



Identity and the Nation in 20th Century Asia. Bremen: Stefan Hübner, Jacobs University Bremen; Torsten Weber, University of Freiburg, 20.07.2012-21.07.2012.

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Identity and the Nation in 20th Century Asia

The formation of group identities in 20th century Asia has been a complex process of interacting phenomena. It was not only “Western” and Japanese colonialism, wars and revolutions that affected the identities of different Asian nations and ethnicities. Decolonization, nation-building, the Cold War and various ideas of pan-Asianism also influenced the relations between Asian peoples, as well as relations with other regions and international organizations. The workshop “Identity and the Nation in 20th Century Asia”, which took place on 20 and 21 July 2012 at Jacobs University in Bremen, sought to unravel the nexus between identity and the nation in Asia from several perspectives. It probed the ideas, transfers, and flows responsible for forging and challenging national identities, nation-building processes, and nationalisms. The presentations also addressed the role of an ‘Asian’ consciousness in these processes. The workshop was organized as part of the research project “Asianisms in the 20th Century” which is sponsored by the German Research Foundation (DFG), under the supervision of Nicola Spakowski, University of Freiburg and Marc Frey, Jacobs University Bremen.

In his opening remarks TORSTEN WEBER (Freiburg/Breisgau) outlined the research agenda with foci on how different layers of identities have historically been negotiated in Asia and on how interactions between Asians and non-Asians have influenced these processes. He particularly encouraged the search for alternative concepts and theoretical approaches to studying identity, nations, and nationalism beyond the Eurocentric canon. Taking a critical position towards the professional pro-

duction of academic knowledge about foreign societies he emphasized the need to de-nationalize approaches to studying Asia by including transnational dimensions of interactions.

The opening presentation was held by STEFAN HÜBNER (Bremen), who presented his research on the Asian Games and their predecessors. The Far Eastern Championship Games (1913-1934) were created by the American branch of the Young Men’s Christian Association in the Philippines. The YMCA aimed to promote Western amateur sports values like fair play, self-control, team spirit, respect for duly-constituted authority and a belief in effort instead of luck or fate to “uplift” Asians and to bring them up to Western standards of “civilization”. From the 1920s onwards, however, the games increasingly became a stage for Asians to illustrate their successful modernization processes by demonstrating their ability to host mega-events on their own, without Western tutelage.

The first panel of the conference then discussed how ideologies were created in Asia. IVAN SABLIN (Heidelberg) introduced a method of geographical map-based history and outlined several approaches which had been developed between 1917 and 1923 in order to create a national identity for the Baykal region. Amongst them was the Pan-Asian vision of an Austrian General who planned to establish Mongolia as the heartland of a projected Asian nation. He also studied a successful strategy of Russia which assimilated the various ethnic groups in the area by assigning them strategically to zones that harboured valuable resources. Sablin hence concluded, that in order to find transcultural entanglements it is more

effective to analyze spaces than borders. Second, BORIS NICLAS-TÖLLE (Bremen) explained the political idea of Asian socialism formulated by the Asian Socialist Conference (ASC) during the 1950s. He demonstrated the parallelism of India's idealist and cooperation-oriented foreign policy on the one hand, and the ASC's aim for socialist unity in Asia which was built on common roots of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism on the other hand. Furthermore, he emphasized the difference between Afro-Asian solidarity and Asian socialism, arguing that Asian socialism had predominantly been an oppositional movement that dissolved at the beginning of the 1960s due to increased international pressure and prohibition.

The following panel focussed on the issue of violence. KONRAD LAWSON (Harvard University) examined war and treason trials which were held after the defeat of Japan in WWII as politics of retribution. His case studies included trials against the Indian National Army, rape trials in the Philippines and trials on the Shandong peninsula in China. He presented several similarities that characterised these trials as potentially a specifically Asian phenomenon. Initially, the trials were mostly based on the accusation of treason. However, the pursuit of all acts of treason was constrained by financial reasons and because it would have involved a high percentage of the total population. As a consequence, the tribunals limited their trials to cases that served to demonstrate the regained national sovereignty and to the pursuit of specific war crimes. Next, with his insightful presentation on the Tuyilam Illam, the sacred shrines of the Sri Lankan Tamil Tigers, WILLIAM HARMAN (University of Tennessee, Chattanooga) reflected on the tragic and violent conflict that ravaged Sri Lanka until recently. He described the Tuyilam Illam as fields of gravestones that commemorated the sacrifice of Tamil "Martyr Bombers". Instead of burning the dead, as would have been usual for Tamils, the remains of the martyr bombers were buried and worshipped at the Tuyilam Illam. Harman studied these commemorations that offered consolation and advice for surviving family members as a means of claiming hegemony over Sri Lanka. They nourished a very lively cult of radical militant nationalism, fortifying the Tamil identity within its community.

The key-note speech of the conference was delivered by DOMINIC SACHSENMAIER (Bremen) who reflected on global historic perspectives of Chinese nation building and Chinese migration at the turn of the twentieth century. He emphasized that tendencies of nation building had existed in China before the European age of empire and had been similar to those in Europe. These tenden-

cies intensified due to increased global connectivity at the end of the nineteenth century. Around that time, Chinese cities became centres for intellectual production and there was a growing international awareness of elites. These were divided into two intellectual camps, the May Fourth Movement which pleaded for radical westernization in order to avoid colonization and the cultural conservatives, who embraced traditional Confucian views along with moderate modernization programmes. Pre-planned nation building thus only emerged after 1900. Connectivity also affected Chinese migrants in the USA and led to an increasing importance of concepts of territoriality and an institutionalization of border controls. The migrants, however, were to a lesser degree examined according to their ethnic identity than their social identity and status.

The second day started with a paper on how colonial and local elites in the Philippines conceptualized the perfect citizen between 1900 and 1940. FRAUKE SCHEFFLER (Cologne) argued that US policy was directed towards negative eugenics, aiming at the limitation of birth-rates. By contrast, Filipino elites turned to the French puériculture which propagated infant health programmes since they were convinced that only a strong population could fight colonial dependence. Scheffler thus not only looked at questions of nation building but also included biopolitical practice in order to analyse the shift of power relations in the Philippines in the early twentieth century.

XIN FAN (Berlin) studied how Zhanguo ("Warring States"), an ancient period in Chinese history, was conceived by Chinese historians and politicians in the 20th century as a universal, recurring stage in world history. Scholars like Lei Haizong, Lin Tongji, Chen Quan and He Lin argued that history is a circle and that each civilization follows the same trajectory of development. From this they drew lessons for modern politics, emphasizing the importance of war and strong leadership and denouncing moral considerations. Xin Fan proposed that the Zhanguo theory could be seen as an alternative to the dominant nation-centred theories of world history and as a way to understand how the Chinese imagine(d) the global.

Finally, sport was the subject of the closing panel of the conference. MARTYN SMITH (London) studied the idea of nation in Japan in the context of the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games. He argued that the Japanese government staged the country as a modern power, capable of competing with the West. Furthermore, it aimed

at reintegrating Japan into Asia and was even pushing for recovering its leading position in the region. At the same time, however, the popular media reacted very differently to the Olympics. They criticized the American consumption culture and favoured European identity and soundness. The games also presented a modern dream: Tokyo had become a cosmopolitan city which had successfully followed the path of modernization. By comparison, the Chinese government in the 1950s and 1960s used sports events to stage the nation in order to strengthen pan-Asian relations and to promote socialism, argued AMANDA SHUMAN (University of California, Santa Cruz). After the Bandung conference (1955) the Chinese followed a policy of making sports alliances, especially focusing on the South-East Asian and African regions. Its aim was to leave behind Russian and American influences and to become an Afro-Asian leader instead - which led to tensions with the International Olympic Committee. From 1966, after the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, China turned inward and “tiyu” (sports, physical culture) as a means of diplomacy came to an end.

The conference revealed common themes and problems in the processes of identity formation across different societies and times in 20th century Asia. One recurrent theme was the multi-layered character of identity as well as the co-existence of assigned and asserted identities. Despite the impact of nationalism and anti-colonialism, the nation remained but one point of reference. In addition, shared common historical experiences also triggered the development of a positive Asian consciousness among peoples throughout Asia. Eventually, however, national identity politics proved to be only partly and temporally compatible with other ideological or supra-national agendas. As many parts of Asia have experienced continuous borders shifts over the past century, the nation in many cases appears to be a political reference rather than a daily experience. The significance of ethnic or social identities and rivalries, such as of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka or the Chinese migrants in the USA, also put the assumed predominance of nation-building and the hegemony of nationalism during the 20th century into perspective.

Conference Overview:

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Opening Remarks: Marc Frey (Jacobs University Bremen)

Introduction: Stefan Hübner (Jacobs University Bremen) & Torsten Weber (University of Freiburg)

Panel 1: Ideologies

Ivan Sablin (University of Heidelberg): Buryat, Buddhist and Socialist. Conflicting Identities and Disentanglement Projects in the Baikal Region, 1917–1923

Boris Niclas-Tölle (Jacobs University Bremen): The Asian Socialist Conferences: From Asian Unity to Non-Alignment

Panel 2: The Aftermath of War

Konrad M. Lawson (Harvard University): Universal Crime, Particular Punishment: Trying the Atrocities of Treason in the Aftermath of Japanese Empire

William P. Harman (University of Tennessee, Chattanooga): Embedding the Martyred Dead: The Tuyilam Illam as Sacred Shrines for the Sri Lankan Tamil Tigers

Keynote Lecture by Dominick Sachsenmaier (Jacobs University Bremen): Global Historic Perspectives of Chinese Nation Building

Panel 3: Asian Nations and the “West”

Frauke Scheffler (University of Cologne): Producing Citizens: Infant Mortality, Pronatalism, and Nation Building in the Philippines, 1904-1937

Xin Fan (Free University of Berlin): Eurocentrism Reversed? Imagining Zhanguo as a Universal Stage in World History

Panel 4: International Sport

Martyn Smith (School of Oriental and African Studies): Between East and West: The Cold War, Japan and the 1964 Olympics

Amanda Shuman (University of California, Santa Cruz): From Soviet Kin to Afro-Asian Leader: The PRC and International Sport 1949-1966

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