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 a state of disrepair 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 disclose 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 a new, regional Cold War, which might erupt into a real war, and drag the world community of nations along? 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 a new, regional Cold War, which might erupt into a real war, and drag the world community of nations along?

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 allegations towards 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” approach. It would be better to accept the movement as being coeval with global developments and having multiple targets.

Margaret Sleaveboom-Falkenius (University of Sussex), in her presentation on “Asian borders”, 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 of time foreign territory by the Chinese state.

This brings us finally to the question of how a historiography of East Asia may be created that underlines 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 WWII it 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.

Bryan 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 trade. In Korea before the war, Jungheo Yi (Incheon National University) reinforced this argument by presenting materials from the recently opened archives of the Overseas Chinese Chamber of Commerce, from 1910-1945. In Inchon, 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 Tonghutiantai firm, during the Sino-Japanese war of 1939-45.

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 evidenced by the papers as an issue to be developed in future history writing.

One means of overcoming the resulting tensions was discussed by Kuo Hua-Ying (Johns Hopkins University), namely the building of cross-border business networks through the cultivation of a new class of successful entrepreneurs in a network of co-operators in Singapore, Tan Kah Kee. Similarly, the papers by Leo Douw (University of Amsterdam and VU University Amsterdam), and Daniel-hong 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).

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