

2021 Annual Meeting of the Working Group on Social Science Research on China (ASC), “Tensions and Conflicts”

The Working Group on Social Science Research on China (ASC),
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Report by Marc Henrici

The Working Group on Social Science Research on China (ASC) met for their 2021 annual meeting under the topic of “Tensions and Conflicts”. The meeting was held online on the 26th and 27th of November with around 55 members from Germany and abroad. The agenda consisted of three panels and one roundtable discussion. After a warm welcome and introduction by the organizers of the conference, Prof. Dr. Sabrina Habich-Sobiegalla and Prof. Dr. Genia Kostka, the first panel, titled “International Relations”, was chaired by Prof. Dr. Sarah Eaton. The first paper “Norm-maker SCO? The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as a platform promoting China’s vision of a changed international order” by Dr. Eva Seiwert was discussed by Dr. Franziska Plümmer. The paper gives crucial insight in what an international order led by China could look like by focusing on the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which is an organization founded and led by China, as a case study. The paper was well received for its rich data and the importance of this case study. How to better organize the paper and to shift the focus more on the tensions were the main parts of the discussion. The second paper, “African Song and Dance: Racial Scandals and the Role of African Studies Experts in China” by Dr. Cheryl M. Schmitz, was discussed by Prof. Dr. Bettina Gransow. The paper examines two commentaries by Chinese African Studies scholars that were written in the aftermath of two alleged anti-Black racism incidents which happened during events organized by the Chinese State. Furthermore, the paper focused on the question of what is allowed to say in a context like this and how China scholars from outside China can interpret and understand these Chinese colleagues. The paper got great feedback for its excellent analysis of the two commentaries by the Chinese African Studies scholars. During the discussion Prof. Dr. Bettina Gransow gave three options to strengthen and sharpen the research purpose of the paper and suggested to put the analysis of racial scandals as a social phenomenon as main point for the paper. Other commentaries recommended to be more precise when talking about “the West” and also to include racism accusations not only from “the West” but from Africa as well.

After a short break, the meeting went on with the roundtable discussion “Mitigating threats to academic freedom in Germany: the role of the state, universities, learned societies and China” chaired by Prof. Dr. Elena Meyer-Clement with the discussants Dr. Andreas Fulda, David Missal and Prof. Dr. Björn Alpermann. The roundtable started with introductory statements of Andreas Fulda

and David Missal about academic freedom and self-censorship in academia and Germany. Björn Alpermann's response focused on the paper written by Fulda and Missal, pointing out some weaknesses in regards to the lack of a clear definition of academic freedom as well as to the vagueness and lacking evidence of some statements in the paper. The following discussion evolved around the paper itself, and academic freedom and self-censorship overall were discussed very intensively by many participants of the plenum. After an hour-long discussion, Genia Kostka ended the first day of the conference by thanking everyone for their engagement in the discussion.

The second day of the annual meeting started with the second panel on "Chinese domestic politics" led by Dr. Anna Ahlers. Prof. Dr. Doris Fischer discussed Dr. Christina Maags' paper "Elder care service development across China's urban-rural divide — The case of Hangzhou". The paper examines the development of elder care services in the city of Hangzhou. It shows that some explanations in the existing literature are not really helpful to explain the regional distribution of elderly care where other explanations fit better. Prof. Dr. Doris Fischer recommended to change the narrative of the paper by starting with the puzzle that elderly care in Hangzhou seems to be good but is not located in the center. She also suggested to make more explanations of specific terms and include more about the limitations of the study. Overall, the paper was praised for its rich description of Hangzhou and the commentators enjoyed reading it. The next paper with the title "Digital Doubters in Different Political and Cultural Contexts: Comparing Citizen Attitudes Across Three Major Digital Technologies" written by Prof. Dr. Genia Kostka was debated by Prof. Dr. Christian Göbel. The paper argues that digital doubters have been overlooked and wants to explore who these people are. Data is gathered through three online surveys about the Social Credit System in China, Facial Recognition Technology in Switzerland, Germany, the UK and the US and COVID-19 Tracking apps in Switzerland, Germany and the US. The following discussion evolved about questions in regards to the research question, the theory, the data and the results. The paper was overall appealing to the audience because of its important and academically relevant question with major policy implications but some issues with regards to the literature review and methodological concerns were raised in the subsequent debate.

The third panel started after the break with Prof. Dr. Tobias ten Brink as chair and addressed the topic of "Skill Formation and Economic Upgrading". Dr. Armin Müller jumped in for Prof. Dr. Boy Lüthje for the discussion of Dr. Isabelle Harbrecht's paper "China's Quest for Talent". The paper is about the vocational school system in China and uses data gained from a three-year panel study from two vocational high-schools in Shanghai. It is argued that China could improve its vocational education system through the strengthening of students' motivations, the improvement of the internship organization and the offering of more development opportunities in order to reach the Chinese goal of a nation of high-income status. During the discussion it was suggested to further streamline,

integrate and restructure some parts of the paper. It was also concluded that more work on the methodological and theoretical parts should be done. The paper was praised for its in-depth data. The next paper with the title “The Cooperation of Schools and Enterprises Collective Action Problems in China’s Skill Formation Systems in the 21st century” was authored by Dr. Armin Müller and discussed by Dr. Julia Marinaccio. The study concentrates on the cooperation between vocational colleges and companies and how they handle institutional weaknesses and market failure. Dr. Julia Marinaccio had recommendations in regards to the two research questions and the structure of the paper. She recommended to formulate a new research question, to restructure some parts of the paper and consider to write two different research articles instead of one paper. The paper was highly acclaimed for its well-done research, the timeliness of the topic and the rich data. The last paper “Chinese blue-collar workers — moving on to decent work? A psychological contract perspective of current HR practices” was written by Marina Schmitz. The paper focuses on HR practices and how they decrease the turnover rate among Chinese blue-collar workers in 22 German subsidiaries in China’s coastal provinces. The article concludes that Chinese blue-collar workers not only focus on the security of their material safety, but also see value in the company’s contribution to their personal development and organizational support which decreases the possibility to leave the company. The discussion evolved around questions about data gathering the turnover rate. The paper was overall well received by the plenum. The 2021 ASC Digital Conference then ended with concluding words by Prof. Dr. Sabrina Habich-Sobiegalla and Prof. Dr. Genia Kostka who thanked the participants for their participation and appreciated the engagement in the discussions.

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