

## THE KNAW COLLOQUIUM ON SOUTH CHINA: STATE, CULTURE AND SOCIAL CHANGE DURING THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, 22-24 MAY 1995

The Colloquium on *South China: State, Culture and Social Change during the Twentieth Century* was held in an exceptionally creative and comfortable atmosphere. It was organized by the undersigned on behalf of the Royal Netherlands Academy of the Arts and the Sciences (KNAW), under the indispensable intellectual guidance by Heather Sutherland (CASA, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam). Its purpose was to improve the study in the Netherlands of internationalization processes in East and Southeast Asia going on since the 1980s, with an emphasis on South China and the role of ethnic Chinese living in Southeast Asia. To this end the organizers had invited an ample thirty scholars and Ph.D. students from North America, Western Europe, Australia, and the regions more narrowly concerned, representing a wide variety of social science disciplines. There were twenty-two paper givers and eight invited discussants. This made it possible to look broadly, also from a historical perspective, at issues arising from economic growth that affect the social and political constellations in the region. The evaporation of socialism in Chinese everyday life and its replacement, during the 1980s, by an unprecedented permissiveness of free enterprise has articulated questions concerning unequal regional development and economic exploitation; it has resulted in the re-emergence of ethnic issues and the revival of traditional ideologies and cultural expressions; and it has drawn the ethnic Chinese overseas back into the increasingly powerful Chinese political orbit centered in Beijing.

One of the corollaries of the process of economic growth going on in the region is the emergence of a new discourse on “Chineseness” and “Chinese Capitalism”, fashionable since the emergence of the NICs from the 1970s onwards but particularly acute since the new wave of opening-up going on in China since late 1991. The explanatory value of these categories for the economic successes achieved in South China and Southeast Asia has been doubted since their first inception, but their resilience in contemporary academic discussions had a profound impact on the colloquium. The most articulate protagonist of their use at the colloquium was *Wong Siu-lun* (*University of Hong Kong*), who argued that the dynamic combination of entrepreneurship styles from Mainland China and Chinese overseas has resulted in China’s economic miracle. Familism, pragmatism, autonomy and personal trust were marked by him as the crucial values conducive to successful entrepreneurial

behavior. The most articulate antagonist of this argument, *Arif Dirlik* (*Duke University, Durham NC, USA*) in his wide-ranging paper admitted that the discourse on Chinese Capitalism understandably reflects the new assertiveness in China, and the rest of Asia, in overcoming colonial hegemony. Rather than an explanation of economic success, however, this new emphasis on allegedly Chinese values and behaviour is, according to Dirlik a consequence of the renewed subservience of the Chinese economic sphere to Western and Japanese economic interests: Chinese economic institutions by their informal character and family-orientation in his view are uniquely fit for subcontracting labour-intensive productions from multinational corporations. *Rajeswary Brown* (*SOAS, London*) joined this argument by raising the question whether Chinese business networks, however successful they are in accumulating capital and monitoring markets, could ever engender the transition to capital-intensive production. Her paper, by concentrating on the Chinese multinationals Kwek and Yeo Hiap Sing, operating from Singapore, emphasized the importance of regional state power and the Japanese and USA economic interest in determining the fate of Chinese business enterprise. Other papers supported the argument in a more indirect manner. *Liao Shaolian* (*Xiamen University, China*) eulogized the economic performance of Township Enterprises in Fujian Province (South China), which are often foreign invested; but at the same time his paper offered no data to contradict the impression that their production remains largely dependent upon cheap labour. The paper by *Wellington Chan* (*Occidental College, California, USA*) perhaps best illustrated the limits and possibilities of cultural explanations: his detailed comparison of the Wing On and Sincere Companies, both Overseas Chinese storehouses in metropolitan South China, during 1900-1941, suggests that only under largely equal circumstances, managerial culture could be considered as the crucial factor in determining their relative success.

The new discourse on “Chineseness” is narrowly related to discussions going on nowadays on a “Greater China”, claiming the existence of a coherent cultural and economic Chinese world that stretches over the PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and the Chinese ethnic communities in Southeast Asia and even further away. The dangers of this line of thought are clear since it intentionally involves anyone who descends from the territory which is now the PRC’s political domain. One

of Prof. Dirlik's strongest criticisms of the discourse on "Chineseness" was its purposeful ignorance of ethnic differences among Chinese communities in the so-called Chinese Diaspora, alongside its ignorance of differences in class and gender interests. *Michael Godley* (*Monash University, Clayton, Australia*) supplemented this argument by stating that the "Nanyang connection" conception of the world has of old determined Beijing's look on the outside world. His study shows, that the big broker of the Overseas Chinese interest, Beijing-appointed Zhang Bishi, at the beginning of this century also fostered ideas on pan-Chinese nationalism. Dr. Godley's justified fears for the political consequences of the recent revival of such ideas made him argue that one had better confine the uses of Chinese ethnicity for the promotion of economic progress, and obstruct its political (ab) uses. *Charles Coppel* (*University of Melbourne, Australia*) in his paper emphasized the historicity of ethnic identity, and the factors internal to Indonesian politics that have contributed to its construction and its changes over time. His scrutiny of the evolution, during the period 1880-1930, of marriage and funeral rituals among *peranakan* Chinese in Java proves that a resinification of those rituals occurred at a time, when growing tensions arose between Muslim and Chinese trader communities, which factor, among others, put an end to the existing tendency of cultural assimilation. *Mary Somers Heidhues* (*University of Heidelberg, Germany*) similarly assured us that the resilience of the ethnic articulation of West Kalimantan's Chinese communities, which persists until today, had to do with factors internal to their position in Southeast Asia, like their original isolated position within the Indonesian colonial polity, and their multi-faceted orientation towards Singapore.

One could view the existing social structures and political practices existing in South China today as transitory. The large role of informal linkages (like trade and business networks), the importance of the family, authoritarian rule, the ignorance of subethnicity, class and gender, and the incapacity at creating a society ruled-by-law, could all be considered as "problems" that must once be overcome, or should be overcome, in order to achieve a rational, modern world order. This trend of thought could be traced in the papers that emphasized the broad international context of developments in China (or East Asia, or Asia), particularly those by Dirlik and Brown. A number of papers, however, took what might be labelled an "internalist" position, representing developments in China, or East Asia, as autonomous processes; in doing so they occupied an intermediary position between Wong's culturalism and Dirlik's

marxism. *Chuang Ying-chang* (*Academia Sinica, Taipei*) provided a detailed description of rotating credit associations on Taiwan; those function as providers of credit in situations where formal banking institutions cannot be relied upon for loans, as is the case in many underdeveloped countries. In Taiwan, these associations belong strictly to society; much of the social mechanism that organizes them dates far back into history, and is nowadays wrapped in institutes that are traditional in form, like temple cults. The detailed paper by *David Faure* (*University of Oxford; in collaboration with Anthony Pang, lawyer in Hong Kong, not present at the colloquium*) discussed the uses of written contracts in China up to the early twentieth century: they expanded vastly in number since the spurt in commercialization from the sixteenth century onwards, and were part of a resilient Chinese culture that prefers informal social arrangements above the enforcement of law from above, as is usual in the Western experience. *Leo Douw* (*Universiteit van Amsterdam, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*) in his paper compared the Chinese and the Western experiences over a similar time space as Faure did, in order to elucidate their persistent differences in state-society relations and the construction of ethnic identities; he surmised that Chinese cultural patterns stretch over much of East Asia nowadays and might prove to offer more of an alternative to Western cultural patterns than is implied by more unilinear approaches. Similarly, *Peter Post* (*KNAW/Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*) confirmed the power of Asian cultural patterns that persisted despite colonial domination. On the basis of a study of the Hokchia/Henghua business networks during the first half of this century, which stretch from Indonesia over much of East Asia (and further), he concluded that Japan's emergence as Asia's economic motor from 1928 onwards, and its dependence on ethnic Chinese entrepreneurship definitively supplanted the always superficial economic potential of the colonial powers in the region. The paper by *Takeshi Hamashita* (*Tokyo University*), by focusing on the voluminous intra-Asian rice trade provided another example of how in the Asian cultural domain, centering around South China, commodity chains developed which were neither touched by Western capital nor supplanted by supposedly superior Western business organisations.

The process of internationalization that currently takes place in East Asia, and which once again affects the balance of power between China (Asia) and the West, is obviously multifaceted with many actors involved. The power of Western and Japanese MNC's is not absolute, and subject to change, as are the chances of survival of Chinese institutions, often based on centuries old

practice. Historical study alone can make out how the balance is at any concrete juncture of time. The near total opening-up of China that supposedly sold out its inhabitants to the vagaries of free market capitalism went hand in hand with efforts to increase control by Beijing. In her paper on the stock markets of Shenzhen and Shanghai *Ellen Hertz (Université de Lausanne, Switzerland)* described how in 1992 Shanghai took over Shenzhen's leading position as China's financial center, replacing the wilder and more corrupt Southern Chinese capitalist culture by a more stable, Beijing-oriented environment. Neither stock markets, however, could be described as fully capitalist, according to *Hertz Leo Suryadinata (National University of Singapore)* stated straightforwardly that Beijing still emphatically appeals to the ethnicity of investors of Chinese descent in Southeast Asia, despite the fact that now they are fully acknowledged as nationals of the countries where they live; this, according to Prof. Suryadinata, is a potentially destabilizing factor in the East Asian power balance, as it has been since the late nineteenth century. The paper by *Arthur Wolf (Stanford University, USA; adstruced by his wife Hill Gates, of the same university, in his unfortunate absence)*, made one aware that diverging social practices cannot lightheartedly be subsumed under one broad cultural nomer: the recent emergence in South China of "New Feudalism" as a label for child-brides, expensive funerals, refurbished temples, and rebuilt lineage halls need not of necessity signal a return to a once coherent feudal culture, but may quite be the expression of new social developments. *Hill Gates (Stanford University, USA)* herself presented a fascinating paper on the rise and decline of footbinding in China in Late Imperial and Republican times, based on a tantalizingly vast data, mainly from interviewing. She argued contrary to established opinion, that the unbinding of feet during the twentieth century was not a consequence of a changed morality, engendered by Chinese enlightened elites and Western reformers, but of the spread of industrial capitalism; this made outdoor work of little girls more profitable for their families.

The study of *qiaoxiang* (hometown) ties, or links between ethnic Chinese abroad and their native places in China, is of particular importance in researching how economic internationalization affects socio-political structures. Ethnic Chinese communities in Southeast Asia and elsewhere have organized along *qiaoxiang* lines for centuries, and *qiaoxiang* ties are part and parcel of Beijing's presentday appeal to ethnic Chinese abroad. The papers by *Isabel Thireau (CNRS, Paris, Chinese University of Hong Kong; in collaborating with Mak Kong, not present at the colloquium)* and *Woon Yuen-*

*fong (University of Victoria, Canada)* on two widely divergent *qiaoxiang* in the Pearl River Delta, and the one by *Zhuang Guotu (Xiamen University, China)* on the big hometown Jinjiang in South Fujian offered a vast array of materials enabling a comparison of the patterns of international interaction that are developed nowadays. *Song Ping (Xiamen University, China)* offered another contrast by describing the transition, in the early 1990s, towards profit-oriented management of education in Jinjiang. *Dai Yifeng (Xiamen University, China)* pictured Xiamen city in the first half of this century as a thoroughfare town linking South China's trade and labour with Southeast Asia without being integrated otherwise with its Chinese hinterland. Here the theme of unequal regional development came to the fore, which makes one wonder once again at the pretension that one homogeneous Chinese culture and economy would exist.

It seems clear that this KNAW Colloquium was a fortunate start for the renewal of overseas Chinese studies in the Netherlands, within the broader framework of contemporary East Asia and China studies. A host of new questions has already been stirred up by the discussants that can unfortunately not be treated here: *Cyril Lin (University of Oxford)*, *Ruth McVey, Sun Fusheng (University of Xiamen)*, *Thee Kian Wie (Indonesian Institute of Sciences, Jakarta)*, *Wang Yeu-farn (CPAS, Stockholm)*, *Leonard Blussé, Ngo Tak-wing, Frank Pieke and Kurt Radtke (all Leiden University)*; as by the other participants: *Ray Yep (University of Oxford)*, *Faye Chan, Tineke Jansen (both University of Amsterdam)*, *Li Minghuan, Sicco Visscher and Wu Xiao'An (all CASA)*. The possibilities to follow up the themes treated at the colloquium are amply present now in Dutch academic life. The University of Amsterdam and the Center for Asian Studies Amsterdam (CASA) have abundantly sponsored the colloquium, and by their program of cooperation with Xiamen University in China have a solid basis for research in the area concerned. It is expected that the third research program of the IAS, initiated last year, on *International Social Organization in East and Southeast Asia: Qiaoxiang Ties during the Twentieth Century*, will also offer major contribution to this field of study.

Leo Douw and Peter Post  
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