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Séminaire collectif du Centre de  
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Histoire du Japon moderne et contemporain : permanences et ruptures

« Confucianism and Sinosphere as Non-Chinese: a Globalized History of Early  
Modern and Modern Confucianism »

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Abstract

Comprised of two parts, one on early modern history, and one on modern history, this talk attempts to problematize the traditional association of both Confucianism and broader ideas of a Sinosphere with Chinese culture and identity.

The first part of the talk argues that by the early modern period (at least by 1650) Confucianism operated across East Asia, both in configurations of culture and identity, and through institutional frameworks like diplomacy, in ways where it was clearly differentiated as a universalist paradigm against ethnic and cultural conceptions related to states. This was the case in Vietnam, Japan, Korea, but also in China. This differentiation relied upon shared understandings for how universalist paradigms could interact with a diversity of ethnic, cultural and national identities in different states, and an inherent acceptance of that diversity. The second part of the talk argues that in the modern period (particularly after the 1880s), in a global political context much less open to diversity, ownership of a more narrowly defined Confucianism was rather fought out between the different nation states, with Japan in particular powerfully employing Confucianism as a key plank in its pan-Asian ideology of imperialism in East and Southeast Asia. This kind of nationalist employment was later replicated in ROC Taiwan, South Vietnam and other states. In both the early modern and modern examples discussed, Japanese states, thinkers, and examples provide a particularly clear insight into complex ways that ideas of Sinosphere and Confucianism were disengaged from simple concepts of China during both these periods.