

ISA 2021-23 Medium Term Research Program (MTRP)

Uncertainties and Inequalities: Engaging with Asian Movements in the Present and Past

This research program directs ISA's focus to Asian social, cultural, political and religious movements, as well as movements of people, knowledge, and objects in, through and from Asia. It further develops ISA's previous research agenda between 2012 and 2020, which dealt with "crisis, mobility and transformation." By emphasizing *uncertainties* and *inequalities*, which are powerfully connected with contemporary crises and movements (from environmental crises and pandemics to migration, economic development, and various religious and political movements), this research program covers some of socio-cultural anthropology's core concerns. As critical guiding orientations, the key concepts of uncertainty, inequality, and movements are empirically applied in and across ISA's three main regions of research: the Middle East, Tibetan/Mongolian regions and Central Asia, Southeast Asia and Islands of the Indian Ocean. They pertain to both contemporary and historic times, and carry particular potential for inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration in the humanities, social and life sciences.

The concept of **uncertainty** directs attention to personal and collective experiences of crisis, transformation, novelty, and encounters with the unknown, be it in the context of conflict, migration (forced or otherwise), economic upheavals, pandemics, or climate change. While commonly carrying negative connotations, uncertainty can also be a productive force that demands new frameworks for making sense of the world. This indicates a second dimension as an opening for new kinds of information, knowledge production, and theoretical reflection, often in contexts where established epistemological authority is challenged or breaks down. The concept of **inequality** points to phenomena of increasing socio-economic difference in many parts of the world today, including the Asian regions that ISA studies. It refers not only to unequal distribution of and access to material conditions as well as asymmetries in social organization, but also considers the ideological expressions and social imaginaries that justify, reinforce or undermine inequalities. The concept also relates to classic anthropological studies concerned with social hierarchies and concepts of power in Asia, and to contemporary scholarship shaping the ethics of engaged anthropology. **Movements** in, to, and from Asia refer to a broad range of interconnected domains of research, from a classic anthropological focus on social mobility to movements of people, things and ideas, as well as various *kinds* of movements (social, political, religious, environmental). This includes *economies* of movement that inform its presence/absence, intensity, direction, agency (moving others/being moved), speed, and duration. In all these cases, movement is mediated through particular structures (social, economic, technological, or infra-) and specific places like borders, nodes, hubs, or digital platforms (particularly social media), which serve as important sites for critical anthropological research.

While each of these three notions constitutes a productive field for critical inquiry in and of itself, they are closely connected. Their combination in one research agenda thus focuses and enhances their analytic and innovative potential for timely anthropological engagements with Asia.

Asia itself denotes not only ISA's ethnographic focus and area of expertise, but is also the point of reference for a methodological approach that involves decentering and decolonizing Euro-American historical and theoretical perspectives. ISA emphasizes collaborative long-term ethnographic fieldwork with participant observation and local language competence at its core, building on a strong network of academic and professional exchange throughout its focal regions. Its methodological repertoire also includes various forms of digital ethnography, archival work and museum studies, experimental and quantitative methods, as well as a historical anthropological approach to oral, written, and material sources. In both its contemporary and historical dimensions, ISA's work emphasizes conceptual, analytic and empirical comparison, contributing to critical anthropological and multidisciplinary scholarship.