China’s Ascent and East Asian Regional Dynamics

Weatherhead Institute sponsors workshop as precursor to symposium in April

Coinciding with U.S. President George Bush’s trip to China, the Weatherhead East Asian Institute organized a half-day workshop to examine the ramifications of China’s growing capabilities on the security and the economy of the greater Asian region. “Today’s panels will be discussing the economic and security concerns that have emerged as China continues on its way to becoming a major superpower,” said Weatherhead Institute director Xiobo Lu in his opening statement. The workshop was part of the ongoing programming of the Columbia Center for Chinese Economy and Society, formed last year to track China’s growing importance in the world community during the 21st century. “The Center builds upon the strength in research and teaching in China at Columbia to provide a forum for timely discussion and information about China business, government, NGOs, students, scholars and the general public,” said Lu. The panel themes explored at the Nov. 16 event would be taken up at the Center’s Second Annual Symposium in April of next year.

Following Lu’s remarks was a series of presentations by experts on the Koreas, Southeast Asia and Japan. They discussed the challenges various Asian nations face as China becomes more engaged in regional affairs and more effective at promoting its influence. China expert David Shambaugh, in a presentation focusing on China’s relationship with North Korea, said China’s economic policies have fallen short of its goal of nuclear non-proliferation and conflict management vis-à-vis North Korea. Such policies, he said, contrast with those espoused by the Chinese regime during the 1990s. Carolina Hernandez of the University of the Philippines felt that China had at long last broken with its past practice of fostering political instability in other countries—pointing to the evidence of its improved relationship with its native Philippines—one characterized by economic gain for both countries.

Indonesian researcher Hadi Soesastro, now a visiting professor at Columbia, observed that China had begun to alter its trading pattern with Southeast Asia as long as ago as 1991, with the liberalization of the country’s economic policies. Moreover, the 1997 Asian financial crisis had demonstrated the benefits of trade with China, he said. As the Chinese economy was less affected by the crisis than elsewhere and itsAlan 

Takahara Akio

Yang Bojiang (left) and Takahara Akio discuss the troubled relations between their two countries.

“destabilize China’s horizontal integration.” Sam Kim of Columbia concluded, presenting his assessment, pointing out that China is now being proactive about achieving the goals of maintaining territorial integrity and conflict management vis-à-vis North Korea. Such policies, he said, contrast with those espoused by the Chinese regime during the 1990s.

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John Adams and others argued that it was better to pay off the pirates rather than fight them—only to find that they’d vastly underestimated the cost when the Barbary States demanded $1 million to end their “war” with America. (The Barbary States were a collection of local powers on the North African coast of the Mediterranean Sea, led by the Barbary pirates, who’d vastly underestimated the numbers of local people who would rather “raise ships” and fight the pirates into reason than money to bribe them—which ultimately proved an accurate reading of public sentiment.) At the constitutional convention held in 1789, the issue of piracy in the Middle East “helped tip the balance in favor of ratification,” Oren said. By then, Americans had grown so “disgusted with government impotence” that they were happy to have Congress empowered to raise taxes and make war.

But with CUP’s recent publication of The Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai, by preeminent novelist Han Banjing, the picture is sud- denly looking brighter. Though the novel (which originally appeared in 1894, but this is the first time a translation (by novelist Eileen Chang, revised after her death by Eva Hung) has appeared in English.

As Asia expert Lesley Downer wrote in a recent New York Times review, the book is distinctive for the “chance it offers to be immersed in a gorgeous, long-van- ish ed world.

In addition to this groundbreaking novel, CUP recently issued two more noteworthy works on China: the translation of a novel of colonial Hong Kong, by modern Taiwanese writer Shih Shu-ching; and the account of an ethnic revival taking place on China’s Southwest bor- ders, by Human Rights Watch researcher Sara L.M. Davis.

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