and for what purposes.

With a record of over 30 years and more than 1000 alumni, the IIAS Fellowship Programme stands as one of the oldest of its kind and a benchmark for scholars in Asian studies worldwide. In our shifting world order, with de-centered and multipolar forms of knowledge production, scholars need to transcend regional hierarchies and disciplinary boundaries.

The IIAS Fellowship Programme now takes a bold step forward with 'Asia in the World,' a pioneering initiative that embodies our Institute's commitment to network-building and collaborative scholarship. Our new program structure follows a three-phase journey: fellows start with six months at IIAS in Leiden, where they immerse themselves in our scientific and scholarly community. They then spend four to five months at a partner institution in Asia, Africa, Latin America, or Europe, experiencing different academic cultures and knowledge traditions. The journey culminates in Leiden, where these varied experiences converge and transform into new insights presented in a public event. This exercise will be thoughtfully and collectively curated by the fellows and the co-hosting institutional partners.

This novel fellowship structure emerges from our conviction that building knowledge is inextricably linked to life experience, shaped by encounters with different ways of thinking and working. This formula will create opportunities for scholars to engage with different academic contexts and knowledge traditions, enriching collaborative opportunities in today's interconnected academic landscape.

With the Asia in The World Fellowship Programme, scholars join a community dedicated to understanding Asia's complex entanglements with the world through diverse intellectual and critical traditions. We are confident that our diverse network of partner institutions will unlock new pathways for more inclusive and equitable forms of knowledge cultivation. This will lead to a richer, more interconnected global understanding of the world's societies, cultures, and histories intricately linked to local contexts.

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Cultivating Knowledge and Connections

Reflections from IIAS Fellows

During our fellowship at the International Institute for Asian Studies, we had the opportunity to engage in a range of activities aimed at enhancing our academic paths, fostering collaboration, and promoting personal growth. In this reflection, we revisit some of these memorable activities and experiences, including visits to three partner institutions of the IIAS Fellowship Programme.

Fig. 1 (above right): IIAS fellows visit Framer Framed in Amsterdam. (Photo courtesy of Laura Erber, 2024)



Alternative Encounters at Framer Framed, Amsterdam

Ming Luo and Zhengfeng Wang

Our visit to Framer Framed in October 2024 was an inspiring encounter with an alternative model of knowledge production and artistic engagement. Retaining its spirit of movement and transformation, this canal-side art gallery and platform for 'contemporary art, visual culture, and critical theory and practice' took us to the industrial wasteland of Amsterdam Oost.

The space, with its brick facade and metalwork roof structure, provides ample room for artists while embodying a sense of openness. We explored the exhibition on citizenship in Somaliland, the Somali region. Rather than being confined by

rigid walls, the curation used fabric to guide visitor flow, creating a sense of framing and enclosure while maintaining fluidity. This dynamic approach resonates with Framer Framed's broader mission: to serve as a platform where knowledge, culture, and people continuously connect and evolve. Emily Shin-Jie Lee from Framer Framed walked us through past publications and shared insights into how the institute fosters artistic practices, critical thought, and community engagement. Experiencing the energy that fuels all the meaningful work at this remarkable institute made it clear that 'nomadcity' not just describes Framer Framed's history but also its approach to art, knowledge, and community.