

2020 Annual Meeting of the Working Group on Social Science Research on China (ASC) “China in Times of Crisis”

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Under this year’s special circumstances, the ASCs annual meeting was held online on the 27th and 28th of November under the direction of Prof. Dr. Barbara Darimont of the East Asia Institute of the Hochschule für Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Ludwigshafen. Around 50 members of the ASC “zoomed in” from all over Germany and abroad. It consisted of 4 panels which focussed on both current political as well as social and environmental problems in China. Barbara Darimont welcomed everyone and was the moderator of the first panel, which started with Björn Alpermann. He addressed the problem of “Social and Environmental Management” and first presented the paper “Casting ancient nets: Grid-style social management during the Corona crisis and its effect on the poor” by Sabrina Habich-Sobiegalla and Franziska Plümmer. The authors draw on Foucault’s concept of milieu and propose that through a topographical reading of this concept we can gain deeper insights into practices of authoritarian governmentality in China. The paper particularly scrutinizes the appropriation of emergency measures on combating the virus, the role of community-based self-regulation, and how grid-style social management has been used since the outbreak of COVID-19. It was suggested to define and describe the grid administration in more detail and advised to keep a more guarded assessment of these systems, however the paper was praised greatly. The second paper “Smoggy cities, contaminated waters and courageous transport policies: old and new images of China in environmentally related media coverage in Germany” by Julia Marinaccio was presented by Doris Fischer. The paper states that news coverages in Germany regarding Chinas environment have been biased in the past, with the reports being mostly negative, whereas the current Chinese government has become more involved in the fight against climate change. The paper was well received and it was remarked that it might not only be interesting to research the perception of China in German media but also in Chinese media. During the first panel it was pointed out that due to COVID-19 there is an increased difficulty accessing into fieldwork.

The topic of the second panel was devoted to “International Politics” and hosted by Maximilian Mayer. It started with the paper “Why does China say “No” to the US initiative of tri-lateralizing the INF and New START Treaty?” by Jiagu Richter. It stated that the international disarmament regime has further eroded during the trump administration by Washington’s 2018 announcement to withdraw from the INF Treaty. The main reason for this was the Trump administration’s intention to either include China into a new disarmament regime or to have a free hand in deploying new weapons systems close to China. In the discussion, however, after

Joe Biden's election as president of the United States, it was pointed out that the time ahead will be very important, as it will determine and define the position of the United States. It was also noted that it would be much more interesting in terms of how China's stance could be changed by what kind of self-perceived identity. In addition, Gunter Schubert made suggestions for the paper to support and clarify the statements concerning the treaty. Jiagu Richter also mentioned to keep in mind that the paper was written before the elections and therefore there might be some differences compared to the current situation. The subject of the paper received a lot of praise for its relevance to the current situation. The second paper covered "China's Corona Crisis in Crossfire: Analyzing the dynamic interplay of domestic and international legitimation narratives" by Heike Holbig. The paper demonstrated the relationship between China's internal and external propaganda during the COVID-19 crisis. For a deeper insight, panelist Armin Müller briefly introduced the background of China's health policy. He stated that, among other things, China had major problems with its healthcare system and structure in the past. The diverse discussion afterwards allowed for a brief overview and a lively exchange of information, which gave Heike Holbig a lot of inspiration for further alterations. She was further encouraged to expand the paper and write a book instead of a larger article, as the subject is very broad and offers many different insights and aspects. This concluded the discussion for the first day.

The next day began with the third panel about Global challenges in Chinese society and the report and discussion of the paper "Eating for the environment or eating for safety? – Chinese government's discourse on environmental food safety risks and green consumption" by Franziska Fröhlich, summarized by Anna Ahlers. The paper presents research on the issue of food safety and the factors that are leading consumers in making their food decisions. It aims to comprehend the structure of the issue itself as well as the discourse as a framework around it. Franziska Fröhlich remarked not only in the paper, but also during the discussion that it is a chapter taken from her doctoral thesis on discourses of eco-related green food consumption in China. This also served as a response to some of the questions asked by the readership during the discussion which was opened by Wiebke Rabe. In addition to questions regarding the content, the readership also gave comments which the author praised to be helpful and to which she expressed her thanks. The second paper of the morning, "In other news: China's international media strategy on Xinjiang – CGTN on YouTube" by Björn Alpermann and a second anonymous writer, examines videos related to Xinjiang on the Chinese news channel CGTN and Xinhua's YouTube-channels. Kristin Shi-Kupfer, as the discussant, presented the main research focus points and key findings of the paper and briefly introduced her comments and personal suggestions. In the following discussion, the two authors received further recognition for their work by the audience and even encouragement to produce a second paper. During the second coffee break, the two authors offered to give the audience an impression of their sources by showing short videos and teasers in one of the breakout rooms.

The fourth and final panel of the ASC conference discussed “Economic politics” and was moderated by Daniel Koss. Mo Chen, together with the two other doctoral candidates Theresa Krause and Lena Wassermann, contributed the paper “China’s model of corporate credit reporting in comparative perspective”. A comparative study of the Corporate Credit Report (CCR) models of China, Germany and the USA with an emphasis on how the Chinese Social Credit System influences the credit eligibility of local companies. After introducing it to the audience, Genia Kostka offered focus points to improve the paper and the elaboration of its key argument. In the discussion afterwards the authors were asked to extend their paper and highlight the links of the system towards not only the company as an institution whose credit score is affected by the CCR and Social Credit System, but also to the individual. It was further suggested to compare these to the situation in the USA and Germany, with a special focus on recent changes of Germany’s SCHUFA, which had already been topic of a lively discussion by some participants in the chat. The last paper addressed during this year’s conference, “Farewell to competence-based vocational qualifications?” by Armin Müller, argues that China’s educational sector is characterized by a massive inequality that hardly allows workers to break out of low-skill jobs into high-skill jobs with better pay. He also stresses that certificates needed for this transition are often too numerous and acknowledged, depending on where they have been acquired. The difficulties connected to the issues of certificate recognition were frequently addressed during the discussion, following Christoph Steinhardt’s introduction of the paper to the audience. Some participants shared their personal experiences and contributed links and sources to further enhance the paper regarding this topic. Other topics that were brought up: the lack of consistently published sources regarding the number of people with a vocational qualification corresponding to their jobs as well as how to stress the importance of vocational qualifications in terms of its link towards the middle-income- gap.

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