

Historical Consciousness and the Future of Modern China and Japan: Conservatism, Revisionism and National Identity

Report >
East Asia

While the phenomena of conservatism and revisionism have long pedigrees in the modern histories of China and Japan, Western scholars have focused mainly on liberals and leftists. They have thus overlooked schools of thought crucial to our understanding of the role of history and tradition in shaping modern collective identities in East Asia.

By Axel Schneider

Our subject is located within the context of far-reaching changes in research on the modern era and the nature of modernity. The participants discussed a key factor in the intellectual and political life of modern China and Japan: the revival of interest in views of history and tradition distinct from hitherto dominant Marxist and liberal visions, and the impact of this revival on the creation of collective identities. In the distinctive forms of conservatism and revisionism, reflection on tradition and the role of history have become, again, essential ingredients in the process of shaping political legitimacy and collective identity, with far-reaching consequences for the future of both countries.

'Globalisation' has been at the centre of public debate since the end of the Cold War. In the West, expectations ran high that globalisation – conceptualised as the worldwide spread of modern Western models of economics, politics, society, and culture – would lead to a world united under the umbrella of universal modernity. These expectations have failed to materialize. Although the global economy can be identified as a universal capitalist system of some sort, cultural and political developments have moved in the opposite direction. Elites around the world increasingly doubt Eurocentric notions of cultural and political modernity, and re-emphasize their own historical heritage. This revival of interest in history and pre-modern traditions goes hand in hand with a resurgence of movements emphasizing various types of particular collectives, concerned primarily with national identity and ethnicity.

The bifurcation of globalisation into a universal economic system on the one hand and an emphasis on particular historical traditions on the other finds parallels in academic debates on 'modernization'. In recent years, new concepts have been formulated – such as the notion of 'multiple modernities' – to cope with the apparent demise of Eurocentrism. Faced with the challenge of post-modernism and globalisation's bifurcation, historical and cultural factors are now given greater weight in modernization processes, while many still try to subsume particular phenomena under a core of modernity, identified as a set of structural, institutional and cultural arrangements.

While the phenomena of conservatism and revisionism have long pedigrees in the modern histories of China and Japan, Western scholars have focused mainly on Chinese and Japanese liberals and leftists. For the most part, they have either neglected conser-

vative and revisionist approaches, or dismissed them as irrelevant. Western scholarship has hence overlooked important schools of thought relevant to our understanding of the role of history and tradition in the shaping of modern collective identities in East Asia.

The workshop

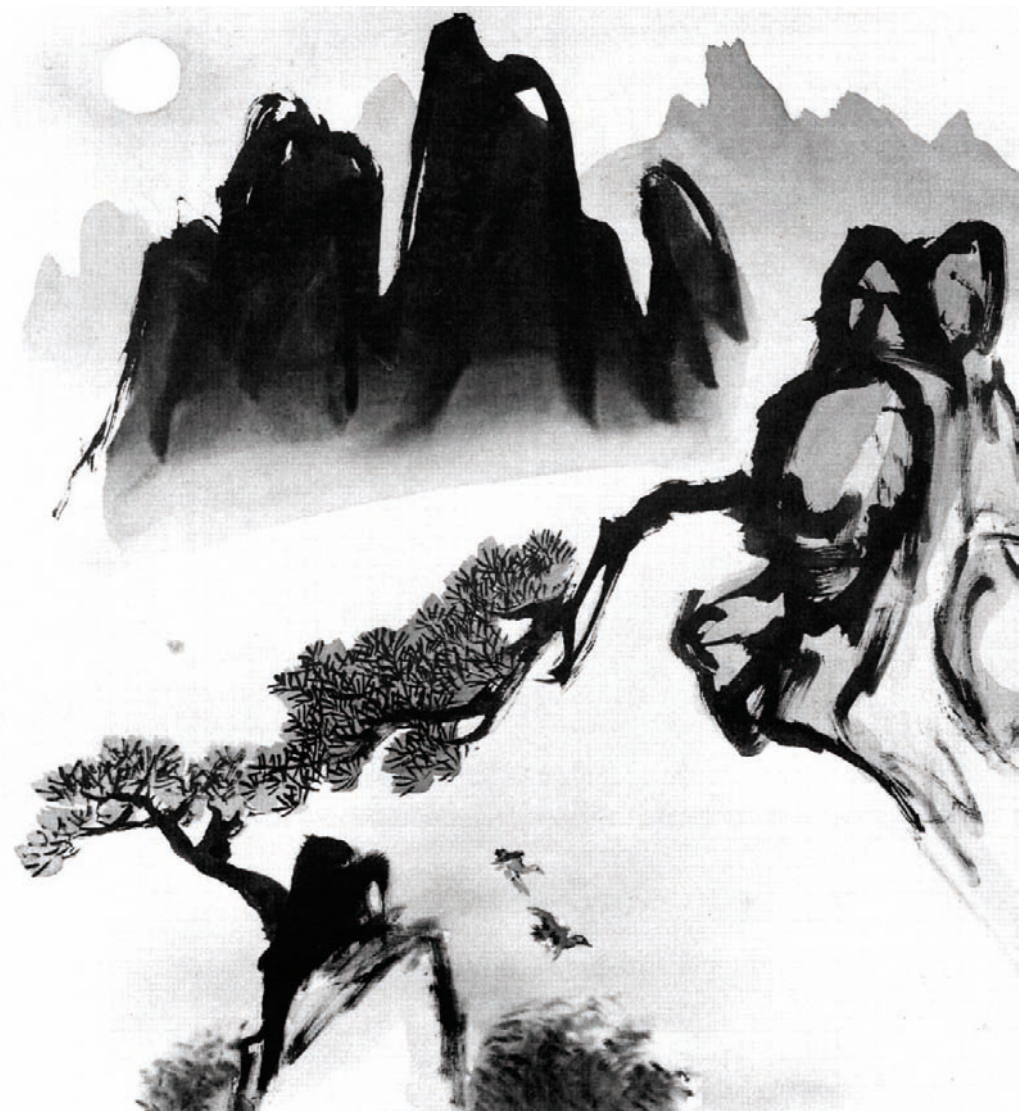
The conveners invited specialists from the US, China, Japan, the UK, Germany and Austria to identify and discuss key theoretical issues underlying changes in academic research, and to delineate topics for research on conservatism in China and revisionism in Japan.

The workshop began with two general, theoretical presentations on methodological issues of historical comparison (Frederic Wakeman, Berkeley: 'Comparative history') and on conceptualising world history in the age of globalisation (Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, Vienna, 'World history and the issue of universality and particularity'). It was followed by a panel on contemporary Japanese attitudes towards World War Two (Tetsuya Takahashi, Tokyo, 'Nation, war and memory: the case of Yasukuni') and on the phenomenon of intellectual and political apostasy from a trans-war perspective (Rikki Kersten, Leiden, 'Historical consciousness and the issue of turning points'). Both aimed to come to grips with the complicated workings of historical memory in modern Japan.

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Next came two presentations analysing the re-emergence of conservative and revisionist trends in historical consciousness in contemporary China and Japan, addressing questions of identity formation, national subjectivity and fundamental views of history (Axel Schneider, Leiden, 'Chinese conservatism', and David Williams, Cardiff, 'Revisionism, subjectivity and the Great East Asian War: the view from Kyoto'). The workshop concluded with a panel aiming at a larger analytical framework for understanding recent conservative and revisionist trends in East Asia, which addressed how these trends are linked to, and differ from, general questions of modern nationalism (Luo Zhitian, Beijing, and Kevin Doak, Georgetown, 'Nationalism and the issue of ethnicity' in China and Japan, respectively). <

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Korean Art: the Brooklyn Museum, New York

The workshop was organized by Rikki Kersten and Axel Schneider of Leiden University, and was supported by the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) and the Isaac Alfred Ailion Foundation. It represented the first milestone in the five-year NWO-funded research project on Historical Consciousness, led by the conveners of this workshop. Please refer to the website for future events and research updates: www.vici-core.leidenuniv.nl