

Global History Lecture Series

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“Ideology and Spatiality: The „Kaiserreich“ as a non-Western model for Modernization in Meiji Japan, Qing China and the Ottoman Empire (1850-1918)”

Abstract:

A lot has been written about Germany's impact as a model for modernization (political, military, educational, economic, ...) in Japan and the Ottoman Empire, but little on its role among reform-minded politicians and intellectuals in China, or in late colonial India or Singapore. Still, a survey of the existent literature on transfers and exchange in the fields of ideology and technology reveals a peculiar fascination among intellectuals all over these Eurasian regions with Germany (and German fascinations with Asia). Germany was perceived as a country humiliated by Napoleonic occupation and bullied by Britain's superior industry and trade, but nonetheless victorious in the Franco-Prussian War (1870/71), which brought about the formation of the German nation state and its rise to an industrial and military world power. From 1871, the number of Chinese and Ottoman students at British and French universities declined, while their number in Germany went up significantly. Even after its “acquisition” of colonies during the 1880s, the Kaiserreich was not perceived as an imperial western power, but rather as a victim of French and British imperialism and therefore as a trustworthy partner. Chinese, Japanese and Ottoman elites further appreciated anti-western sentiments widespread among many German intellectuals. These emphasized an unbridgeable difference between German “Kultur” and western “Zivilisation”, deemed as merely technical, materialist and cold. This corresponded with essentialist dichotomies circulating among intellectuals from Istanbul to Beijing and Kyoto – e.g. “moral east” pitted against a “materialist western civilisation”, or “eastern essence” against “western rationality”.

The paper aims at an emic understanding of the ideologically loaded concepts of “East” and “West”, and at recalling ideological transfers still resonating in the present-day policies of some countries.