



INSTITUTE OF CHINESE STUDIES

Bombs in Beijing (1910) and Delhi (1912): Connecting Marginalized Histories of Modern India and China

Speaker: Cao Yin

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Venue: Seminar Room, ICS

The speaker began by describing how two different assassination attempts using explosives in Beijing (in 1910) and Delhi (in 1912) had commonalities and connections with historical events of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The speaker first talked about the attempted assassination of Prince Chun, Regent of the Qing Empire, in Ganshuiqiao, Beijing. The assassins – Wang Jingwei, Huang Fusheng and Yu Peilun – had rigged a bomb (dynamite) with a probable blast radius of one sq. km under a bridge that the Prince was supposed to cross. However, they aroused suspicion when locals noticed their activities forcing them to abandon their bomb without detonating it. The police later recovered and disarmed the bomb and traced it to a camera shop where they arrested Wang Jingwei and Huang Fusheng.

This came after previous assassination attempts like Wu Yue's plot against senior Qing officials in Beijing 1905 and Liu Shifu's assassination attempt against Qing army general in Guangzhou 1907. However, the 1910 Beijing bombs were more sophisticated than anything previously used, consisting of advanced chemical formulas, including glycerol to stabilize the explosive. The bomb design had dynamite sticks in an iron box with an arming mechanism that would be detonated via switch. It would turn out to be a dead man's trigger as the person who would have detonated it would be killed in the blast as well.

The assassination attempt in Delhi in 1912 was described next. Rash Behari Bose tried to assassinate Lord Hardinge, Viceroy of British India, in Chandni Chowk using a bomb that was primed to detonate upon impact. The Viceroy survived with minor injuries as he was on top of an elephant while it did kill two people in the vicinity. The type of bomb used was similar to the one used by Bengali revolutionaries in Dalhousie Square in 1911 and Midnapore in 1912. The bombs were traced to the French settlement of Chandannagar that was a hub of illegal activities like illicit arms and explosives trafficking. This signalled a move from using gunpowder which was less powerful to dynamite which had more destructive power but was unstable in wrong proportions.

The assassination of Tsar Alexander II at St. Petersburg in 1881 was the first instance of a political assassination using explosives. Most of these explosives were sourced from Italy and Spain. The speaker then explained how four distinct historical events in different parts of the world were connected to these bomb plots. He mentioned the 1905 Russian Revolution, the Russo-Japanese War, the Partition of Bengal and the establishment of a group of Chinese revolutionaries in Japan, like Sun-Yat Sen's group. A Bulgarian bomb maker and anarchist named Naum Tieufekchiev was an infamous trainer in the use and making of explosives. The transportation of explosives to Russia from anarchist hubs like Paris was very dangerous so the Russians sent a delegation to Bulgaria to learn about bombs from Tieufekchiev. Bomb labs came up all over Russia and were accompanied with lots of failures and casualties. The Russians in the process became some of the most expert bomb makers. However, in 1906 the Russian Revolution ultimately failed and most revolutionaries were arrested and transported to gulags in Siberia. Some escaped to Paris which had a socialist orientation and some to Japan from Siberia via the port city of Vladivostok. The Japanese cities of Tokyo and Yokohama had become sanctuaries for revolutionaries around this time while Paris became a diaspora city for Russian revolutionaries.

The speaker then explained how the assassination plots previously mentioned came about. A Bengali revolutionary named Hem Chandra Das who was a member of the Anushilan Samiti (United India) tried to shoot a British officer in 1905 but failed. He then travelled to Paris where he met Nicolas Safranski, an anarchist, who taught him about bomb making. In China Huang Fusheng went to study in Japan where he became radicalized and joined Sun Yat Sen's faction

and learned bomb making in Yokohama. He returned to China and established bomb labs in Sichuan province. Their bombs detonated by accident in their lab and thus injured them, they travelled back to Japan in 1907 to improve their skills. He met Wang Jingwei and Liu Pelin in Tokyo where they learned bomb making together. Sun Yat Sen's faction was encouraging these violent revolutionary activities but they ultimately failed in propagating their ideologies. These spate of bombings were just a desperate attempt to revive their cause.

The speaker then described the several discourses on historiography for India and China. The first wave was the anti-colonial paradigm followed by the cultural turn which had a ground up approach in learning about national histories. These were followed by the post 1960s top down approach in deconstructing national histories called the transnational turn. After this came an attempt at transnationalising the marginalized in history. A final discussion was held on the concept of *Chindia* and how it could be achieved.

On the question of how historical narrative still focuses on elitist responses the speaker explained that marginalized does not mean lower strata or ordinary people but those that were sidelined throughout history. Dynamite technology proliferated – geographically and technologically – after these assassination attempts due to advancements in explosives.

About the Speaker

Cao Yin (PhD, National University of Singapore) is an associate professor in the department of history, Tsinghua University. His research interest mainly covers modern India, the British Empire, and the Sino-Indian connections in the twentieth century. He is currently working on a project of how India became China's home front during the second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). His first book, entitled *From Policemen to Revolutionaries: A Sikh Diaspora in Global Shanghai 1885-1945*, was published by Brill in 2017.

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