

A Transformative Experience

Aditya Kiran Kakati

I began a fellowship at the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) in Leiden amid the global Covid-19 pandemic, in 2021. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, the IIAS provided a unique environment for fostering a sense of community and connections. From potlucks, picnics and barbecues to stimulating conversations with the ghosts in the basement, my time at the IIAS was a transformative experience that surpassed all expectations.

Many of us fellows lived in the same building at Hogewoerd, Leiden's historical textile fabrication district in its glory days. During these initial months and under the duress of the pandemic, we organized potluck dinners, picnics, and barbecues, taking advantage of Spring weather. These gatherings provided a platform for sharing delicious food from different culinary cultures, peppered with discussions and, sometimes, even debates about culinary "exceptionalism." Breaking bread together, we exchanged stories, experiences, and ideas, finding solace and support in each other during the challenging times of the pandemic.

When the IIAS office became accessible again, fellows could find some regularity and routine for work. The IIAS building is by the canal on Rapenburg, providing a workspace with an old charm. I routinely encouraged other fellows to gather for lunch, especially in the cute back garden of the office, equipped with wooden benches and tables. I often found myself working late into the night. As most people left, I discovered an unexpected company in the form of ghosts in the basement. These spectral companions, remnants of the institute's long history, seemed imbued with a wealth of knowledge and stories. More recently, after my reassurances about the friendly spirits, the late-night working crew of fellows has grown in size. The serenity of late evening when the office bustle subsides and the yellow lighting in the old building creates a reflective atmosphere that I found beneficial for writing.

Being part of the IIAS community, I actively participated in the whole range of activities offered. One of the more significant engagements was at ICAS 2021, hosted online from Kyoto that year and remotely managed from Leiden. During the quiet summer months, I bonded with the organizing staff and provided moral support for their late-evening shifts. Apart from my panels at this conference, I helped set up a last-minute "break-in" panel on Afghanistan overnight, and the outcomes of that discussion were very productive. Beyond the confines of the IIAS, some fellows started to attend the annual Durga Puja celebrations in Den Haag. This celebration was a way to interact with the South Asian community in South Holland and, more importantly, partake of some delicious festival feasts to feed both bellies and nostalgia for home. Between hectic late-evening work routines, we organized several



Above: Fellows and others attend a puja in the Netherlands. (Photo courtesy of Aditya Kiran Kakati)

barbecues, including on New Year's eve, when another wave of the pandemic returned in the winter. Ever since, I have pushed to promote "winter barbecues". Local events such as "Leiden Onzet," or the city's wonderful weekly markets provided other rallying points for us. Such experiences created strong bonds among fellows and made the experience of living in the quaint and scenic Leiden even more wholesome.

The IIAS provided a home base for interdisciplinary research and creative exploration, providing a stable platform for pursuing intellectual and creative endeavors. Leiden University's vast library resources, various departments, and research centers where I presented in seminars have all provided a crucial milieu for me to develop intellectually, professionally, and personally.

My fellowship at the International Institute for Asian Studies in Leiden during the pandemic was an unexpected journey. The IIAS created a vibrant and welcoming community that fostered connections, intellectual pursuits, and cultural immersion while providing a place for me to return to upon completion of my Swiss National Science Foundation postdoctoral mobility grant. Through shared meals and recipes, late-night conversations with spectral companions, active participation in various events, and the overall nurturing environment of the institute, my time at the IIAS became a transformative experience.



Left and below: Attending an "Inspirational Session" with other IIAS Fellows. (Photo courtesy of Wen Huang)

Living and Reflecting in Leiden

Wen HUANG

Uncertainty has become the norm in life. After experiencing multiple lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I arrived at IIAS (International Institute for Asian Studies) as planned, where I felt warmth and hospitality after engaging in discussions with Director Philippe Peycam and Fellowship Coordinator Laura Erber. Throughout the years, I have been immersed in busyness, whether it was during my time in Boston or my visiting scholar period in Madison. My primary objective has always been to enhance the efficiency of resource allocation. However, in the field of technology, the deployment of big data and artificial intelligence has surpassed the effectiveness of human experience.

Discussions at IIAS have provided me with a greater comprehension of the primacy of life and the pursuit of a better existence. They have also emphasized the importance of effectively managing the relationship between development and stability, as well as the necessity of risk prevention and resolution. Each individual contributes the strengths and capabilities, viewing development from an existential perspective and to fulfill the potential of life.

At IIAS, I participated in various inspirational sessions, gaining a deeper understanding of broader, more complex, interdisciplinary, and cross-domain innovations. I also learned how cultural traditions shape and recreate themselves, and how the local social and cultural landscape is formed. As someone originating from the ethnic regions of southwestern China, I pondered on self-identity and future pursuits. While my current research combines geographical information systems in natural sciences with virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) for simulating cultural heritage tourism, my academic background remains rooted in anthropological fieldwork.



Right: Fellows and friends having a picnic. (Photo courtesy of Aditya Kiran Kakati)

