

## **Denaturalizing inequality in global knowledge politics**

### **Jenniffer Vargas Reina talks about her experiences as the Democratizing Knowledge Politics Initiative Writeshop**

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#### **Global-local connections in international knowledge politics**

What does it mean to be “*globally connected-locally embedded*” in the context of knowledge politics within a deeply unequal global circuits of knowledge production, attribution, circulation and use? The relatively privileged condition of knowledge work in the Global North should always be understood in its inextricable relationship with the more precarious conditions of scholars and researchers in the Global South. This is especially relevant to the fields of social sciences that pertain to some of the global burning issues in the world today related to land, food, animal feed, energy, climate and environment, biodiversity, labour and finance, where research often implicate the Global South, not in isolation from but in connection to the North. Ideas and practice that advocate for academic knowledge with positive societal impact, such as inclusion and sustainability, should be understood as something that inherently requires efforts that produce societally relevant knowledge, but at the same time trying to democratize the very institutions of knowledge politics globally and locally. This is the main objective of the Democratizing Knowledge Politics Initiative’ ([DKPI](#)) as part of the [Erasmus Professors Program](#), within which is a series of international Writeshops for early career scholars from the Global South towards the idea of helping build the conditions for engagement between scholars from the Global South and North based on the principle of equal footing. This can in turn contribute to giving broader meaning to the notion of “globally connected-locally embedded” method of knowledge work for scholars based in different parts of the world. In this Longread, I will describe what the DKPI’s Writeshop series is.

#### **Amazing and extraordinary training workshops**

*It was the best training workshop I have ever experienced in terms of content and methodology, intellectual excellence and social relevance, balance between practical and theoretical matters, and short- and long-term goals, Phwe Yu Mon said. It was serious and fun at the same time. It was extraordinary!* She added.



Fig 1. Phwe Yu Mon, 2025 Asia Regional Writeshop, Beijing/Hebei

Phwe is from Myanmar. She is currently pursuing a PhD in development studies under a joint initiative by the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) of Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR) in the Netherlands ([Erasmus Professors program](#) for positive societal impact) and Chiang Mai University in Thailand. She is referring to the [Journal of Peasant Studies](#) (JPS) Asia Regional Writeshop in Critical Agrarian Studies and Scholar-Activism held in July 2025 at the College of Humanities and Development Studies (COHD) of China Agricultural University in Beijing, China co-organized by the Democratizing Knowledge Politics Initiatives ([DKPI](#)) of the Erasmus Professors program of EUR. A total of 54 PhD candidates and early career researchers from 13 countries and 38 universities in Asia, half of whom were women, participated in the two-week Writeshop.



Fig 2. *JPS* Asia Writeshop in Critical Agrarian Studies and Scholar-Activism, 30 June–13 July 2025, Beijing/Hebei, China. Phwe – first row, eighth from the left.

Phwe is not the only one who feels the same way, and the July 2025 Writeshop was not the first time such an event was organized. The *JPS* Writeshop is a regular event.

[Jenniffer Vargas Reina](#), currently an associate professor at Universidad Nacional in Bogota, Colombia, was one of the 55 early career researchers from 36 countries from the Global South who participated in the very first Writeshop held in July 2019, also in Beijing. She was energized by the experience, and [reflected on it](#) as follows,

*It was a great and amazing experience. I met lots of people who do research from the perspective of the Global South. Everybody learned a lot from each other. We presented our papers and got feedback from the participants and the organizers, making them ready for submission to journals. And very importantly, the Writeshop led us to build our own international network [Collective of Agrarian Scholar-Activists in the South, or CASAS], a network of people committed to the struggle against dispossession, inequality and injustice.*



Fig 3. *JPS* Writeshop, 2019 Beijing/Hebei, China. Jenniffer Vargas Reina – top row, second from the left.

Jenniffer and Phwe are among more than 300 early career scholars from 100 countries in the Global South who have participated in the series of Writeshops co-organized by *JPS* and other institutions. At the time of writing, there have already been seven sessions. Of these seven Writeshops, the first five were global, while the last two are regional. Three were held in China, hosted by [COHD](#), two were held online during Covid-19, and the other two in Cape Town, South Africa, hosted by [PLAAS](#) of the University of the Western Cape, co-organized by the Erasmus Professors program of EUR.



The participants are early career researchers: PhD and postdoctoral researchers and some assistant professors. On average, there are 50–55 participants per Writeshop, with at least 50% women. The event runs between 10 and 14 days.

The 2019 participants decided to organize themselves, and all subsequent participants of the Writeshops, into an international movement, the Collective of Agrarian Scholar-Activists in the South, or [CASAS](#). CASAS in turn has become a co-organizer of the Writeshop.

So, what is this Writeshop all about?

## **Practical**

First of all, it is a very practically oriented workshop. A significant part of every Writeshop is dedicated to practical issues, which some institutions or intellectuals might feel are too mundane to warrant a major international effort to organize.

There is a long list of practical questions participants want to have answered. Some examples are shown in Fig 4. How do I choose the right journal? What is ‘just another case study’ (‘JACS’) and how can I avoid it? How do I turn a dissertation chapter into a journal article? Which is better – a single authored or multi-authored paper? Why does a paper still get rejected even after several rounds of peer review and revision? How do I deal with the problem of lack of confidence in writing academic papers in English? How do I deal with a desk rejection from a journal editor? Can I submit a rejected manuscript to another journal? How can I make a good but concise argument and story when I have collected so much exciting material from my research? What does an editor value most in a manuscript – big theory or empirical material? How can I minimize the chance of rejection, especially when the top journals in my field have only 15% acceptance rates? How do I prepare and write a competitive research grant application? Should I co-author with my supervisors? How can my article be cited more? How can I afford the Open Access fee that is as high as 3,000 euros per article in a top journal in my field? Are all open access journals good and prestigious? What is the best strategy in responding to peer reviewers’ reports, and how do I explain effectively how I addressed the reviewers’ points? I am more an activist than an academic: how can I learn to write in an academic way?



The conversation is not hypothetical. A requirement for the workshop is a full draft paper from each participant. The idea is that after the Writeshop, a revised paper is well on the way to being ready for submission to an international journal. So, after the inputs, sharing and reflection on matters related to publishing, the participants go into smaller break-out groups to give peer review feedback on each other's paper.

This practical part of the workshop is a combination of inputs, sharing and reflection – and the most popular, exciting and animated part of the Writeshop.

So, yes, the Writeshop was conceived and organized to address the urgent practical needs of early career researchers from the Global South. But there are many similar, practically oriented workshops like this. What is special about this initiative?

## **Political**

One thing that sets Writeshops apart is the recognition that the root causes of the practical problems faced by early career researchers from the Global South are political in nature. The terrain of global knowledge politics is marked by inequality. Researchers from the Global South, especially early career scholars, are not by nature inferior to their Northern counterparts. It is the existing social structures and institutions – which are, in turn, an extension of the uneven global capitalist system – that largely hinder the realization of the full potential of Southern researchers. It is not a natural phenomenon. The current global knowledge regime is politically constructed, and to a large extent shaped by the colonial past.

That early career researchers in state universities in Sumatra cannot access published articles because their libraries cannot afford to subscribe to expensive international journals, in contrast to their counterparts based in leading universities in the Netherlands, or in Europe and North America more generally, resulting in lower publication performance by the former, is not something organic or inevitable. It is a direct outcome of the uneven global capitalist system, and the global circuits of knowledge politics in the context of the commercialization of universities and colleges worldwide, through neoliberalization.

In March 2024, an early career researcher from Burkina Faso took a flight from this western African country to participate at the International Conference on Global Land Grabbing held at the Universidad de los Andes in Bogota, Colombia. He was under the sponsorship of the Land Deal Politics Initiative ([LDPI](#)), with a travel fund from a European Research Council Advanced Grant project. To get to Bogota, he had to catch connecting flights in Morocco and Paris, without leaving these airports. When he arrived at the airport in Morocco to catch his onward flights to Paris and then to Bogota, he was not allowed to board. Instead, he was sent back to Burkina Faso supposedly because of French immigration rules on citizens from Burkina Faso transiting through Paris airport. It was a heartbreaking experience. And it is not an isolated case.

Early career researchers from the Global South generally do not have resources to participate in international academic conferences, and this is one of the first layers of marginalization that separates them from the global circuits of knowledge politics. But on the few occasions when they get sponsors to enable their participation at international conferences, visa application rejections or denied access to flights are far too common. What kind of conversations about social change in the Global South do we expect from international conferences when a very significant proportion of scholars from these parts of the world are a priori unable to participate?

What kind of development trajectory are early career scholars from the Global South likely to follow when they are prevented from participating in important conversations with leading scholars and fellow researchers from other parts of the world?

These are some of the manifestations of the inequality and injustice that define global knowledge politics. This knowledge inequality cannot be separated from the inequality and injustice in the world more generally which, in turn, trace their history back to colonial times.

If the causes of the poor performance in standard academic metrics by researchers from the Global South – the quality and quantity of scientific publications, successful competitive research grants, participation in international conferences, etc. – are structural in nature, then individual excellence-centered approaches and institutional mechanisms which use incentives/disincentives to address the issue of inequality in academia, while relevant and important, may inadvertently reinforce rather than unsettle the unfairness in the status quo.

This is why the *JPS* Writeshop has been framed and organized along a [scholar-activist tradition](#). In other words, it aims to develop a method in knowledge work that interprets the world in various ways in order to change it into something better – more just, fairer and kinder. How and under what conditions we pursue knowledge work are themselves issues that require us to challenge the status quo. Emancipatory knowledge about global social justice can be produced, and has been produced, in deeply undemocratic social structures and institutional conditions. The axes of inequality are intersectional, involving class and interlocking identity politics: gender, generation, race, ethnicity, caste, nationality, as well as the Global South–North divide.

What we talk about when we talk about development depends very much on who talks about development. The unjust, unfair, unkind global circuits of knowledge politics in critical agrarian studies – agrarian, food, environmental, labor studies – can be seen reflected in statistics about the geography of published authors and journal usage. We use *Journal of Peasant Studies* 10-year statistics 2012–2021 as an illustrative case. *JPS* is a top journal in its field and has been doing affirmative action to assist early career researchers from the Global South. This particular period of 10 years is likely to be representative – things have not changed radically in the last five years – so it offers relevant insights. What we see in Fig 5 (geography of published corresponding authors) is the huge gap between authors based in North America and Europe compared to the tiny share of the rest of the world. Fig 6 shows statistics on journal usage (full-text downloads); the gap between North America and Europe on the one hand, and the rest of the world, on the other hand, follows the same pattern. In fact, if *JPS* has been “doing affirmative action”, one would expect the *JPS* statistics to be better than most journals. To see that the *JPS* statistics are not that exciting makes us wonder about the situation with most other journals in our field that have no similar affirmative action.

Fig 5. Geography of Published Corresponding Authors, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 2012–2021

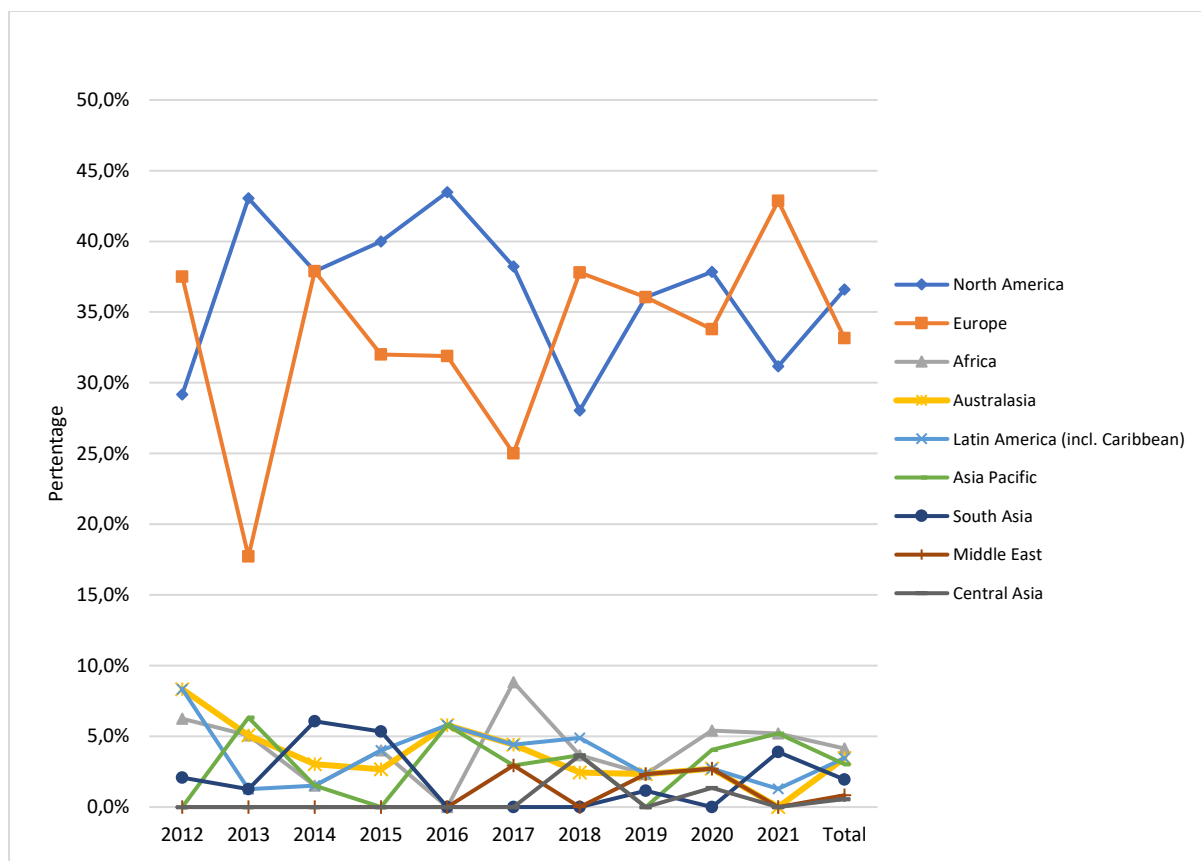
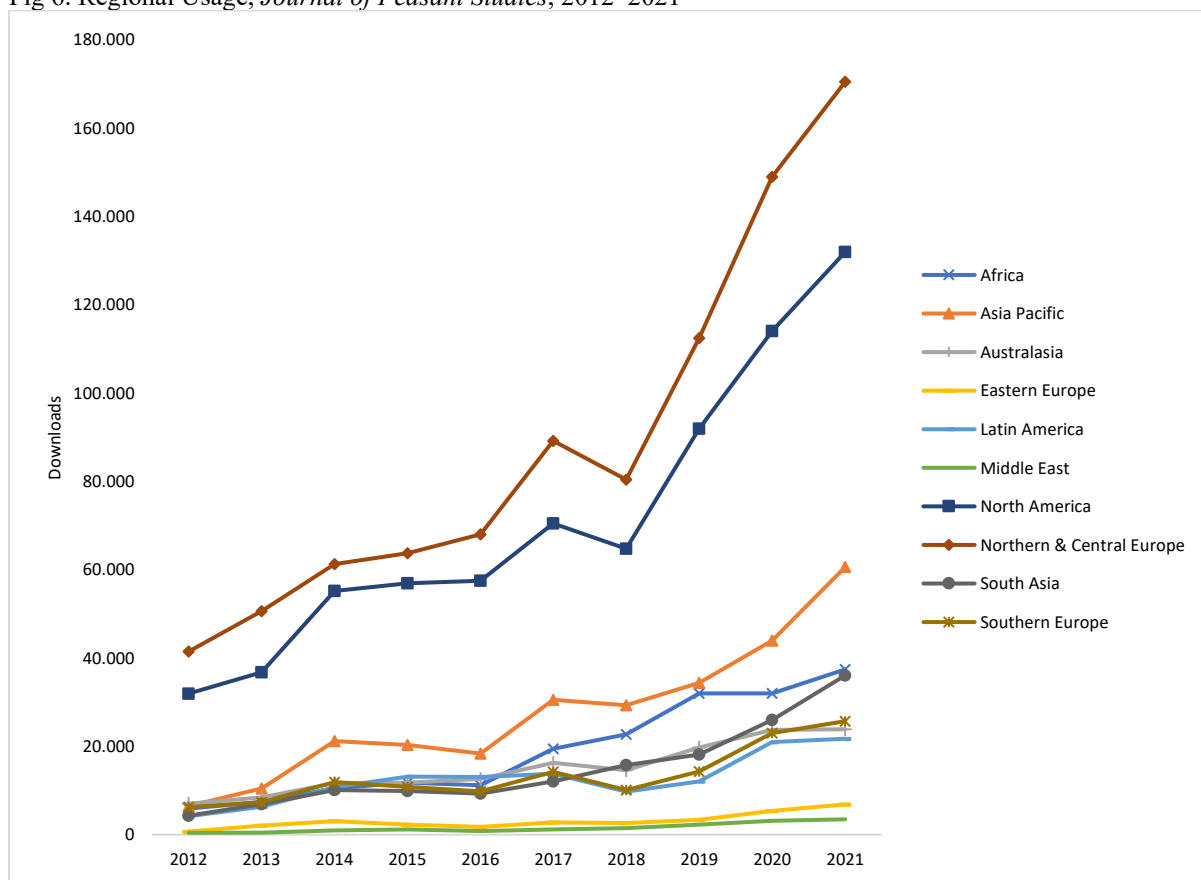


Fig 6. Regional Usage, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 2012–2021





These two figures are an illustration of the structural, institutional and political conditions of the global circuits of knowledge politics. Top universities in richer countries and regions are able to pay for subscriptions to journals that are totally unaffordable to most universities in the Global South. As a consequence, we cannot expect researchers in the Global South who do not have access to journals to be able to perform in publishing at the same level as their Northern counterparts. These two sets of statistics in the world of scientific journals are just a small manifestation of the unjust global structures that are in turn a reflection of the uneven development of capitalism in the world, and the broader and deeper inequality in the international economy and politics.

In a world marked by social inequality and injustice, producing knowledge that justifies, naturalizes, normalizes and legitimizes such inequality and injustice, directly or indirectly, knowingly or unwittingly, inadvertently but essentially makes one complicit to such inequality and injustice. Being agnostic to this injustice is no better. To accept that early career researchers in the Global South are far behind in publishing performance compared to Global North counterparts simply because the latter are based in universities with better resources than the former, and to take no public action to unsettle such structural and institutional conditions, is tantamount to naturalizing inequality in global knowledge circuits.

Given the complex situation within which we need scholars in universities to produce emancipatory knowledge, the most appropriate strategy for meaningful social change is to carry out struggles within and against the contemporary global knowledge regime. This implies fighting to reform the terms and terrain of knowledge-making now, while trying to disrupt the system in the longer term; working to erode and dismantle the current knowledge system, while constructing an alternative. The first step in this process is to denaturalize inequality in global knowledge politics.

This is the main political framework of the *JPS Writeshop* within which we locate the bewildering array of practical needs of early career researchers from the Global South.

Rahma Hassan, from the 2020 Writeshop cohort and currently a research fellow at the University of Nairobi, was part of the CASAS co-organizing team of the 2022 Writeshop. She reflected as follows:

*The Writeshop is an extraordinary space where we learn as a participant and as a co-organizer. It is similar to one of the highlights from the Writeshop: building the skills of how to get published by learning as an author and as a peer reviewer. The Writeshop is thus a curated space that produces, and at the same time is a product of, uniquely trained early career researchers from the Global South, aiming not only to understand knowledge politics but to change them into something more equitable, on issues such as access to and publishing in international journals. The network that emerges from the Writeshop cohorts offers the much-needed solidarity space to keep engaging.*



Fig 7. From right to left: Carol (Mexico), Duygu (Turkey), Rahma (Kenya) and George (Zimbabwe). All were co-organizers of the 2022 Writeshop held in Cape Town, and had participated in the Writeshop in previous years.



Fig 8. Rahma is at the center in a green shirt; 2022 cohort, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa

## **Movement**

“Yes, it’s tough out there. But if you just work harder, and in a smarter way, grabbing every opportunity that comes your way, you can overcome the barriers and excel in academia, be ahead of the pack, even become famous.” Expressed in many different ways, this more or less summarizes the dominant approach in academia today, that is, the ‘individual excellence approach’, carried out through a system of incentive/disincentive packages.

There is nothing wrong with being an ambitious individual academic. It should be encouraged and supported. Creative energy that benefits humanity can, and does, come out of this. The danger with this approach comes when it is oblivious to, or even justifying, the unjust status quo. When that happens, it becomes part of the apparatus of the inequitable, disempowering system.

If we aim for a systemic change, then neither an ‘individual excellence approach’ nor a one-off major event can have a serious impact. Continuing conversations, training and political struggles to change the system become imperative. It is for this reason that the 2019 Writeshop cohort, followed by subsequent cohorts, decided to build a global network of all those who completed this *JPS* Writeshop. They called it the Collective of Agrarian Scholar-Activists in the South or CASAS. Their vision is captured in their initial [manifesto](#).

It is not an anti-North platform. Quite the opposite. It is an internationalist movement. The Global South focus of the Writeshop and its affirmative action is to help strengthen the position of early career researchers from these parts of the world so that they can forge more meaningful engagement and collaboration with their Northern counterparts compared to the current situation. This is internalized in the orientation of CASAS, the global network, the international movement, and expressed in further articulations of the initial idea such as the collaboratively written [paper](#). CASAS as a network or movement is at its formative stage, trying to navigate the global terrain of knowledge politics, and determine how best to define and carry out the idea of political struggles within and against the existing global knowledge regime.

### **Broad-based, community funding**

The dominant knowledge regime is in general based on the principle of providing training and conference opportunities for those who have the means to participate. It is almost always the case that early career researchers from the Global South do not have the means to pay for travel and accommodation costs, annual academic association member fees, conference registration fees, visa costs, and so – all mundane issues for their counterparts in the North who, most often, have such means. In this way, elitism and the unjust social structures in global knowledge politics are naturalized and reproduced.

The *JPS* Writeshop aims to unsettle this reproduction mechanism. It is not an event only for those who have the means to participate. When the Call for Applications was released in late 2018 for the first Writeshop in July 2019, the organizers were thinking of taking 35 participants, for logistical reasons. To our huge surprise, more than 700 applied (!), including well over 200 academically qualified applicants. We decided to invite 60 from 40 countries – not the ‘top’ 60 based on academic credentials and abstracts, but on the basis of democratizing access to the Writeshop opportunity across 40 countries in the regions of Africa, Latin America and Asia, and adopting a bottom-line principle that not less than 50% should be women. Some of them were registered in Global North universities and could afford to pay for their travel cost, fully or partially, but most could not. So, we democratized the process: those who could afford to pay for their travel cost in part or in full took responsibility for those costs. For the rest, the organizers funded the costs: accommodation, daily food expenses, travel costs, etc. Ultimately, it was a community effort in making sure everyone was able to come. Leaving no one behind. This is how all subsequent *JPS* Writeshops have been organized, and will continue to be organized.





Fig 9. *JPS* International Writeshop, July 2024, Beijing/Hebei, China.

### Fun and friendships

The *JPS* Writeshop is not all academic and political work. There are also a lot of fun activities and personal friendship-building. As [Afreen Faridi](#) of Kashmir, a PhD candidate at Jawaharlal Nehru University and part of the 2025 Asia cohort, said, the Writeshop is not about random strangers meeting in an interesting workshop, but rather, a community effort that views everyone in the process as a potential friend and family member.

The 2019 Writeshop was broadly organized like this: one or two days before the workshop began, participants arrived and could visit the city of Beijing. Then: Part 1 of the workshop (3 days); a day off in between, with the entire group taking a hike at the Great Wall (see Figs 16 and 17); Part 2 of the workshop (3 days). Afterwards, some participants stayed for an extra day or two to see more of the city. Subsequent Writeshops in China introduced some additional features, with half of the workshop being held at a rural village in Hebei province, and the remaining half in Beijing. During their time in Hebei, participants live with peasant families who have converted some of their extra rooms into ‘homestay’ accommodation, with breakfast, lunch and dinner, similar to a *casa rural* or bed-and-breakfast, giving extra income to peasant households. In this way, participants get the chance to learn more about Chinese peasant life. We hold this part of the Writeshop in a typical small peasant village called Sanggang, with which COHD has a long-standing research partnership and where a seminar center has been built. Visiting rural villages has become an integral part of the *JPS* Writeshop. During the 4<sup>th</sup> Writeshop held in Cape Town, the participants visited a village of farmworkers in the vineyard sector of Stellenbosch (see Fig 11).





Fig 10. International 2019 cohort, China



Fig 11. International 2022 cohort, visit at a farmworkers' village in Stellenbosch.



Fig 12. Asia 2025 cohort, visiting an organic apple orchard cooperative, China.



Fig 13. A large representation from Indonesia in the 2025 Asia regional Writeshop, China





Fig 14. Finding new friends. 2025 Asia cohort, China



Fig 15. More new friendships, Asia 2025 cohort, China



Fig 16. Some 2024 participants reaching the point on the Great Wall where hikers are allowed to go the farthest.



Fig 17. 2025 Asia regional participants at the same point on the Great Wall.

Learning from each other, not just about academic issues and views, but about each other's lives and societies has been the heart and soul of the *JPS* Writeshop, as [Praveen Verma](#), Assistant Professor at the University of Delhi (2025 cohort), has emphasized. Together for 10–



14 days in very intensive academic work, but at the same time in a very relaxed and friendly atmosphere, provides a great balance in the learning process, and a setting in which personal friendships that could last for a lifetime have been forged.



Fig 18. Africa 2025 Writeshop, Cape Town, 28 Sept – 5 October 2025.

It is true that the *JPS* Writeshop is about the everyday practical needs of early career researchers from the Global South who are trying to navigate life and work inside academia. Yet, the practical concerns are a logical extension of the political character of the global knowledge regime. The participants and organizers are bound by a common commitment to [scholar-activism](#) – the method of knowledge work that studies the world in order to change it into something better, seeing the unjust social structures and institutions in global academia as something inherently entangled in the world social order marked by exploitation and oppression. The struggle to transform the global circuits of knowledge politics is therefore not separate from the struggles of ordinary working people to transform the world social system into something more just, more fair and kinder than it is now. In this sense, the Writeshop is also about building a movement that is politically bold, subversive, disruptive to the status quo – but at the same time, building a community, forging solidarity and friendship, and learning about caring.

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The *JPS* Writeshop series is co-organized by the DKPI of Erasmus Professors Program together with the *Journal of Peasant Studies* (*JPS*), CASAS, College of Humanities and Development Studies (COHD) of China Agricultural University, and PLAAS of the University of the Western Cape. The 2025 Asia Regional Writeshop received a major funding contribution from EarthCare Foundation, Hong Kong. The host organization in China is COHD under the leadership of Professor Ye Jingzhong, former COHD Dean. COHD mobilizes dozens of volunteer students, and provides generous -resources to make every Writeshop a once-in-a-lifetime positive experience for the participants. The host in Cape Town is PLAAS at the

University of the Western Cape under the leadership of its Director, Professor Ruth Hall. Both Ye and Ruth are co-editors of *JPS*.

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