

KONFERENZBERICHTE

Governance, Adaptability and System Stability under Contemporary One-party Rule. Comparative Perspectives

Nanchang, PR China, 27.–29. March 2014

This conference was the concluding conference of the first phase of the Competence Network “Governance in China,” which has been established in 2010 and is sponsored by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research of Germany and the DLR Project Management Agency. It was conducted in cooperation with the China Center for Global Governance and Development (CCGGD) as well as Nanchang and Zhejiang Universities.

Under the overarching theme of “Governance in China” the conference participants presented the main results from the first four years of the network’s research projects; internationally renowned scholars commented the contributions. The conference lasted three days with altogether six panels with over 20 papers.

Thomas Heberer organized and chaired the first panel which presented views on the subject by scholars outside the network, mostly from the perspective of political science. Adam Przeworski argues that friction of party and state is inherent in party-states. Concerning the case of China he observes that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) allows itself to adapt to changing circumstances and survive the friction by limiting its power of control (which is a prerequisite for effectively ruling others according to Holmes 1995 and Poulantzas 1973) through market reforms and ensuring that other agents in society are able to act and give feedback.

Chu Yun-han presented the results of his analysis of the Asian Barometer Survey data from mainland China concerning legitimacy of the CCP with special reference to three questions, namely to what extent the CCP is facing a legitimacy crisis, what factors help sustain the regime’s political power and last but not least whether the regime can defy the gravitation toward liberal democracy in the process of rapid socioeconomic change. Surprisingly he can find no evidence for a dependence of the regime’s legitimacy on its economic performance. Instead, he argues, regime legitimacy is more influenced by traditional Chinese concepts of political legitimacy and the institutionalist argument that the perceived characteristics of the political system are important.

John Keane analyzed Chinese traits of democracy in China in the footsteps of Alexis de Tocqueville’s visit to America and coined for his findings the notion of “phantom democracy,” a term to describe the contradictory traits of the current political and economic system developments of the PR China. Yu Keping presented his research on China’s cadre education as a means to improve governance capacity.

The second panel was organized by network member Heike Holbig and centered on the role of ideology in government and party legitimization in the PR China. He Zengke introduced a scholar’s perspective onto the ongoing policy shift from social management to social governance. Holbig analyzed developments in party theory since the 18th Party Congress in 2012. Dai Changzheng’s paper on “Ideological Discourse Formation” was concerned with Chinese politics at the grassroots level. The last panelist was Frank Pieke who presented his findings on party school education in Yunnan Province.

Sebastian Heilmann, who could not attend the conference personally, had prepared the third panel which opened the second conference day and centered on "Policy-making and adaptive governance." Scott Kennedy's paper in which he investigates the process of Chinese policy making to foster Indigenous Innovation was followed by Chen Ling's presentation on her research with Barry Naughton on the operational system of China's top level leadership small groups which they call "an implementation system that displays responsive governance and consensus-type policy-making." Zhu Xufeng's contribution dealt with the new administrative licensing system which he analyses in a study of 283 Chinese cities applying punctuated event history analysis.

Network member Björn Alpermann was responsible for the next panel on social stratification and political participation. Alpermann himself presented his and his colleagues Katja Yang and Baris Selcuk's findings from previous fieldwork on political values in urban population in China. Marc Blecher and his co-author Daniel Zipp followed with their research results on class formation of Chinese migrant workers. The last contribution on this panel, a presentation on political participation of private entrepreneurs in China, was presented by Gang Shuge.

The third day began with the panel organized by Heberer and Gunter Schubert on the role of the local state for China's development. The two network members presented their findings on the interaction of private entrepreneurs and the local state applying their concept of strategic groups. They were followed by Elena Mayer-Clement who applied this concept to rural urbanization. René Trappel who was next analyzed "the role of township and county administrations in agrarian change" and Yang Xuedong looked at international influences on Chinese local governments' performance and legitimacy.

Yu Keping was responsible for the final panel of the conference, which dealt with the relation of social organizations and party governance reform. Chu Songyan described the dilemma of party organized social organizations who lost credibility in recent years. Yu Jianxing's paper dealt with the shift of state society relations from control to governance. Jude Howell presented her preliminary research results on the procurement of social services by the government from Chinese labor NGOs. Zeng Ming concluded this last panel with his case study on ways to maintain social stability in the coal mining industry.

This conference brought together scholars from China and Germany as well as from other countries to discuss various perspectives on up to date political developments in the PR China. The various subjects showed impressively that political reform is an ongoing process in China with its own models and pace. The conference also showed that scholarly exchange is constantly improving. As one participant put it: "Years ago Chinese and foreign scholars were talking past each other in unintelligible languages, but nowadays they talk to each other in the same language." The research network has just entered its second phase, which will last until 2016. We are looking forward to the next conference which will be held in Berlin in autumn this year.

Katja Levy