Japan, China, and the construction of history

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AFTER THE APEL MEETING in Beijing in November 2014 a series of pictures and reports in the media emerged, 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 a state of anarchy 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 in the intention to dismiss 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 counteracted, and apparently won’t improve much for some time to come. Diplomatic relations have been in stalemate for several years. So, are there alternatives to this confrontation? In particular by the promotion of trade and investment, or the construction of peace and if so, should that threat be balanced by a counter-offensive, even if it also keeps the dialogue between both countries is part of a long lasting pattern. This pattern in its turn may be a starting point for historical analysis. The term as used by Chinese nationalists makes us forget the diversity of China’s society and the acquisition of which those treated in the workshop are an important part. The field of historiography were already noted in the forgetfulness by many Taiwanese during the colonial period. ‘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 major motives in the construction of historiography are already noted in the forgetfulness by Chinese nationalists in Dèihk’s paper; these were also present in the argument made by Mark Legene (VU University Amsterdam) in the memorial monographs in Jakarta and Amsterdam for J.B. van Heutze, the general whose massacres against the native population of the Netherlands East Indies have been largely forgotten by mainstream Dutch historiography, but actually were already a topic of contention in Dutch politics during the Interbellum, and which 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 dialogue between both countries is part of a long lasting pattern. This pattern in its turn may be a starting point for historical analysis. The term as used by Chinese nationalists makes us forget the diversity of China’s society and the acquisition 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/tcza (see also the announcement on page 53).

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References
1 The workshop was held at the occasion of the author’s retirement and was kindly sponsored by the Program Group Moving Matters at the 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 Dèihk’s paper, see http://tinyurl.com/Dirlik.
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 discussants and the floor. The paper presents a broad treatment of the topic and the discussants and session chairpersons. For shorthand sake only their names follow here, in alphabetical order: Sjaak Eder (University of Amsterdam), Otto Holman (University of Amsterdam), Gerard Janne (University of Amsterdam), Susan Legene (VU University Amsterdam), Chris Lorenz (VU University Amsterdam), Peter Pot (Netherlands Institute for War Documentation), Willem van Schendel (University of Amsterdam), Sikko Visscher (University of Amsterdam), Haj-Ahmed Al-Hashimy, and Harriet Zurndorfer (Leiden University).