Japan, China, and the construction of history

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Japan and China have been part of the East Asia region for centuries, and their relationship has been characterized by both cooperation and conflict. The recent surge of alarmist tendencies in the international arena has raised questions about the possibility of building a regional East Asian identity. One recurring motif during the workshop was the study of the Tumen River Area Development Project, which was formalized in 1993 along the border between North Korea and China. However, this project has met with resistance from the Chinese side, which has expressed concern about its implications for its national security.

The workshop was held at the occasion of the author's conference in Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe during their meeting at the APEC meetings in Beijing. The workshop was much richer in content than the announcement on page 51. The papers by Leo Douw (University of Amsterdam), Harriet Zurndorfer (Leiden University), 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 workshop focused on the contemporary position of Korean migrants of Chinese descent in the US, and traced their migration history back to the history of repression after the war. The workshop also discussed the construction of 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 WWII had cooperated with the Japanese against China's interests. The workshop also highlighted the need for a platform for academic debate on issues and concerns, and the importance 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.nl/tca (see also the announcement on page 53).

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References

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China's President Xi Jinping (Right) shakes hands with Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe during their meeting at the APEC meetings in Beijing, 10 Nov 2014. The formal talks signified a breakthrough in ending a two-year row between Japan and China. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein, Pool)

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After the APEC Meeting in Beijing in November 2014 a series of pictures and videos circulated in the media that showed Japan’s Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and China’s President Xi Jinping reluctantly shaking hands. Small wonder, Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations have been at a 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 dispel 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 counterbalanced 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 regional identity be constructed that counteracts the Japanese and Chinese nationalisms, and which tampers 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 Schutte Nordkvit (Hofung Technology) he interpreted Xi Jinping’s “Chinese Dream” discourse and his “Seven Don’t Speak” campaign as a deepening of Chinese nationalism in the domestic and international arenas, and an accommodation to China’s territorial claims on island groups in the East and South China Seas. Counter-claims by the US, which backed up Japan, warns 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 underridden position and may feel threatened by its concise 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, Japan and Korea 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 a prevention 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 Nordholt (Hofung Technology) opened a fascinating window on the problem of regional cooperation with his study of the Tumen River Area Development Project, formally established in 1993 as a response to the repressed identity of the Chinese people along the border with Korea and China. However vague in its operations and results, the project reveals how the Japanese have taken the lead with a unique and unchangeable culture, or identity, but have studied as a participant in global developments that shape and reshape it over time. Jeroen de Kloet (University of Amsterdam) presented his research on the contemporary position of Korean migrants of Chinese descent in the US, and traced their migration history back to the history of repression after the war. The workshop also highlighted the need for a platform for academic debate on issues and concerns, and the importance of which those treated in the workshop are an important part.

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