Leiden Asia Centre Research Agenda 2024-2026:

Environments in Transition

We live in a world in transition.

As the major players of world politics grapple with the challenges of the 21st century, their political, economic, social, and physical environments are shifting under their feet, and often radically so. Rapid technological advancements further amplify and complicate these changes.

Where do these transformations lead, who benefits or suffers from these changes, and what does a responsible strategy look like that promises to steer societies through these radical uncertainties?

Asia in Transition

Asia remains a crucial place for analysing and addressing these concerns. Across the region, perceptions about American power decline and increasing Chinese influence are pushing states, companies, non-profits, and academic institutions alike to recalibrate their approaches and adjust to landscapes in flux.

As societies emerge from deeply transformative events like pandemics and new wars, they are transforming their transnational production and distribution - often under severe pressures to 'de-couple' or 'de-risk' national economies.

Meanwhile, resource-hungry consumerism has radically altered the region's physical environments and climates. Some of these shifts are subtle. Their implications only come into view over extended periods of time - though that does not make them any less tectonic. As the climate catastrophe worsens, hundreds of millions of people across Asia face the consequences, and the

human costs and demographic implications are so profound they are difficult to fathom.

All of these transformations are taking place in complex, highly interconnected environments in which risks and their outcomes are hard to assess. Amidst such wicked problems, we are no longer confronted merely with puzzles that can be solved but rather with interlocking mysteries that we must unpack and explore from all available angles.

At Leiden Asia Centre, we tackle such mysteries with deep regional knowledge and interdisciplinary expertise. We ground our work in the practices of cutting-edge social science and humanities research – with a focus on original scholarship, systematic analysis, and first-hand knowledge.

But this is not merely an academic exercise. If we don't have a keen understanding of local complexities, we risk overlooking the subtle factors that shape the overlapping transitions in Asia and elsewhere. This limits our ability to formulate practical interventions.

If we are to respond to the new geographical, political, and economic configurations that are emerging in Asia, we need actionable research that communicates, in clear language, what we are to make of Asia in transition.

Three core themes

Our research will focus on three core themes:

Regional Reordering:
Asia's political environment is changing, leading to a great deal of uncertainty.

How are political actors re-configuring regional order, especially in the face of US-China rivalry? What approaches do middle powers take, as they are finding their footing in this tumultuous international environment, and how are they re-inventing themselves and their relations in the process?

These are crucial questions both for stakeholders within the region as well as for their partners in Europe and beyond.

Technological Transformations:
Technological innovations promise to address the challenges of the 21st century.

How should we assess the frequent hyperbole that accompanies such promises? How truly transformative are technologies like block-chains, generative artificial intelligence, automated decision-making systems, electric motorisation, and renewables? When are such technologies put to effective use to address societal problems, and when do they merely become window-dressing for extractive logics and vested interests in production and governance networks?

To fully understand the implications of technological transformations, we must look past 'solutionist' ideas that see the world's problems as easily 'fixed' by tech, to instead ask who does what, with which innovation, and to what end.

Evolving Environments:
The full costs of economic and technological hypermodernity are coming forcefully into view.

How are stakeholders addressing the fallout of environmental degradation and cushioning its impacts, especially for the most vulnerable in our societies? What are we to make of the complex trade-offs between developmental goals and environmental constraints? And what practical risks, but also opportunities, open up as societies are forced to take questions of renewable resources and sustainable development ever more seriously?