

Asia in Times of Crises and Polarization: Challenges, Processes, and Solutions — 10th Conference of the Young Scholars Group of the German Association for Asian Studies (DGA)

Digital conference, May 7–8 and 15, 2021

Report by Jan Robin Sofinowski

Due to Covid restrictions the 10th biannual conference of the DGA's Young Scholar Group took place digitally. Led by the YSG's team of representatives, the conference was spread over two platforms and three days on two consecutive weekends.

Around the world people feel an increase in polarization. Various crises humanity faces, from the ongoing pandemic over resource shortages to partisan politics give rise to this polarization. The conference's eleven panels investigated several of them, ranging from governance, education and agriculture to international relations and foreign policy. The conference offered the opportunity to both present in a formal conference setting as well as in an informal meeting place for discussions. The platforms and approach were thus the first topic after the representatives' welcoming remarks. What are the challenges, what are the solutions? These are the young scholars' works:

The first panel on governance had two presenters, with Prof. Jörn-Carsten Gottwald acting as discussant. Hannes Gohli presented his work "Yes Mr. Xi, No Mr. Xi: A Study of Political Steering and Countersteering in the People's Republic of China's Smart Grid Industry" on economic steering by the Chinese government. This was followed by Phillipp Immel's presentation "On the Origins of the Social Credit System: Innovations in Chinese Social Governance." His work included a comparison with three previously existing Chinese systems of social control to contextualise what aspects of the Social Credit System are truly new, and which are not.

The second panel was held on political institutions and participation, with Dr. Kamila Szczepanska acting as discussant. The first presenter, Zhang Hao, presented his work "Citizen Participation in China's Digital Governance Era" that focuses on motivations by citizens and local governments. The second presenter was Vicent Plana Aranda who presented the theoretical aspects of his work about party institutionalisation in Korea, including findings of his ongoing research. Thirdly, Shoko Tanaka presented her PhD project "Intersections Between the Political Culture of Youth and Voting Behaviour in Japan" in which she is trying to shed light behind the rationale of "broken connections" in terms of political trust and social trust among young Japanese.

The third panel focused on education, the presented works were commented by Lena Henningsen. The panel kicked off with Anna Schnieder-Krüger and her

research on the role of universities in India, asking what these institutions embody and how much criticism they are allowed to voice. Christoph Weithas presented his work concerning the internationalisation of Chinese universities since the 1990s. He also included challenges presented by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. The third presenter was Lena Wesemann. Her PhD project concerns the “Presentation of Palaeolithic Archaeology in Museums in China”. The first day of the conference ended after these first three panels with a mingling event on the platform WonderMe. This included a possibility to dine together online. For this purpose, the speakers and panelists were provided with several recipes to try out and show off their cooking skills.

The second conference day started with the keynote presentation by Rajib Shaw, Professor of the Graduate School of Media and Governance at Keio University, who delivered important insights on Asia’s reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic. He also explored Disaster Risk Reduction, which led to a lively discussion. The following break included a guided yoga session presented by Anna Caspari.

The keynote presentation was followed by a total of four panels. Panel four was concerned with media ethnography. The first presentation was by Helen Hess, whose work looks at the possibilities of digital technologies to help increase the visibility of marginalised groups. The second presentation in this panel was given by Dhanya Fee Kirchhof, who focused her presentation on Ravidassia music videos in India. Instead of a single discussant, this panel received a peer commentary from colleagues and YSG representatives.

Panel five’s theme was Chinese urban development, and presenters received commentary by Eva Sternfeld. The first presentation was by Mia Hallmanns, whose research project seeks to dive deeply into China’s sustainable urban development. The next presentation “Xiagang Workers in Chinese Nursing Homes” by Yan Zhe, who investigated the developments of China’s changing elder care environment, specifically into “xiagang” (laid-off) workers who staff the increasing number of nursing homes in China.

Panel six was concerned with religion. Amanda tho Seeth delivered the commentary. The first presenter was Jens U. Augspurger, who discussed the depolarisation of the East-West dichotomy of spiritual practitioners. Charlotte Chin presented her PhD project on the role of re-integration projects for Philippine women who left ISIS and possible scaling up to the global level. Lastly, Dissa Julia Papatungan presented her work on Islamic values in education aiming to contribute to the democratisation effort in Indonesia by focusing on the education sector.

Panel seven, with the theme of sustainability, took place at the same time with Sabrina Habich-Sobiegalla acting as discussant. The first presentation was delivered by Wiegand Körber, whose work focuses on the water-energy nexus in India. The second presentation on sustainability was presented by Julia Tiganj. Her work seeks to investigate the oncoming post-mining period in China that will pose wide reaching challenges in many mining related areas such as geo-monitoring and

more. Lastly, Luisa Flarup presented her thesis where she seeks to add to the sustainability debate by applying Mol's concept of informational governance to citizen generated data in China. The second day of the conference was rounded-off by an information session about the DGA, the Young Scholars Group and the upcoming election of new representatives to be held on the third day after the conference's end.

The third and last day of the conference started with two parallel workshop sessions, one on the topic of fieldwork during the pandemic by Daniel Fuchs, the other about Academic Publishing in Asian Studies by Claudia Derichs & Amanda tho Seeth. These two workshops were followed by a mingling session that again had the option of a guided yoga session.

Panel eight, the first panel about international relations, was then held and commented on by Florian Pölking. The first presenter was Erik Isaksson who introduced his work about Japanese foreign policy and its efforts to balance a rising China. This presentation was followed by Bohyun Kim who studies the "Comfort Women" Movement as a transnational advocacy network. Panel nine, held at the same time, was concerned with the "Belt and Road Initiative" and commented on by Sebastian Bersick. The first presenter was Carsten Schäfer, whose work researches the "Belt and Road Initiative" through the strategic-narrative approach, trying to uncover what internal crises are translated into external propaganda through the initiative. Stefan Tetzlaff introduced his work about connectivity issues between Asia and the EU, arguing that the China-US conflict as well as the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic strongly influence and question the state of global supply chains.

The afternoon again consisted of two parallel panels. Panel ten was held on the topic of agriculture and commented by Anika Trebbin. The first presenter was Sarah Luft who studies waterscapes in periurban Pune. Periurban resources in India, especially water, are facing increasing challenges due to transformative pressures from both urban and rural sides. The second presentation was by Mehwish Zuberi. Her presentation summarised her insights from four months of fieldwork in South Punjab in Pakistan. The parallel panel was the second panel about international relations with Niall Duggan as discussant. The first of the three presenters, Pia Dannhauer, introduced her research project about the influence of intra-governmental contestation on Indonesia's foreign policy behaviour in ASEAN. The second presentation was given by UnHye Joe, who argues that two modified sovereignty games are needed in transnational relations. The last presentation was held by Jan Robin Sofinowski who presented his research project about risk and risk perception in Japan and how it influences policy decisions. As a work in progress, he concentrated his presentation on his chosen method of written interviews and how they open the "bureaucratic black box".

The third day of the conference ended with the introduction and election of new representatives of the Young Scholars Group. The new representatives are Dissa

Julia Paputungan, Helen Hess, Hannes Gohli, Philipp Immel and Wiegand Körber. Finally, presenters and guests alike were invited for a last mingling on the platform WonderMe.

With a total of eleven panels, a keynote presentation, two workshops and two guided yoga sessions, the tenth YSG conference can truly be called a great success. Covid-19 has brought forth a multitude of challenges with a diverse range of impacts. Issues increasingly ripple from one area to another and become interlinked, sometimes with compounding effects. The diversity of research projects presented offers a glimpse at the various issues Asia is facing, ranging from water issues to education to foreign policy. We wish all presenters the best of luck with their research. Great and many thanks therefore go out to the team of representatives and to all commentators who made this three-day conference possible!

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