

“Sick Man of East Asia” in the Collective Memory of Modern China

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Abstract

This talk aims to explore the historical significance of the term “Sick Man of East Asia” in the construction of modern Chinese national identity. As well known, “The West”, as the most significant “Other”, has figured prominently in the modern Chinese intellectual discourses. Therefore, the idea of “Sick Man of East Asia,” which originated from the western discourses, in particular has played an important role in the modern Chinese imagination of their national identity. It has long been regarded by many Chinese as a negative symbol ruthlessly imposed upon China by the Western imperialists to humiliate both China and the Chinese people, especially the poor physical quality of the Chinese people. However, this kind of understanding of this term is indeed ahistorical and full of distortions. As my talk will point out, this term was initially utilized by the Western political discourse to describe the weak and corrupt condition of the Qing Empire in the late 19th century, similar to the Ottoman Empire in Europe. At the time, many reform-minded Chinese intellectuals agreed with this political “diagnosis” of the Qing empire and even frequently referred to this term to stress the necessity of embracing radical reform programs. However, in the early 20th century, when many Chinese came to feel extremely anxious about the decline of physical prowess of the Chinese people, Chinese thinkers, such as Liang Qichao, redefined the meaning of “Sick Man of East Asia” —meaning all the Chinese people are seriously sick and weak beings—in order to stress the importance of the national body reform movement. In other words, the meaning of term was reinvented by the Chinese thinkers themselves to amplify the sense of national crisis in order to stimulate their people’s will to reform. Ironically, as time went on, the Chinese people came to regard this term as purely a contemptuous criticism on the Chinese body from the evil West, totally forgetting and ignoring the fact that the new meaning of this term is a historical product done by the Chinese thinkers in the early 20th context and has little to do with the West. The term has therefore been appropriated time and again to mobilize and provoke xenophobia sentiments in the construction of modern Chinese collective identity. In particular, Many Chinese enthusiastically believe that victory in international sports games is the best way to get rid of the national humiliation embodied by “Sick Man of East Asia.” By showing the root of the “imagined” national humiliation and analyzing the dramatic trajectory of how “Sick Man of East Asia” has been manipulated by the modern Chinese nationalist discourse, this talk reveals the complicated role that the West plays in the construction of modern Chinese identity and the ambivalent feeling of the modern Chinese people toward the Western culture.

About the Speaker:

Prof. Jui-sung Yang is Distinguished Professor of the History Department, and Director of the Office of Lo Chia-luen International Sinology Chair at National Chengchi University, Taiwan. His research interests focus on historiographical methodology, psychohistory, Chinese nationalism, and trans-lingual/transcultural issues. He has published a number of articles on late imperial and modern Chinese intellectual and cultural history, such as 〈從「民吾同胞」到「我四萬萬同胞之國民」：傳統到近現代「同胞」符號意涵的變化〉 (“From ‘People Are My Siblings’ to ‘My Four Hundred Million Siblings as Compatriots’: The Changing Symbolic Meanings of ‘Tongbao’ from the Past to the Present”); “To Nationalize the Past: The Discourse of ‘5,000-Year-Long’ National History in Modern China,” in *Connaissances-nous la Chine?* (Ottignies-Louvian-la-Neuve: Academia-L’Harmattan-s.a, 2020); “From Discourse of Weakness to Discourse of Empowerment: The Topos of the ‘Sick Man of East Asia’ in Modern China,” in *Discourses of Weakness in Modern China* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag GmbH), and two books: *Body, Ritual and Identity: A New Interpretation of the Early Qing Confucian Yan Yuan (1635-1704)*, Leiden: Brill, 2016; 《病夫、黃禍與睡獅：「西方」視野的中國形象與近代中國國族論述想像》(*Sick Man, Yellow Peril and Sleeping Lion: Chinese Images from “Western” Perspective & the Discourses of Modern Chinese National Identity*), Taipei: NCCU Press, 2016.

近代中國國族集體記憶的「東亞病夫」

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演講摘要：

本演講以追本溯源的方式，從釐清「東亞病夫」在不同的歷史脈絡中的不同意義，進而探討它在近代中國國族建構想像中所扮演的重要角色。我們可以確認十九世紀末期的甲午戰爭，促成了「東方病夫」說在西方輿論界誕生。由於目睹當時清中國改革無效，內部問題重重，某些西方觀察家以西方慣用形容類似局面的鄂圖曼帝國（土耳其）的形容詞——病夫（Sick Man），來形容表達他們所觀察的清中國當時的困境。當時中國輿論界，尤其是致力於變法維新者以「逆耳忠言」態度正面看待這項源自西方的清中國「體檢報告」，中國思想家也引用相同的比喻，來強調當時中國必須變革的迫切性和正當性。可是到了二十世紀初期，國民改造成為政治社會改革根本的新思潮，尤其是強國必先強種的思維，使得國民身體素質的檢討批評成為新的思想課題。在這樣新的思想脈絡下，「病夫」的意涵在中國的思想文化界內，被中國思想家如梁啟超等操弄轉化成是針對當時中國人病弱身軀的寫實形容，甚至成為中國作家的自我比喻；但是在另一方面，隨著民族主義意識的高漲，「病夫」論的「外來性質」也開始被強調。由於這些新的歷史因素影響下，「東亞病夫」產生的原始歷史背景和其單純意義，漸漸為人所遺忘。在近代中國民族主義的滋養哺育下，「東亞病夫」成為了百年來，中國人集體記憶中，代表著傲慢無情的西方人所一直掛在嘴邊，嘲笑中國和中國人的羞辱名詞。簡言之，這一在中國思想文化史上「成長轉化」的「病夫」，不啻是中國人所創造想像的「他者的詛咒」，轉而為中國人集體認同意識中的「原罪」，必須以身體技能所搏得的榮耀，尤其是現代國際體育競技場上，不斷地證明其已被解咒，已被清洗。從理性思想分析的角度而言，「東亞病夫」在近代中國「生根、成長、轉化」的過程中，充斥著太多認知上的謬誤和不必要的情緒操弄；但也正因為如此，它百年來的歷史動向不啻是近代中國人，在自我言詮和認識世界的過程中，對於西方和西方人愛憎交雜的矛盾心情的具體呈現的一頁滄桑史。

講者簡介：

楊瑞松教授於 1963 年出生於台北市。畢業於國立台灣大學歷史系，獲清華大學歷史所碩士學位後，於 1997 年取得美國洛杉磯加州大學（UCLA）歷史學博士學位。現職為國立政治大學歷史系特聘教授，羅家倫國際漢學講座辦公室主任。主要研究領域為近代中國思想文化史、心理史學、史學理論與方法。近來年專注於近代中國國族論述想像的課題，以及跨文化和跨語境的知識思想傳播議題。