5-4-2008

Critical Han Studies Conference Report

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive
Part of the Asian History Commons, Asian Studies Commons, Chinese Studies Commons, and the International Relations Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/262

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
Critical Han Studies Conference Report
May 4, 2008 in Uncategorized by The China Beat | No comments

Last weekend (April 24-27), I and about 70 other students, scholars, and members of the public attended the Critical Han Studies conference held at Stanford University. Organized by Tom Mullaney of Stanford and China Beat, Jim Liebold of La Trobe University, Stéphane Gros of Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, and Stanford PhD student Eric Vanden Bussche, the conference drew scholars from around the world—China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, England, France, Belgium, Australia, Canada, and the U.S.—and from a wide variety of disciplines: history, anthropology, religious studies, literature, East Asian Studies, etc. Most importantly, it was a lot of fun.

With over 40 presenters, this event was a successful kick-off for a new subfield in China studies: Critical theories of Han-ness. Like critical theories of Whiteness as an invented racial category which shifts over time, Critical Han studies will cast an analytic eye on China’s racial majority. Given that roughly one in five people on earth could claim Han Chinese identity, this is a Herculian—or shall we say Panguvian—task, and the work has only just begun.

The organizers and participants created a lively atmosphere; even we grad student presenters felt encouraged and supported. The conference began with a quadruple opening panel: Nick Tapp called for studies that place ethnic minorities at the center, Emma Teng questioned whether Eurasian Chinese blur racial boundaries, Pat Giersch underscored the importance of thinking regionally with his case study of ethnic conflicts in 18th century Yunnan, and Frank Dikötter illuminated a world historical perspective with his discussion of the racialization of the globe. Ten panels and two days later, we ended with a triple keynote: Dru Gladney discussed the evolution of Chinese Muslim (Hui) identity, Xu Jieshun—renowned Chinese scholar of Han ethnicity—illustrated his “snowball” theory of racial absorption, and Mark Elliott painstakingly traced the etymological origins of “Han.” The following morning, those of us who still had some spark left gathered to discuss the future of Critical Han Studies—and it does have a bright future, so stay tuned.

The weekend boasted multiple successes. The participation of many Asian scholars—some now teaching in Asia and some elsewhere—gave the event a much-appreciated diversity in perspective, even if it also exposed some epistemological divides. Prolonged contact at meals, coffee breaks, and scenic walks to and from Stanford campus allowed for ongoing conversations about geographical determinism, the role of science in shoring up racism, the limits and gifts of disciplinary differences around the world, the contemporary relevance of this burgeoning field, and so much more.

Although more work is needed to shift the academic focus from Han identity as reflected in relations with ethnic minorities, to Han identity as a racial category worthy of scrutiny in and of itself, this was an excellent start. The bigger job will be figuring out how to have a constructive impact on non-academic discussions of race in contemporary China, the importance of which is borne out by recent events in and near Tibet.