

Protecting the Weak. Entangled Processes of Framing, Mobilization and Institutionalization in East Asia

Goethe University, Frankfurt a.M., 22.–24. January 2015

This first international conference of the project “Protecting the Weak” funded by the Volkswagen Foundation within its initiative “Key Issues for Research and Society” was organized by the Interdisciplinary Centre for East Asian Studies (IZO) at Goethe University in collaboration with the Institute for Social Research (IfS). Corresponding to the interdisciplinary logic of the project, the principle investigators of the project, Iwo Amelung, Moritz Bälz, Heike Holbig, Cornelia Storz and their project team, as well as the renowned conference speakers from Europe, Asia, USA, and Australia represented a variety of disciplines like history, social sciences, law, economics, and cultural studies.

After the welcome addresses by Iwo Amelung, vice-director of IZO, followed by Vera Szoelloesi-Brenig, program director Volkswagen Foundation, and Sighard Neckel from IfS, Heike Holbig introduced the project and its research on entangled processes of framing, mobilizations and institutionalization leading to calls for “protecting the weak” in East Asia.

Already in the beginning Sighard Neckel (Goethe University Frankfurt, IfS) showed the paradoxical implications of being regarded as “weak.” “Negative classifications” might lead to blaming and stigmatization of weak groups, thus limiting their opportunities for action and reinforcing social inequality. Further paradoxes were elaborated by Shalini Randeria (Institute for Human Sciences, Vienna), who identified the phenomenon of “porous legalities” in Indian cities where interactions between different legal and political institutions made it difficult for the poor to hold someone accountable.

The second panel was dealing with the state and civil society as key actors. The reflections of Hans-Jürgen Puhle (Goethe University Frankfurt) on the changing role of the state and its transformations by recent challenges led to a lively discussion contesting the political system debates dominated by Western scholarship. In a very agile presentation Daniel Aldrich (Purdue University) illustrated that civil society might really matter and that bottom-up forces like informal networks and NGOs might have an important impact in East Asia.

Stefan Gosepath (Free University Berlin) presented a normative approach of two ideal-typical approaches to identify weak groups, namely poverty, destitution, and misery on the one hand and domination on the other, each requiring different cures. His approach was widely discussed throughout the conference. This also led to a core question regarding the definition of “weak“: should there be a normative or objective definition of “weak,” presuming a certain threshold of misery, or might the definition of “weak“ remain relational depending on the constellation of weak versus strong interests? In addition to this, Chunrong Liu (Fudan University, Shanghai & University of Copenhagen) presented his communitarian view on how community institutions like inner city neighborhoods in China might facilitate social mobilization, thus enabling the weak to protect themselves.

In the last panel the historical trajectories of protecting the weak in East Asia were analyzed. While Ken’ichi Mishima (Tokyo Keizai University AND IfS, Frankfurt) focused on the clash of the two competing principles of social welfare solidarity and Social Darwinism or market competition in advanced industrial countries including Japan, Vladimir Tikhonov (University of Oslo) impressively described the dominant role of Social Darwinism in Japan and Korea from the 19th century until today.

On the second day the focus was put on the four comparative empirical studies of the project – namely, calls to protect disaster victims, employee well-being, cultural heritage, and animals in Japan and China, which were introduced by Cornelia Storz and Moritz Bälz.

With regard to the empirical study on “disaster victims” Gregory Clancey (National University of Singapore) showed how the idea of victimhood in Japan changed over time by examining textual and visual evidences of four “Great Earthquakes” from 1855 to 2011. In a dramaturgical approach Bin Xu (Florida University, Miami AND Yale University, New Haven) examined the efficacy and dilemma of the use of compassionate moral performance as an instrument for disaster management by the Chinese state.

“Employee well-being” in Japan was explored by Ryo Kambayashi (Hitotsubashi University, Tokyo), who provided novel evidence on the replacement of “good jobs” by “bad jobs” especially for the group of young (women) during the so-called Lost Decade. Further insights on the Chinese labor market were provided by Xiangdong Wei (Lingnan University, Hong Kong) who established a connection to the categorical and gradual classifications of Sighard Neckel’s presentation with regard to job satisfaction of rural migrant workers.

The changing sociocultural attitudes and the changing legal conditions concerning “animal welfare” were looked at by Hitoshi Aoki (Hitotsubashi University, Tokyo) and Wei Song (University of Science and Technology of China, Hefei). While Aoki described the developments of animal protection law, thus reflecting changes in the legal culture in Japan, Song shed light on the trigger factors influencing the awareness for protection of animals in China.

The last panel on the protection of “cultural heritage” again revealed the paradoxical effects of protection. With regard to the institutionalized protection of cultural heritage, Natsuko Akagawa (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne) stressed the importance of communicative social practice for the cultural heritage discourse in Japan. Furthermore, Robert Shepherd (George Washington University, Washington D.C.) using the example of Wutai Shan in China illustrated that an institutionalized protection of cultural heritage might even lead to the loss of the livelihood of the affected citizens.

The conference was rounded up with some final remarks by Heike Holbig who demonstrated that key for further research on the topics discussed lies in understanding the entanglements of the different discourses, processes and worldviews in the societies of Europe and East Asia today. For details see: www.protectingtheweak.uni-frankfurt.de.

Christiane Münscher

Jahrestagung des Arbeitskreises Südasien der DGfG

Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, 23.–24. Januar 2015

Am 23. und 24. Januar 2015 fand an der Georg-August-Universität Göttingen die fünfte Jahrestagung des Arbeitskreises Südasien in der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Geographie (DGfG) statt. Ziel des Arbeitskreises, der 2011 ins Leben gerufen wurde, ist die Vernetzung von GeographInnen sowie Interessierten aus Nachbardisziplinen, deren regionaler Arbeitsschwerpunkt in Südasien liegt. Der Arbeitskreis versteht sich zugleich als Plattform für den Dialog zwischen Praxis, Wissenschaft und Schule, den Austausch über die konkrete Arbeit vor Ort sowie die Erörterung aktueller Entwicklungen in der Region.

Das Programm der diesjährigen Arbeitskreistagung bestand aus 15 Vorträgen, die in fünf Sitzungen thematisch zusammengefasst wurden, der Verleihung des Forschungspreises Süd-