Gwen Bennett is an assistant professor in the departments of East Asian Studies and Anthropology at McGill University, Canada, where she was hired to start a program in East Asian historical archaeology. She has studied, worked, and done research in China for many years, and is currently Principal Investigator of the ‘Khitan-Liao Archaeological Survey and History Project’ (KLASH) in southeastern Inner-Mongolia, which looks at the rise of the Liao Empire by integrating new data from archaeological fieldwork with historical data; and the ‘Chengdu Plains Archaeological Survey Project’ (CPAS) in Sichuan, which has finished fieldwork and is now in the writing up stage. She is also the Co-Principal Investigator and Director of Fieldwork for the ‘Understanding Cities in the Premodern History of Northeast Asia (c. 200-1200) Project’, being done in tandem with KLASH and which uses geophysical methods to examine the pre-walled Liao period urban areas of a project area.

As I look back now, my time at IIAS was intellectually stimulating beyond my expectations. Much of this was due to a rich and diverse cohort of scholars at IIAS and the University who were working on fascinating projects themselves, and who were equally willing to explore ideas and learn from each other as I was. We often talked about each other’s research at the Institute, but probably spent as much time doing it at the many dinners we shared with each other. Cooking became an international affair with shopping trips in Leiden and beyond to find the spices and foodstuffs to make Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Korean, Italian, and Austrian dishes to be served to friends, all paired with wine to make the thoughts flow, of course! These close interactions with colleagues over meals at the institute or over dinners gave me fresh perspectives on my own work and the chance to learn about areas of the world and areas of study I had not yet had exposure to. I came to Leiden to study Chinese history but ended up learning just as much about India and Indology from my friends and their projects. I came to IIAS under its Asian History research cluster, and the many activities that the Institute and University held around this theme meant that there was always something to attend. Some of the most interesting events were the numerous talks held by the Leiden Initiative on North Korea, organized by Prof. Remco Breuker. Experts from many venues and perspectives, which refreshingly included several non-academic professionals with deep experience in Korea, took this opportunity to strategize on how to make North Korea more visible both in and outside of the academy. I was also able to attend a five day intensive course for graduate students on Korea organized by Prof. Breuker and Dr. Koen De Ceuster of Leiden University. This workshop had as its theme, Margins and marginalization in the production of Korean histories, with the goal of examining the margins of Korean history from different perspectives, such as political, economic, geographical, and social perspectives. As the only archaeologist, and the only presenter to work outside the present day boundaries of the Korean state, I talked about the Liaoning Provincial Museum’s use of material culture to present the PRC’s perspective on events and entities in this border region, including the early Han Dynasty commanderies and the Koguryo and the Balhae Kingdoms. This workshop also included a visit to the University’s Bibliotheca Thysiana, where we were introduced to its architecture and collections, and had the rare opportunity to very closely examine several of the rare books in its collection. Meetings with Drs. Borna Bausch, the University’s archaeologist of Japan, were also always very thought-provoking, and we always enjoyed ‘talking shop’ together.

One of the most enjoyable events I attended was the 1st annual UKA roundtable on urban heritage policies held in November at Tul in Delft. Many fascinating presentations by Dutch and Chinese experts were made that critically compared and contrasted planning approaches to heritage in the Netherlands and Western Europe with experiences in Asian cities. The highlight of the workshop was the walking tour around Delft with these experts during which they told us about the buildings and projects that we were seeing, and the history or considerations behind them. What I learned about Dutch history and architecture during this short two hour walk helped me to better appreciate the urban forms and architecture that I saw on all my other day trips to other cities in the Netherlands.

Left IIAS at the beginning of March 2013 as the tulip fields were starting to color the landscape. I am back in Montreal at McGill University, but keep in touch with the friends I made at the Institute and in Leiden, and I visit when I can. It was with great anticipation that I returned to take part in IIAS’s November 2013 ‘Patterns of Early Asian Urbanism’ conference where I spoke about urbanism on the steppe and medieval period Liao urban centers, and where I was able to meet friends from the Institute and University again. I was also able to visit with the IIAS staff that attended the AAS meetings in Philadelphia in 2014, and even got to man the booth to hand out their cloth bags and information!

This past September, I attended the 2014 Association of European Archaeology meetings in Istanbul, I was able to re-experience the Netherlands’ Open Monuments Day – while passing the Dutch Embassy on Kizil выпуск I saw the ‘Open Monuments’ banner flying over its gate and knowing what it meant, I lined up for a guided visit and had one hour back on Netherlands territory as we explored the nooks and crags of this historic building. One hour in the Netherlands is not long enough for anyone, and I am fondly looking forward to my next visit!

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