



Sixth Annual Pierre du Bois Doctoral Workshop

Across the Bamboo Curtain: Economic, Political, and Technological Exchanges Between East and West During the Cold War

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Dates: 28–29 May 2026

Venue: Maison de la Paix, Petal 2 (Room A2), Geneva Graduate Institute, Geneva

Organizers: Liu Yi and Yang Ziru (Geneva Graduate Institute); Dr Severyan Dyakonov (University of Fribourg); Karina Khasnulina (Leipzig University)

Hosted by: Department of International History and Politics, Geneva Graduate Institute, in partnership with the Fondation Pierre du Bois pour l'histoire du temps présent

Overview

The **Sixth Annual Pierre du Bois Doctoral Workshop** was held at the Maison de la Paix in Geneva on 28–29 May 2026, organised by the Department of International History and Politics of the Geneva Graduate Institute in partnership with the Fondation Pierre du Bois. Convened under the theme “*Across the Bamboo Curtain: Economic, Political, and Technological Exchanges Between East and West During the Cold War*,” the workshop brought together doctoral researchers and faculty from fourteen universities across Europe, Asia, and North America for two days of focused scholarly exchange.

Across four thematic panels and two guest lectures, participants examined how economic, technological, and cultural ties endured across the ideological divide of the Cold War, and how those entanglements actively shaped the trajectories of great-power rivalry and Asian development. Each panel was anchored by a distinguished discussant, ensuring rigorous feedback for the emerging scholars and a genuine dialogue across generations and institutions. The result was a coherent, intellectually ambitious programme that advanced an important and timely field of historical inquiry.

Theme and Scholarly Rationale

The “Bamboo Curtain” has long served as a symbol of division between communist Asia and the capitalist world. Yet that curtain was never impermeable. Even as comprehensive, U.S.-led economic and military containment sought to isolate communist Asia, firms, diplomats, individuals, and intermediaries on both sides sustained economic, technological, and cultural interaction. Socialist states, for their part, selectively engaged with foreign knowledge and institutions to advance national development, revealing persistent tensions between ideology and



pragmatism.

The workshop therefore asked how exchanges between the capitalist West and communist Asia actually functioned beneath the surface of Cold War confrontation, and how such cross-bloc entanglements shaped — rather than merely reflected — the course of the conflict and of Asian economic development. In doing so, it foregrounded the paradoxes of Cold War interdependence: the coexistence of embargo and exchange, of ideological hostility and pragmatic cooperation, of national confrontation and transnational circulation. These dynamics carry clear contemporary resonance, informing present debates on economic security, technological sovereignty, and regional order in the Asia-Pacific.

The Geneva Setting: A Place of Historical Resonance

Convening this conversation in Geneva carried particular meaning. Seventy-two years ago, the 1954 Geneva Conference gathered the great powers to settle the future of the Korean Peninsula and Indochina — questions that proved decisive for the fate of Asia’s communist states. Where the Cold War in Europe remained “cold,” in Asia it repeatedly turned hot. The Korean War of 1950–1953 drew the United States, South Korea, and a Soviet-backed China and North Korea into bloody conflict, and led to comprehensive economic sanctions and the near-total diplomatic isolation of China and North Korea. At the same time, the decolonisation struggle in French Indochina, led by the Vietnamese communist movement, gave rise to the American “domino theory” and its fear of communist advance across the region.

Against this backdrop, the Geneva Conference sought to chart a path forward. Negotiations over the two Koreas reached a stalemate that endures to this day, while compromise over Indochina secured independence for its states but also created two Vietnams — setting the stage for renewed conflict in the decades that followed. Crucially, the conference also marked the People’s Republic of China’s return to the international stage, seated alongside the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and the Soviet Union. It opened a diplomatic rapprochement with London, tentative contact with Paris, and a fragile channel with Washington that would help avert further military confrontation — and it laid early groundwork for China’s economic ties with Western European business and its gradual reintegration into the international market. It was against this historical backdrop that the workshop’s two days of discussion unfolded.

Programme and Proceedings

Day One — Thursday, 28 May

The workshop opened with welcoming remarks by organizers and Madame Irina du Bois,



president of Pierre du Bois foundation, before turning to its first panel and a pair of invited guest lectures.

Panel 1 — Asian Agency in the Cold War: Diplomacy, Alignment, and Global Economic Integration

This opening panel examined the political relations binding China to the United Kingdom and France, Japan to ASEAN and China, and China to the international organisations of the postwar order.

—*The Sino-Soviet Split and the Early Adjustment of China–Western Europe Relations* — Jin Zhixia, Peking University

—*Weaponizing “Asian Identity”: Japan’s Strategic Alignment with China and ASEAN during the INF Crisis (1981–1987)* — Lai Ching Li, Peking University

—*The Forgotten History of Structural Adjustment: China and the IMF during the Early Reform and Opening Up* — Federico Pachetti, Corvinus University of Budapest

Discussant: Prof. Jussi M. Hanhimäki, Geneva Graduate Institute

Guest Lectures

Two invited scholars enriched the first day. **Professor Valeria Zanier** (University of Bologna), in “Moving Beyond the Ideological Divide: Why Are China’s Cold War Global Networks Relevant in the Current Times?,” traced the methodological and historiographical development of Cold War China studies and underscored its contemporary relevance. **Professor Wu Bohao** (Peking University), in “Tipping Over the Peninsula: Contextualizing Japan’s Economic Diplomacy Toward the Two Koreas in the Cold War,” examined North Korea’s economic relations with Japan — its former coloniser and a close U.S. ally — as a case in which shared economic interest endured across ideological and political division.

The day concluded with a workshop dinner at the Restaurant Caramela, Hôtel Eden, providing a valuable informal setting for continued exchange among participants.

Day Two — Friday, 29 May

The second day turned from diplomacy to the economic, cultural, and material connections that crossed the bloc divide.

Panel 2 — Trading Across the Bamboo Curtain: Firms, Institutions, and Export Controls in Cold War East Asia

This panel explored China’s early Cold War trade with West Germany and the United Kingdom, and the institutions it built to manage commerce with capitalist markets.



—*An Uneven Curtain: Export Control Regimes and Sino–West German Cross-Bloc Trade in the 1950s* — Liu Yi, Ruhr University Bochum

—*Between Empire and Republic: Jardine Matheson and the Adaptation of British Colonial Merchantile Capital to Cold War China, 1952–1967* — Liu Yi, Geneva Graduate Institute

—*Engineering Regulated Interdependence: Maoist Economic Statecraft and Institutional Platforms in Sino-Western Trade, 1950s–1970s* — Zhang Zhen, University of Edinburgh

Discussant: Prof. Valeria Zanier, University of Bologna

Panel 3 — Representing Socialist Asia: Propaganda, Media, and Transnational Perceptions in the Cold War

This panel considered how revolutionary models were projected abroad — through Japanese left-wing filmmakers and Chinese stage performers — while also addressing the gap between revolutionary propaganda and everyday hardship, bringing a micro-historical perspective to the human consequences of the Maoist social experiment.

—*Culture as Propaganda: State-Sponsored Performances at the Canton Fair under China’s Planned Economy, 1957–1991* — Guo Jingxuan, University of Hong Kong

—*Between Propaganda and Utopia: Report from China and the Japanese Gaze on Socialist China* — Hong Pang, University of Tokyo

—*Exporting Memories: Witnessing the Turbulence Transnationally* — Yang Zirui, Geneva Graduate Institute

Discussant: Prof. Jan Kiely, Geneva Graduate Institute

Panel 4 — Material Networks Across the Bamboo Curtain: Resources, Technology, and Commodities in Cold War Asia

The concluding panel followed commodities, technology, and knowledge as they crossed the Cold War divide, demonstrating that the division was never a sealed wall but a permeable one — navigated by resilient transnational and national actors. It illuminated the transnational origins of Maoist China’s scientific and industrial development, and the rise of British Hong Kong as a global financial centre.

—*Growing Socialist Rubber: The Operation of the PRC’s Rubber Institute and Its Engagements with International Rubber Science during the Cold War* — Zhou Wenyu, University of Macau

—*Gold Across the Bamboo Curtain: The Interplay of Informal Finance and Global Capitalism in Hong Kong* — Ka Shing So, Binghamton University (SUNY)

—*Assemblages of Oil: The Techno-Politics of Socialist Self-Reliance and China’s Cold War Petroleum Exchanges (1960s–80s)* — Xiao Zhongxian, Georgia Institute of Technology



—*Beyond Autarky: Equipment Introduction in China’s Third Front Construction (1966–1980)*
 — Wu Chenyong, Fudan University

Discussant: Prof. Bernard Keo, Geneva Graduate Institute, and Prof. Wu Bohao, Peking University

The workshop closed with concluding remarks reflecting on the two days of discussion and the shared research agenda the participants had developed.

International Reach and Participation

The workshop drew presenters and discussants from fourteen universities across ten countries and territories, spanning Europe, East Asia, and North America. This breadth reflects both the global vitality of the field and the Geneva Graduate Institute’s standing as a meeting point for international historical scholarship.

Institution	Country / Region
Geneva Graduate Institute	Switzerland
University of Fribourg	Switzerland
Leipzig University	Germany
Ruhr University Bochum	Germany
University of Bologna	Italy
Corvinus University of Budapest	Hungary
University of Edinburgh	United Kingdom
Peking University	China
Fudan University	China
University of Hong Kong	Hong Kong SAR
University of Macau	Macau SAR
University of Tokyo	Japan
Georgia Institute of Technology	United States
Binghamton University (SUNY)	United States

Outcomes and Significance

The workshop achieved its central aims. It assembled a rare concentration of PhD students, early-



career and senior scholars working on Cold War Asia, and gave doctoral researchers sustained, expert feedback on work in progress. The panel-and-discussant format generated substantive critique rather than mere presentation, helping participants strengthen research that is moving toward publication. Equally important, the workshop built lasting connections across an international community of scholars-connections that will support future collaboration, citation, and exchange.

Beyond its scholarly value, the workshop spoke directly to questions of pressing contemporary concern. By recovering the histories of trade, technology, and cultural contact that persisted across the Cold War divide, participants offered a historical perspective on present-day debates over economic security, export controls, technological sovereignty, and order in the Asia-Pacific. The event thus fulfilled the Pierre du Bois Foundation's mission of advancing the history of the present.

Acknowledgement

The organisers extend their sincere gratitude to the Fondation Pierre du Bois pour l'histoire du temps présent, whose generous support made this workshop possible. The Foundation's continued commitment to the Annual Pierre du Bois Doctoral Workshop at Geneva Graduate Institute sustains a vital platform for PhD students from Department of International History and Politics to develop their academic networks and more importantly the professional skills as emerging historians in the future job market.