Leiden University’s new Asian Library

After three years of planning and construction, Leiden University’s new Asian Library is ready. Bringing together various important collections on Asia, the Asian Library holds the largest collection on Indonesia worldwide, and some of the foremost collections on South and Southeast Asia, China, Japan and Korea. The Executive Board of Leiden University warmly welcomes all to attend the official and festive Grand Opening on 14 September 2017.

To mark the achievement, Leiden University is celebrating the whole of 2017 as the ‘Leiden Asia Year’. Working together with other Asia-oriented institutes in Leiden as well as with the Leiden municipality, so far the agenda of the Leiden Asia Year has already featured over 70 events, with a further 40 still scheduled to take place, including the library’s Grand Opening. Students and scholars will not have to wait until September, as the Asian Library was opened for the public on March 31.

Sandra Debue (IIAS) and Rosalien van der Poel (Coordinator Leiden Asia Year)

The Asian Library

In 2014, Leiden University decided to build a new Asian Library to bring together under one roof all of the collections of the various Leiden University Libraries on China, Japan, Korea, India and Indonesia. Also included are the Heritage Collection of the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) in Amsterdam and the library of the Leiden-based Royal Netherlands Institute for Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV).

Adding up to over 30km in length, the collections of the Asian Library belong to the most important worldwide, both in quantity and quality.

The new Asian Library was realised by adding a complete extra floor on top of the Leiden University’s main library building. This extension offers direct access to a large volume of reference works, as well as work spaces for students and researchers, a group study room, a seminar room and a small cinema. The library also houses numerous Asian special collections, which are available in the nearby Reading Room Special Collections. Whatever is not immediately on-hand, can be ordered and presented within an hour.

Asian special collections

The Asian Library comprises many special collections, including a huge variety of rare books, thousands of manuscripts, maps, prints, drawings and photographs, and hundreds of archives. Predominant is the written heritage originating from or dealing with Southeast Asia (especially Indonesia), South Asia and Tibet, and East Asia. The collections contain an abundance of native materials, such as palm leaf manuscripts and block prints, documenting the many religions, languages and cultures of Asia in word and image over a period of more than four centuries. It also holds ship logs, letters, research reports, publications, photographs and other source materials collected from and testifying to the presence of European travellers, mer-chants, scholars, colonial civil servants and institutions in Asia.

These unique Asia collections of the Asian Library, but also those of the nearby Hortus botanicus Leiden, the Japan Museum SieboldHuis and the Museum of Ethnology, are among the many reasons for scholars around the world to come to Leiden, along with the abundance of scholarly expertise present at Leiden University and other Asia-oriented Leiden institutions.

IIAS donates books to the Asian Library

During a small ceremony on 31 March, Leiden University Rector Magnificus Prof. Carel Stolker officially declared the Grand Opening Day. To mark the achievement, Leiden University invited the IIAS to symbolically gift the library the first of the more than 500 books submitted for the 2017 ‘ICAS Book Prize’ (IBP).

IIAS maintains excellent relations with the Asian Library. Not only do our fellows use its collections in their research (some examples of which are included below), the Asian Library is also the main sponsor of the ICAS Book Prize, which is awarded every two years (when Asia scholars from around the world gather during the International Convention of Asia Scholars) for outstanding books and dissertations on topics related to Asia in the Humanities and Social Sciences. In return, the Asian Library receives one copy of each book submitted to the IBP. In March 2017, more than 500 books were donated, including titles in English, Chinese, Korean, German and French. This number is likely to rise to perhaps as high as 1000 in 2019, with a more active participation of the foreign-language submissions and the expansion of the reading committees to include Japanese submissions as well.

In 2019, the 11th ICAS convention is planned to take place in Leiden. It will be the first ICAS in Europe since the first two editions in Leiden and Berlin, in 1998 and 2001 respectively. As usual ICAS will cover a wide range of topics, but will also focus on ‘Asia in Europe’, demonstrating how this region of the world is itself deeply influenced and shaped by its historical connection with Asia and Asian societies. Contributing to the Leiden Asia Year, IIAS will organise an afternoon meeting on 18 October to introduce the academic community of Leiden to ICAS.

Join us for the Grand Opening and ‘Tour of Asia’ festival on 14 September

THE EXECUTIVE BOARD OF LEIDEN UNIVERSITY invites you to the Grand Opening of the Asian Library. If you would like to join the celebrations, please register now at www.universiteitleiden.nl/grand-opening-asian-library.

The Grand Opening Day will start at 10am in the Pieterskerk (‘Peter’s Church’), with a keynote speech by renowned global historian Peter Frankopan, musical performances, a presentation of the Asian Library and its rich collections, and the launch of the book Voyage of Discovery. Exploring the Collections of the Asian Library. After a walking lunch, the programme is resumed in the afternoon with an informative and fascinating ‘Tour of Asia’ and around Leiden University’s central locations. Various parallel events will be held at different locations, including the IIAS office, and will involve lectures, country updates, exhibitions, tours, contemporary Asian films, music, workshops, panel discussions and much more. At the end of the day, all attendees are invited for snacks and drinks in the University Library.

Detailed information about the programme will be made available on the Leiden Asia Year website: www.leidenasiayear.nl

Leiden Asia Week (13-17 September)

The following events are scheduled in the week of the Grand Opening. Information about these and all other events of the Leiden Asia Year are available at: www.leidenasiayear.nl

13 Sept De-bordering Asia – Graduate conference
14 Sept Opening of the Asian Library and ‘Tour of Asia’ festival
14-17 Sept Middle Period Chinese Humanities – International conference
15-16 Sept Mapping Asia: Cartographic Encounters between East & West – International conference
16 Sept Night of Arts and Sciences – Cultural festival with acts and performances
Asian collections in research

The agenda of the Leiden Asia Year features an abundance of different types of activities and topics pertaining to Asia. Below are three examples of activities that illustrate how the collections of the Asian Library are used in research and education.

Sanskrit as a vehicle of cultural exchange

Leiden University holds one of the oldest and richest Sanskrit collections. From 18 May to 5 September, the exhibition ‘Sanskrit – Across Asia and Beyond’ explores Sanskrit as a vehicle of transculturation and exchange. It incorporates a broad range of materials from the Asian Library, including rare manuscripts, vibrant photographs of Asian temples and icons, and original videos and multimedia presentations. The exhibition is organized in cooperation with IAS fellow Dr Elizabeth Cecil (see Cecil’s article on page 46 of this issue), who is a historian of pre-colonial South and Southeast Asia with a focus on Religion and Material Culture. At IAS, Cecil is completing a book manuscript entitled ‘Mapping the Pāśupata Landscape: Polity, Place, and the Sāke Imaginary in Early Medieval North India’ with a fellowship provided by the J. Gonda Fund.

Mapping Asia

The Asian Library holds close to 30,000 maps concerning Asia, including several large collections of historical maps. Among these are the maps of Japan collected by Philipp Franz von Siebold (1796–1866) during his stay in Japan where he was employed by the Netherlands Government at the trading post of Deshima in the bay of Nagasaki. These maps were the reason for Dr Radu Lecca (fellow at IAS) to come to Leiden, where he is surveying both Western maps of Japan and Japanese maps in Dutch collections for his research on cartographic sources as testimonies of the geopolitical thought in early modern Japan. In addition, Lecca has been working closely together with the Asian Library as a map curator for the permanent exhibition of Japanese maps in the Japan Museum SieboldHuis. Lecca is also one of the thirty scholars to present a paper during the international conference ‘Mapping Asia – Cartographic Encounters between East & West’, on 15-16 September. ‘Mapping Asia’ is also the title of an exhibition organised by the Asian Library at the Museum of Ethnology from 14 September 2017 until 16 January 2018. This exhibition not only features historical maps, prints and books, but also highlights various aspects of Asia using cartography and (GIS) mapping tools (see Lecca’s article on page 6 of this issue).

Symposium ‘Collecting Asia’

Another activity of the Leiden Asia Year to mention here is the symposium ‘Collecting Asia’, which took place in the Museum of Antiquities on 17 March 2017. Organised by the Centre for Global Heritage and Development, the National Museum of Antiquities and Japan Museum SieboldHuis, in cooperation with the Asian Library, the symposium not only provided an overview of the existing collections from Asia in Leiden, but also addressed the history, systematics and ethics of collecting. One of the speakers was Leiden PhD student Taufiq Hanafi, who is currently doing research at KITLV. For his work on fiction as counter-history in Indonesia, he uses works that are present in the Asian Library but which are banned (and burned) in Indonesia. Hanafi: “Collecting Asia, despite its bias-cum-political connotation that includes structure, control and curiosity towards the foreign, can be very helpful as it directly helps in preserving material culture or, in this case, books that are no longer accessible in their home country due to tight censorship, banning, or practical reasons such as shelf-life.”