

IIAS Reports *continued*

History, Identity & Collective Memory: In Search of Modern China

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Above:
Beijing Olympics
opening ceremony,
2008. Photo
courtesy Creative
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"ONLY WHEN CHINA STOPS defining itself in terms of how it thinks it is perceived by the West and Japan, will it truly have overcome 'national humiliation'." This was one of the many points made and issues raised during the seminar 'In search of Modern China' (29-30 June 2012). Nine scholars from different countries and academic backgrounds presented their research papers, shedding light and exchanging ideas on the question of how history, identity and collective memory issues are interpreted, constructed and appropriated in the nation building process of modern China. With this two-day seminar, convener Prof. Jui-sung Yang, concluded his half-year teaching appointment at Leiden University as IIAS visiting professor from National Chengchi University in Taiwan. The event was also attended by a small group of his students and other interested parties, including Sandra Dehue, editor at IIAS.

In his introduction to the seminar, Yang outlined the context of the topic. The image today's China is eager to present to the world is that of a modern nation at peace with itself, and fully integrated in the modern international system. A China that is no longer under the shadow of its imperial past or its modern vicissitudes, and where history and collective memory only seem to play an insignificant role in its rapid economic

development and self-understanding. For many people a rich and powerful China is nothing but the realisation of the widely shared pragmatic value in contemporary China: to 'look forward in all respects' (*yiqie xianqiankan*). However, China thus portrayed, is only one side of the story. There are many signs indicating that the 'new China', while 'looking forward' economically, has continued 'looking back' to redefine its modern significance by reinterpreting history and constructing collective memory. For example, during the 60th anniversary of the People's Republic of China in 2009, an unusual ceremony, a march of 169 goosesteps escorting the PRC national flag from the People's Heroes Monument to Tiananmen Square, honoured the sacrifice of the Chinese people ever since the Opium War in 1840 (169 years ago). Another example is the important and widely promoted goal for Chinese athletes, especially during the 2008 Beijing Olympics, to erase the label of 'Sick Man of East Asia', a term believed by the Chinese to have been used since the 19th century by the West and Japan to humiliate the Chinese people and country.

Elena Barabantseva presented her paper *In Pursuit of an Alternative Model? The Modernisation Trap in China's Official Development Discourse*. She argues that China's model of

development is preoccupied with modernity as a linear process of progression, relying on the suppression of other possible development paths. This paradigm of modernisation is symbolically celebrated in China's official discourse and public rituals. By tracing its impact on the influential annual publication *China Modernization Report* and on the 2009 National Day mass parade, Barabantseva aims to show what kind of Chinese nation is produced and how. The *China Modernization Report*, which offers a comparison of China's development with other countries, is for example not issued by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, but by the Chinese Academy of Sciences, which represents the hard sciences. Another example is the theme of the 2009 National Day, 'Advances of the motherland', which was expressed in the mass parade by the Yangtze river representing the necessarily forward flow of development, while the ethnic minorities – officially regarded as backward – held the last position in the parade.

Andrea Riemenschneider (*Specters of modernity in Post-Maoist fiction*) pointed our attention to the heterogeneity and polysemy of the symbols employed in post-Maoist literary works. The multiplication of Chinese pasts, it has been suggested, is one of the strategies to reconstruct an alternative (to the) present. Post-Maoist fiction also explores new ways of understanding history through the voices of hitherto silenced subjectivities. While famous writer Lu Xun, during the late 1910s, woke up his elite compatriots from their long shut-eye complacency, post-Maoist writers, in their turn, investigate a century of supposedly awakened, modern reason, that had nevertheless led to other forms of no less harmful irrationalism in Mao's China and thereafter. Meanwhile, the violence of the revolutionary monomyth has given way to passive nostalgia, while the unsustainable dreams of capitalist new China threaten to turn its (social) landscapes into wasteland. In her paper, Riemenschneider analyses Bei Feiyu's novel *Tuina* (*Massage*, 2008), which offers an outlook on the everyday lives of a group of social outcasts, in terms of its renegotiation of China's different modernities and core values.

Focusing on two propaganda poster series from the 1990s, Professor Landsberger (*I want to be an amazing Chinese: How China prepared (the people) for a global role*) illustrated how the success of the modernisation process, as well as selected moments in China's history, have been used by the Chinese government in the conceptualization and visualisation of being Chinese. In the four-part educational propaganda poster series 'Amazing' (1996), intended for middle schools, the love for the Mother Country is clearly related to the success of the modernisation process. Posters like these are designed to prepare the Chinese people for a global role, and are intended to invoke feelings of pride in the self and the nation. The second series, the 'Patriotic Education Propaganda Poster Set' from 1994, adds a new sentiment by specifically remembering the century of 'national humiliation' by the imperialist West, starting with the 1840 Opium War and officially ending with the founding of the PRC in 1949. Its second poster, entitled 'How can we forget?', shows the ruins of the Summer Palace (Yuanmingyuan), ransacked in 1860 by the British. The series not only appeals to feelings

Professor Jui-sung Yang, first incumbent of the Taiwanese Chair of Chinese Studies at IIAS

PROFESSOR JUI-SUNG YANG visited IIAS and Leiden University, from February through August 2012, in the framework of the (renewed) agreement between IIAS and the Ministry of Education of Taiwan, in support of a teaching chair of Chinese Studies.¹ Following its mandate to stimulate Asian Studies in both academia and society, IIAS supports professorial fellowships that allow Dutch and Asian scholars to exchange expertise, by sponsoring Asian scholars to come to Dutch universities for the purpose of teaching and research. In this framework, Professor Yang taught an advanced course on Chinese nationalism in the last year of the bachelor's programme China Studies at Leiden University, while engaging in research at IIAS. He concluded his seven-month stay with a two-day international seminar entitled *History, Identity & Collective Memory: In Search of Modern China*.

Professor Jui-sung Yang holds the position of Associate Professor at the Department of History, National Chengchi University in Taiwan. He wrote his dissertation at the University of California (Los Angeles) under the mentorship of Professor Benjamin A. Elman, on the subject of Yen Yuan an early Qing Confucianism in north China. In recent years, Yang's research has focused on the issues regarding the construction of modern Chinese identity. He is the author of

the book *Sick Man, Yellow Peril, and Sleeping Lion: Chinese Images from the 'Western' Perspectives & the Discourses and Imaginations of National Identity in Modern China*, a publication chosen by the Taiwanese government as one of the Taiwanese official publications exhibited at the 2011 *Frankfurter Buchmesse*.

Teaching

The course *Modern Chinese Nationalism* was designed to give last-year students of the bachelor programme China Studies, a rounded perspective on the complicated relationship between collective memory and modern Chinese national identity. Besides introducing the main themes of modern Chinese nationalism, it explored the construction of modern national identity in terms of symbols such as 'Yellow Emperor', the Great Wall, 'Sick Man' and 'Yellow Peril', and analysed the significance and impact of the 'victimisation narrative' of modern Chinese history.

In a period of twelve weeks, and covering selected readings from various contemporary scholars in both English and Chinese, the course familiarised the students with some important current scholarship regarding the study of modern Chinese nationalism and the discourse of Chinese national identity, and provided insights into the way symbols and images have been appropriated by nationalist discourses in the construction of modern Chinese national identity. It aimed to teach students how to assess and analyse the significance of historical memory and consciousness in modern Chinese nationalism; to redefine the complicated

relationship between traditional and modern China; and to rethink the ambiguous role played by the West in the 'victimisation narrative' of modern Chinese history.

Research at IIAS

Yang's research project at IIAS focused on the relationship between population discourse and modern Chinese nationalism. It aimed to explore how the 'digitalised' population discourse shaped the boundary imagination of the modern Chinese nation, internally and externally. The fruit of this research is the article *The 'Four Hundred Millions' Discourse/Imagination of the Nation in Modern China* (in Chinese), published in the *Journal of the History of Ideas in East Asia*, vol.2 (June, 2012), in Taiwan. Yang also looked into the complicated relationship between the collective memory of 'national humiliation' and 'victimisation narrative' in modern Chinese historiography. His major research interests and concerns lie in investigating the various facets of modern Chinese nationalism and their interactions with modern Chinese collective memory and identity.

Notes

1 Replacing an older agreement in support of a teaching chair of Chinese Studies, the new agreement was signed in March 2011 between IIAS and the Bureau of International, Cultural & Educational relations (BICER) of the Taiwanese Ministry of Education. The new agreement aims to promote the teaching and research of Chinese Studies, and its interaction with East Asian Studies, within the Netherlands and Europe, and provides for a Taiwanese Professorship Programme at IIAS.

of pride, but also emphasises the necessity to stand up for China's legitimate rights. Relevant questions include, among others: how did China see itself, and how did the Chinese people perceive themselves at this point in time?

Jui-sung Yang's presentation, *Long Live the Sick Man!*: *The 'Bingfu' Complex in Modern Chinese Consciousness*, centred on the role of the 'Sick Man' label in the nationalist discourse in modern China as a form of 'imagined national humiliation'. An important mission for the Chinese athletes during the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, was winning as many medals as possible in order to erase the so-called 'Sick Man' label, which is erroneously regarded by many Chinese to have been ruthlessly imposed upon China by the Western imperialists and the Japanese to humiliate both China and the Chinese, especially with regard to the physical qualities of the Chinese people. In the West the term was first used by Tsar Nicolas I to refer to the weak Ottoman Empire, and in the political discourse of the late 19th century, to describe the weak and corrupt state of the Qing empire. Agreeing with this metaphor, many pro-reform Chinese intellectuals at the time frequently invoked the term to call for radical reforms. The term was only used to refer to the physique of the Chinese when Chinese reformers, like Liang Qichao, invoked the term in the early 20th century to stress the importance of the national body reform movement. However, as time went by, the Chinese people forgot the Chinese origins of this new meaning, and even worse, the term has since been used time and again to invoke and mobilise xenophobic sentiments in the construction of modern Chinese collective identity. By historicising this 'imagined national humiliation' and showing how the image of 'Sick Man' has been 'individualised/personalised' as a bodily problem for every Chinese, and then 'nationalised' as a collective humiliation in the nationalist discourse in modern China, Yang's paper reflected on the complicated role the West plays in the construction of modern Chinese identity, as well as on the possibility of a 'post-national' understanding of this symbol in today's China.

Ivo Amelung (*Science and National Identity: Discovering History of Science in early 20th Century China*) argued that the history of science only became a serious research area in China in the 1930s, when it was integrated into China's discourse on identity in two ways. Firstly, China as an aspiring modern nation needed a past that could be linked to a Chinese modernity, and a history of Chinese science and technology was one way to achieve this. Secondly, the Chinese scientists as a group wanted to legitimise their position by emphasising the importance of science and technology in China's great past. As the study of the history of science had never before been an important topic, the Chinese used the existing western models of scientific classification as blueprints and a source of inspiration for the discourse. By doing so, they created an identity that in many respects relied heavily on western ideas and developments.

With his presentation, *The Date No One Could Recall: Collective Memory about the Founding Day of the Chinese Communist Party*, Yoshihiro Ishikawa showed how political

Right: Combining powerful images and rousing language, the "Patriotic Education Propaganda Poster Set" (1994) shows how China has shaken off its humiliation and is becoming a nation once more to be reckoned with. The poster set is part of the IISH/Stefan R. Landsberger Collections (chinese posters.net).



pressure can lead to collective memory creation. In the period after the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, its members gave special meaning to the exact founding date – and birthday – of the CCP. Lacking reliable information on the exact date, the pressure of the political arena at the time contributed to the formation of an 'official collective memory' of many who attended the first national congress; as time went by, however, they themselves had no actual clear recollection of when precisely it had taken place.

Shiro Onodera (*Commemorating the National Humiliation: the Origin of Modern Chinese jinian and Guochi jinian*) focused on the origins of the Chinese 'National Humiliation Day' (*guochi jinian*). At the end of the 19th century, *kinen* (記念) in Japan, referred to a ceremony to celebrate honourable events. The idea of commemoration was introduced in China by Liang Qichao, but in a different way, namely for the purpose to remind people of *guochi*, or 'national humiliation', and to swear revenge. One of the first *jinian* (記念) ceremonies was to commemorate six executed reformers. When Japan confronted China in 1915 with the Twenty-One Demands, patriots responded in outrage by establishing *guochi jinian*, a day of national humiliation to commemorate the demands.

Below:
Standing (L-R):
Onodera (Kyoto U.),
Yang (Nat. Chenchi U.),
Ishikawa (Kyoto U.),
Amelung (Goethe U. Frankfurt),
Landsberger (Leiden U.)
Sitting (L-R):
Sakamoto (Hitotsubashi U.),
Riemenschnitter (U. Zürich),
Barabantseva (U. of Manchester),
Ter Haar (Leiden U.)

Hiroyo Sakamoto's presentation, *On the Concept of the Han, the Yellow Race and the New Chinese Nation in Modern Chinese History: From Liang Qichao's Concept of 'Yellow as Greater Han' to Fei Xiaotong's argument on the 'Plurality and Organic Unity' of the Chinese Nation*, showed how issues of ethnic identity played an important role in the nation building process after the fall of the Qing dynasty. She argues that Liang Qichao's concept of the 'Yellow Race' from 1901, meaning the Han Chinese and the highly sinicised Manchu minority, can be regarded as a sort of prototypical model of Fei Xiaotong's view on the Chinese nation. In his *Plurality and Organic Unity* (1988) Fei portrays the Han group as the 'coagulated core' around which many different groups fused together in China's thousands of years long history. After the fall of the Qing, most nationalists initially didn't agree with Liang's inclusion of the Manchu. However, fearing that they might lose large parts of the previous imperial territory, inhabited by its many different ethnic groups, they soon decided that the term *zhonghua minzu* (中華民族) [Chinese people, Chinese nation] should include all different ethnic groups in an attempt to unify the new nation. The term is present in both the Chinese names of the Republic of China (1912), *Zhonghua Minguo*, and of the PRC (1949), *Zonghua Minzu Gongheguo*, which also referred to itself as a 'Harmonious Big Family', comprising all ethnic groups within its borders. Nevertheless, the reality was that Stalinist policy soon declared that the ethnic minorities were at a lower stage of development in history. The question that arises is, if the great importance given to the Han group, first in Liang Qichao's concept of the 'Chinese race', and later also by Fei Xiaotong, may somehow pressurise the ethnic minorities to conform to Han identity?

The last presentation, *Stories of Northern Connectedness*, was delivered by Barend ter Haar. He put forward his hypothesis that many of the local indigenous cultures in southern regions of China have their origin stories stemming from the north. He argues that these stories may be interpreted as stories of belonging, rather than of evidence of historical facts. They create a fictional past linking the cultures in question to what is seen as 'Chinese', or at least to an 'imperial' past, which can be shared with what is seen as the original China of the plains of the Yellow River.

The seminar was completed with a discussion and concluding remarks about the subjects covered, including: how the historical past can be distorted in the construction of national identity; how present concerns can determine what of the past we remember and how; how the common people react to or consume the official ideology; and the question of the possibility of a post-modern, post-national understanding of the past in today's China.

Notes

1 The seminar was sponsored by the Ministry of Education, Taiwan; Leiden University's Institute for Area Studies, Modern East Asia Research Centre, and International Institute for Asian Studies.

