

IIAS Report

Japan, China, and the construction of history

Leo Douw



AFTER THE APEC MEETING in Beijing in November 2014 a series of pictures were released in the world press, which showed Japan's Prime Minister Abe Shinzō and China's President Xi Jinping reluctantly shaking hands. Small wonder, Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations have been in stalemate for several years and apparently won't improve much for some time to come. On 25-26 June 2015 a workshop was convened at the University of Amsterdam with the intention to discuss this impasse: can we speak of a new, regional Cold War, which might erupt into a real war, and drag the world community of nations along? Can we speak of an ongoing Chinese expansionism, menacing to Japan and its other neighbors, which should be counter-balanced by a military build-up under US leadership? If so, are there alternatives to this confrontation, in particular by the promotion of trade and investment, or the construction of an East Asian regional identity? And with regard to the latter, could a historiography be constructed that counteracts the Japanese and Chinese nationalisms, and which tempers the concomitant historical claims?¹

First, does China pose a military threat to international peace and if so, should that threat be balanced by a counter-threat? The recent surge of alarmist tendencies in the international press resonate with the presentation by Henk Schulte Nordholt (Hofung Technology): he interpreted Xi Jinping's "Chinese Dream" discourse and his "Seven Don't Speaks" campaign as a deepening of Chinese nationalism in the domestic and international arenas, and an accompaniment to China's territorial claims on island groups in the East and South China Seas. Counter-claims by the US, which backup Japan, warn China against using force in supporting its claims and threaten the US free navigation.

Ingrid d'Hooghe (Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael) argued that the consistent anti-Japanese propaganda, which China uses in its public diplomacy, harms Japan's international exposure and triggers a Japanese counter offensive, even if it also keeps the dialogue between both countries going and attenuates mutual bad feelings about one another among their populations. She would also acknowledge, however, that China starts from an underdog position and may feel threatened by its conscious encirclement by the US and its allies.

Would economic exchange and related institution building help ease existing tensions and lessen the need to balance their power projections? Henk Overbeek (VU University Amsterdam) and Shaolian Liao (Xiamen University) considered the tracks of globalization followed by China, Korea and Japan during the past three decades. Liao showed that although there is no one-to-one relationship between the fluctuations in economic cooperation between Japan and China and the highs and lows in Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations, the complementarity between the Japanese and the Chinese economies should contribute positively to an improvement of mutual relationships in the longer term. However plausible as an argument, much doubt was expressed by the discussants, and Liao himself would admit that Chinese businesspeople could be more active in initiating trade and investment with Japan, and not leave the initiative to their Japanese counterparts.

Peter Peverelli (VU University Amsterdam) opened a fascinating window on the problem of regional cooperation

with his study of the Tumen River Area Development Project, formally established in 1993 along the border between North Korea and China. However vague in its operations and results, the project reveals how the Japanese have taken the lead with their sophisticated mode of organization, and by their exploration of its potential, thereby maneuvering China and other involved nations into follower positions.

What about the possibility of building a regional East Asian identity, or one that is even more cosmopolitan? Several papers implied that China should not be reified as a nation endowed with a unique and unchangeable culture, or identity, but be studied as a participant in global developments that shape and reshape it over time. Jeroen de Kloet (University of Amsterdam) warned against the exclusive framing of last year's Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong as a pro-democracy movement; this positions China and Hong Kong on a track of development which lags behind the West, and is essentially a euro-centric approach. It would be better to accept the movement as being coeval with global developments and having multiple targets.

Margaret Sleeboom-Faulkner (University of Sussex), in her presentation on "Asian bioethics", acknowledged that this term has served to articulate national social and political agendas, rather than to bring these together. But at the same time she showed how it has provided an umbrella for common discussion, and an opportunity to overcome Orientalist notions of Asia and replace these by a more self-aware and positive discourse on Asian values. The paper by Arif Dirlik (University of Oregon) argued that the notion of "China" or *Zhongguo* was subject to change over the long period of its use, and had begun to propagate a Chinese cultural exceptionalism by the late nineteenth century, after a centuries-long interaction with Western ideas about the nation state. In doing so, the term as used by Chinese nationalists makes us forget about the diversity of China's society and the acquisition over time of foreign territory by the Chinese state.²

This brings us finally to the question of how a historiography of East Asia may be created that underbuilds such a regional East Asian identity. One recurring motif during the workshop was the need to overcome the repressed identities of those mobile populations, especially traders, who before WW II had initiated the modernization of regional business enterprise, but who after the war had become victims of modern state building and the concomitant repressive nationalisms.

Byungil Ahn (Saginaw Valley State University, Michigan) presented his research on the contemporary position of Korean migrants of Chinese descent in the US, and traced much of their predicament back to exactly this history of repression after the war. Just as in most South East Asian countries, big Chinese business families had increasingly dominated domestic and international trading in Korea before the war. Junghee Yi (Incheon National University) reinforced this argument by presenting materials from the recently opened archives of the Overseas Chinese Chamber of Commerce, during 1910-1945, in Incheon, the port city where the biggest Chinatown of Korea was located at the time. Jin-A Kang (Hanyang University, Seoul) went even further back in history, and discussed the complicated patterns of interaction with the Korean society among members of one big Chinese family business, the Tongshuntai firm, during the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-95. The issue of emergent nation-oriented loyalty and the related

discrepancy between the interests of the firms, which engaged in cross-border trading, and those perceived by the local society, was evident in the discussions on these papers as an issue to be developed in future history writing. One means to overcoming the resulting tensions was discussed by Kuo Huei-Ying (Johns Hopkins University), namely the building of cross-border business networks through the cultivation of hometown ties; such was the case with Myanmar business tycoon Aw Boon Haw's Hakka network, and the Hokkien network of Aw's competitor in Singapore, Tan Kah Kee.

Similarly, the papers by Leo Douw (University of Amsterdam and VU University Amsterdam) and Man-houng Lin (Academia Sinica, Taipei) discussed the social position of the Taiwanese who migrated to China and Southeast Asia during the Japanese colonial period (1895-1945). The predicament of these "Registered Taiwanese" existed of the ambiguity caused by the claims laid on them both by the Chinese and the Japanese governments during that period: being Taiwanese, but registered as Japanese nationals, they were subject to Japanese rules and restrictions, but they also profited from that status, especially when they worked and resided in China and South East Asia. The resulting jealousies and accusations of non-patriotic and even criminal behavior, which were largely justified, were forgotten during the Cold War period, but were again remembered during the late 1980s, when in Taiwan the indigenization movement emerged and the issue of multiple nationalities and identities was posed once more. Lin maintained that no understanding of the rift between "mainlanders" and "native Taiwanese" in Taiwanese society is possible without remembering that many Taiwanese during the colonial period cooperated with the Japanese against China's interests. Forgetting and remembering as major motives in the revisions of historiography were already noted in the forgetfulness by Chinese nationalism in Dirlik's paper; these were also present in the argument made by Ethan Mark (Leiden University) on the memorial monuments in Jakarta and Amsterdam for J.B. van Heutsz, the general whose massacres among the native population of the Netherlands East Indies have been largely forgotten by mainstream Dutch historiography, but actually were already a topic of contestation in Dutch politics during the Interbellum, and in Mark's view should be better remembered at present.

It seems clear that the revisionism that informed the history-oriented papers of the workshop can contribute significantly to identity formation in East Asia, and balance the single-minded nationalisms that prevail in Japan and China. The workshop focused on the twentieth century, but also in the longer term a definite uneasiness has characterized Sino-Japanese interactions: trading has been indirect and strictly controlled since the sixteenth century at the latest. Therefore we may say, that the present-day reluctant cooperation between both countries is part of a long lasting pattern. This pattern in its turn may be a better starting point for historical analysis than the 'balance of power' approach, which has recently emerged in public debate, and threatens to sharpen the apparent Sino-Japanese antagonism rather than soften it.³

Several of the papers in the workshop will be published in the recently relaunched academic journal *Translocal Chinese: East Asian Perspectives* (TCEA), nr. 10.1 (Spring 2016), published by Brill Academic Publishers. The journal is meant to provide a platform for academic debate on issues and concerns, of which those treated in the workshop are an important part. For further information on the journal's institutional embedding and editorial policy, please see: www.brill.com/tcea (see also the announcement on page 51).

Leo Douw, Department of Anthropology, University of Amsterdam (L.M.Douw@uva.nl).

References

- 1 The workshop was held at the occasion of the author's retirement and was kindly sponsored by the Program Group *Moving Matters* of the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam, the International Institute for Asian Studies in Leiden, and the Faculty of Arts at the VU University Amsterdam.
- 2 For a publication of Dirlik's paper, see <http://tinyurl.com/boundaryDirlik>
- 3 The workshop of course was much richer in content than could ever be done justice in a summary article, and all misrepresentations are the author's responsibility. Valuable contributions, aside from those by the paper presenters, were provided by the other participants, in particular the paper discussants and session chairpersons. For shortness sake only their names follow here, in alphabetical order: Julia Bader (University of Amsterdam), Otto Holman (University of Amsterdam), Gerd Junne (University of Amsterdam); Susan Legêne (VU University Amsterdam), Chris Lorenz (VU University Amsterdam), Pál Nyiri (VU University Amsterdam), Peter Post (Netherlands Institute for War Documentation), Willem van Schendel (University of Amsterdam), Sikko Visscher (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences), and Harriet Zurndorfer (Leiden University).