ICIR 333 The Politics of Memory in Asia

Course description and aims:
This course critically examines how and why social actors use the past to act in the present and the future. It introduces major approaches to the study of history, memory and identity and applies those ideas to distinct case studies in the Asian region. How do societies remember their past? How is the past intertwined with political and social processes of the present? How do nation-states, ethnic groups and other communities remember their past to form their identities? In what ways do contested memories of the past underlie conflicts of the present? How do physical and tangible things such as monuments, museums and landscapes represent and transmit memories of the past?

By analyzing how individual and collectives memories have been forged through narratives, landscapes, institutions, and popular culture, students will critically assess the mobilization of memory as politics in the Asian region and evaluate major concepts of memory in their applicability to the Asian region.

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Assessment

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Course Learning Outcomes

At the end of the course students will be able to:

1. Demonstrate critical understanding of the role of memory in the construction of national and other forms of identity
2. Students will critically analyze the different uses of the past in the present
3. Critically discuss different perspectives on modern Asian history and some of its key events
4. Reflect on the ethics and problems associated with researching and writing about individual and collective memories and related issues of truth and justice.
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**Assessment Methods and Criteria**

**Assessment Methods:**
The assessment is based on five components: classroom participation (30%), presentation (30%), and a final essay (40%).

**Assessment Criteria:**

1. **Classroom Participation 10%**
   Classroom participation is based on attendance, preparation for class and the quality of students’ participation.

2. **Student activities 20%**
   Students can get up to 20% for their participation in student activities.

3. **Presentation 30%**
   Students are expected to identify a relevant research question and conduct independent academic research on their chosen topic. They will then present their findings and argument to the class within 20 minutes. Afterwards, the presenters are expected to answer questions from the audience and to trigger and moderate a discussion about their presentation topic.

4. **Essay 40%**
   The final essay is a response of 4000 to 5000 words to one of several proposed essay questions. Students can come up with individual essay questions but need to seek approval from the instructor first. The paper should be well-organized, make a clear and compelling argument, contain a thesis statement, and fully cite all sources. Students should incorporate course readings as sources and adhere to academic conventions when writing their paper.
Introduction and Overview: Collective Memory, Identity and Politics

**Topic description:** This week will introduce the course and provide an overview of key terms related to memory studies. It will show the connections that exist between commemoration and forgetting and political processes and identity constructions.

**Key questions:** What is the relationship between individual and collective memories? What role do commemorations and other political rituals play for the construction of cultural memory and national identity? How does memory construct and reinforce political, ethnic, economic, gender and other identities?

**Expected learning outcomes:** Students will become familiar with key concepts related to memory studies. Students will be able to explain links between the processes of remembering and forgetting the past and contemporary politics in Asia.

**Readings and activities:**

**Student activity:** Students will brainstorm links between memory, identity and politics.

### Sites of Memory

**Key questions:** What are ‘sites of memory’? How can sites of memory become means to express and legitimate personal biographies, collective identities and social constructions of the past?

**Expected learning outcomes:** Students will be able describe and explain the concept of “site of memory”. Students will be able to critically discuss the applicability of the concept “site of memory” to memory debates in the Asian region.

**Readings and activities:**

**Student activity:** Students will apply the concept of ‘site of memory’ to a place in their environment.
**WW2 Memory in Asia and Contemporary Politics**

**Topic description:** This week looks at the role played by the Second World War in memory debates in the Asian region. It shows how the commemoration of World War II is closely intertwined with political dynamics in the region.

**Key questions:** How do different countries in Asia remember the Second World War and how does the WW2 memory interlink with contemporary politics in the region? Should states deal with the difficult past, or should they move on and forget?

**Expected learning outcomes:** Students will be able to analyze how competing interpretations of the past can create social conflict in the present. Students will understand key issues in the memory struggles concerning WW2 in Asia. Students will be able to discuss possibilities for regional reconciliation and reintegration in Asia in the light of memory politics in the region.

**Readings and activities:**

**Student activity:** Students will discuss how states should deal with the difficult pasts and will debate whether it might be sometimes better to move on and forget.

**The East Asian Textbook Wars**

**Topic description:** This week will deepen the discussion on WW2 memory in Asia by specifically looking at the textbook controversies in East Asia regarding the portrayal of Japanese imperialism in the region. It will show how school education plays a substantial role in the construction of collective memory of citizens.

**Key questions:** What happened in the various textbook controversies in Asia? Does it matter? Should outsiders care about textbooks in national contexts?

**Expected learning outcomes:** Students will be able to discuss the links between school education and collective memory of citizens. Students will be able to compare and contrast the formation of official memory narratives in China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan.
Readings and activities:

Student activity: Students will discuss the role of nationalism in the construction of collective memory. They will critically reflect on how nationalism has played a role in their own history education and explore alternative ways of constructing memory.

**Memory Construction and Territorial and Place Identity**

Topic description: This week looks at how memory turns abstract spaces into places with meaning and significance for people. It will pay special attention to the role played by maps in the visualization of memory.

Key questions: How do people give meaning to a particular space or territory? How are those meanings communicated? How do place identities underlie the construction of collective memories?

Expected learning outcomes: Students will critically reflect on the use of maps for territorial claims and memory constructions. Students will draw connections between the mobilization of memory and placemaking in the Asian region.

Readings and activities:

Student activity: Walking tour through Bangkok’s Chinatown, followed by a written observation paper.

**Review and Presentations**

Topic description: This week offers an opportunity for review and student presentations.

Expected learning outcomes: Students will be able to communicate complex ideas in an oral presentation. Students will be able to learn and work collaboratively. Students will be able to demonstrate interpersonal and intercultural skills.

Readings and activities:
  - To be confirmed by the presenters.

**Ruins and Voids**

Topic description: This week explores the topic of cultural preservation and heritage for memory making in Asia. It will analyze how the preservation of selected ruins goes along with the elimination and erasure of other sites.

Key questions: What kind of ruins are considered worth preserving in the Asian region? How do they help construct a collective memory? What role do voids and forgetfulness play for the construction of social memories and identities?
**Expected learning outcomes:** Students will be able to critically discuss absences and eliminations as part of the process of collective memory construction. Students will be able to identify links between heritage conservation and political power dynamics.

**Readings and activities:**


**Students activity:** Students will critically discuss how supposedly void and empty spaces might actually be charged with political meanings and implications.

**Museums**

**Topic description:** This week turns to museums as one aspect of heritage preservation and analyzes how museums shape discourses and legitimize national memories.

**Key questions:** What role do museums play in remembering the past? To what extent can museums be agents of change in the construction of collective memory? How do museums in Asia connect to individual, group-specific or transnational memory processes? What has been the role of museums during political transformations in Asia?

**Expected learning outcomes:** Students will be able to “read” museums in Asia as socially constructed texts. Students will be able to reflect on the interplay of power, knowledge and memory in Asian museum contexts.

**Readings and activities:**


Student activity: Students will visit the Samphanthawong Museum and Yaowarat Heritage Centre in Bangkok’s Chinatown and compare the different portrayals of Bangkok’s Chinese community.

Monuments and Memorials

Topic description: Building on the previous discussions of heritage preservation and memory politics, this week examines monuments and memorials in Asia as political texts.

Key questions: How do monuments narrate the past? What role do monuments and memorials play in shaping collective memories and identities in Asia?

Expected learning outcomes: Students will be able to compare and contrast monuments and memorials with other forms of commemoration. Students will be able to apply visual methods in their analysis of monuments and memorials. Students will be able to contextualize important monuments and memorials in the Asian region.

Readings and activities:

Student activity: Students will collaborate in small groups and design their own monuments commemorating an event, period or historical figure of the past. They will then contextualize their monument in the wider memorialization of that historical event, period or figure.

Trials and Truth Commissions

Topic description: This week raises the issue of reconciliation in the context of trials and truth commissions. It will critically analyze the notion of transitional justice and examine how memory constructions shape the debates on reconciliation and achievement of justice.

Key questions: How can confronting authoritarian pasts be reconciled with the ‘messiness’ of democratic transitions? Is there an inherent tradeoff between the push for justice and the desire for stability? How effective are mechanisms such as war crime trials and truth commissions in facilitating reconciliation? Which role do war crime trials play in constructing narratives of the past?
**Expected learning outcomes:** Students will be able to appreciate the significance of memory as an essential element of transitional justice in the Asian region. Students will be able to reflect on the ethics of truth commissions and political trials for transitional justice. Students will be able to critically discuss the potential of trials and truth commissions for achieving reconciliation in Asian contexts.

**Readings and activities:**

**Students activity:** Students will brainstorm how memory politics can shape the debates on transitional justice.

**Material Culture and Nostalgia**

**Topic description:** This week, the focus shifts from the high politics of trials and truth commissions to the memory politics of everyday life, as exemplified by material culture. Special attention will be paid to the aspect of nostalgia.

**Key questions:** Why is there nostalgia for colonialism, communism or authoritarianism in some Asian countries? How does political nostalgia express itself in material culture? Can nostalgia be subversive? Can it offer an alternative way of reading history and interpreting the past? What are the links between the phenomenon of nostalgia and contemporary political and social settings?

**Expected learning outcomes:** Students will be able to critically assess the form, significance and impact of colonial, communist, or authoritarian nostalgia in the Asian context. Students will be able to recognize and critique ideological elements in material culture. Students will be able to identify and discuss historical and political contexts for the rise of nostalgia in Asia.

**Readings and activities:**

**Student activity:** Students will critically analyze political tourist souvenirs from the East Asian region.
Presentations and Concluding Discussion

Expected learning outcomes: Students will be able to communicate complex ideas in an oral presentation. Students will be able to learn and work collaboratively. Students will be able to apply interpersonal and intercultural skills.

Readings and activities:
- To be confirmed by the presenters.