

Day 1 - Rediscovering the past

Session 1B:

Divergences and convergences in East and West: A global historical perspective

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Abstract

It used to be commonplace for historians to say that China and the West were on very different historical trajectories, and that they diverged early and in fundamental ways from each other. But a new generation of historians in Asia and the West have begun overturning this perspective. It now seems that the Great Divergence between China and the West occurred much later than once believed, and that it was based not on fundamental incommensurabilities in terms of philosophy, social organization, and science/technology but on more contingent -- and recent -- events and processes.

This talk presents this exciting new perspective, focusing not just on science and technology, but also on two related and equally significant areas: warfare and international relations. The implications of this new perspective is profound. If the divergence between China and the West is not as deep or fundamental as once believed, then our task in bridging East and West changes. It is less a matter of reconciling fundamentally different views of the world than understanding particular concrete divergences, which were in some sense historically contingent rather than deeply determined.

For example, arguably the biggest barrier to East - West dialogue were the different conceptions of diplomacy in East and West, which helped lead to the Opium War and, thence, to the fraught interrelations of the period of the "Century of National Humiliation." On the other hand, technological and military differences were far less vast and technological and military gaps opened up much later (and closed much earlier) than once believed.

What is also clear from new historical discoveries is the immense curiosity and interest in the Other, and the increasingly rapid impact of mutual cultural influence, a process that continues to accelerate today, and which is so evident in Singapore itself. Indeed, Singapore is a modern variation on an ancient pattern. Southeast Asia was a place where much East-West cross-fertilization was mediated, a place of dramatic and productive intercultural admixture.