

EDITORIAL

It's research and education, stupid!

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The latest biennial conference of the German Association of Asian Studies (DGA) took place in Berlin on 17 June 2011 and concentrated on the development of China's and the United States' engagement in Asia and on the effects these developments are having on Europe's role in Asia. The conference included a number of interesting presentations, some of which were controversial. The assumption underlying the overall topic was that Europe's influence in Asia will somehow depend on the two major world powers, China and the US. It could be argued, though, that the impact that China's rise is having on Europe is not being decided in Asia or South-east Asia, or by US activities in Asia, but in Europe.

During the DGA's General Meeting a day before the conference, members were concerned about the impact of the university reforms of the last decade on the so-called 'small subjects', namely those that require intensive language training. Two major arguments were raised. Firstly, the Bologna process with its focus on new Bachelor's and Master's programmes creates numerous inter-disciplinary study programmes. In these programmes, Asia-related classes (including language classes) have a fifty per-cent weighting at best. Programmes that are entirely dedicated to Asian countries, cultures and languages are extremely scarce. As far as students' courses of study actually have a specific focus on Asia and Asian languages, the participants tend to have very little time for those parts dedicated to Asia. In general, they acquire less knowledge and language proficiency than in the traditional Master's degree courses that prevailed prior to the Bologna reforms. Secondly (and perhaps this is slightly related), the decline in the small subjects observed over the last few decades has still not come to a halt. In sum, this raises the question of whether we are actually educating enough students and creating enough experts with strong Asian expertise.

The concerns raised during the meeting have not yet been verified by a dedicated analysis of appropriate statistics. Hopefully, the DGA – or rather its board – will be able to initiate such an evaluation based on the information resources and the network available to the association. However, daily experience seems to support the impression that the knowledge base related to Asia is not sufficiently developed in

our society. Just to give one recent example, how can it be that a journalist commenting on the first Chinese-German government consultations at the end of June consciously characterized China's economic system as a *planning* economy? A lot can be said about China's economy, but clearly the term 'planning economy' is not suitable at all. That ought to be common knowledge by now.

We certainly do not need millions of Asia experts, but we *do* need people with a broad rudimentary knowledge of Asia in European societies. We need schools that teach Asian affairs, and we need teachers who can teach these subjects. We need a considerably number of people who can speak Asian languages, and we need teachers who are able to teach these. We need experts in universities and think tanks who can teach future teachers, journalists and business people. And we need independent basic research related to Asian countries. If Asia only gains half the importance that everybody believes it will, then not only will we need insight and knowledge, but we will also have to regard Asian countries as potential partners for our future development. We will increasingly be willing to learn from Asia.

Personally, I have a dream that one day I won't have to start with elementary information on the Chinese political system before I can start explaining Chinese economic policies. I have a dream that those people who take it for granted that the European and American systems are complex will also understand that the Chinese political system is complex as well. I don't want to keep on hearing the statement that environmental policies could be implemented more easily in China than elsewhere in the world because of its central authoritarian government. And I certainly don't want to hear journalists speaking of China as a 'planning economy'. My experience here is based on China, given my 'small' subject, but I am sure that colleagues whose expertise is concentrated on other Asian countries will have similar experience.

I hope the German Association of Asian Studies can help my dream come true one day. We have to constantly raise politicians', journalists' and business people's awareness that 'the Asian century' is not only creating an Asian market for German products, but also calls for an expanded provision of a public good: research and education on Asia. Provision of this public good would be a long-term strategy to meet the challenge of power shifts towards Asia and would also be a good basis for helping Europe to play a moderating role in potential conflicts between Asia and the US.