Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

Colorimetry of Memory: Contested Histories in Taiwan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker:

Simon Preker

18 February 2026

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Speaker: Dr. Simon Preker, Historian and Diplomat.

Chair: Dr. Hemant Adlakha, former Associate Professor, Centre for Chinese and South East Asian Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; and, Vice Chairperson and Honorary Fellow, Institutes of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Venue: Zoom Webinar

- The seminar explored memory politics in Taiwan through the metaphor of colorimetry. Dr. Simon Preker provided the historical context in which memory politics plays out in Taiwan Further, he also delved into how memory culture serves as a prism through which contemporary events are refracted, and how memory is best understood as being continuously recalibrated across a spectrum.

- The speaker argued that contestation over memory in Taiwan, rather than being a binary debate, consists of a variety of narratives best analysed through the metaphor of colorimetry. Colour, in this context, represents a practical simplification of Taiwanese politics, where memory culture operates in a continuously changing political spectrum, wherein commemorative practices act as instruments through which political actors try to influence historical consciousness.

- Providing historical context to these contestations, Dr. Preker mentioned the Japanese colonial period as well as the debates surrounding its reception *vis-à-vis* political repression and modernisation. The speaker also highlighted the 7-7 incident, and noted how its relevance to Taiwan has been contested by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). On the other hand, the 2-28 incident functions as foundational trauma, and serves as a central moral reference for the Pan-Green camp. These foundational experiences constitute a baseline spectrum within Taiwanese memory politics, through which contemporary issues are understood.

- The speaker further argued that the 2000-2008 era was marked by symbolic re-framing. During this period, Chiang Kai-shek and his legacy emerged as a point of

contention. With the election of the DPP, the early 2000s witnessed state-led memory recalibration, with various statues of Chiang Kai-shek being removed. The 2014-18 era similarly saw the expansion of memory arenas. This period witnessed the Sunflower moment, and a state apology to indigenous people of Taiwan.

- The opening of archives, the rehabilitation of victims, and reassessment of authoritarian-era symbols signalled a transition from from memory to institutional politics. Later stages were similarly marked by continuing debates over statues of Chiang Kai-shek, emblematic of late-phase transitional justice and a period of narrative saturation. The speaker also mentioned how memory politics most recently has also moved on to digital spaces.

- Dr. Preker then highlighted the cross-cutting themes of authoritarian legacy, recognition of victims, external narrative pressures and the pluralisation of historical narratives. These themes represent continuous negotiation and contestation over consensus in Taiwanese memory politics. The speaker concluded by reiterating that the metaphor of colorimetry is about understanding the continuous recalibration of memory across a spectrum. Memory is, therefore, not objective, but is shaped by instruments used to measure it as well as those who wield them.

- The Chair, Dr. Hemant Adlakha, in his remarks, highlighted how contesting memories could also be seen as contesting nationalisms, and how the conflict over unification could escalate due to evolving relations between the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Communist Party of China (CPC). Dr. Preker also highlighted how the identity question is connected to competing nationalisms and disagreements over the *status quo*. He argued that competing claims and the resulting deadlock between the KMT and the CPC are still preferred by the PRC over de-Sinicisation, which it sees as an aggressive move towards independence.

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