

Konferenzberichte

“Social Worlds Workshop”

Bad Homburg, January 26–28, 2023

Report by Ryanne Flock

During the last weekend in January 2023, Björn Alpermann (University of Würzburg) and Elena Meyer-Clement (University of Copenhagen) hosted the annual workshop of their ongoing research project “Social Worlds: China’s Cities as Spaces of Worldmaking” at the Forschungskolleg Humanwissenschaften in Bad Homburg. Located at the University of Würzburg, the project is part of “Worldmaking from a Global Perspective: A Dialogue with China”, a collaborative research project funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. Using the prism of the “social world” allows multiple perspectives on Chinese society, focusing on the knowledge creation, transmission, and agency that emerges in communicative dynamics. To share and discuss the most recent work in progress, the workshop brought together the project members Ryanne Flock (postdoc), Antonie Angerer (predoc), and Birgit Herrmann (coordination); (former) project fellows Bettina Gransow, Gil Hizi, and Mao Jingyu; and colleagues from Sociology and China Studies Isabel Heger-Laube, Michael Malzer, Marius Meinhof, Tian Yueran, Yuan Mingqing, and Francesco Zaratin (in alphabetic order).

The first sessions focused on contextualizing knowledge production in academia to approach the “black box” of Chinese national politics. Björn Alpermann’s paper — written in collaboration with his PhD student Yang Weiyue — analyzed population categorizations in the context of family planning and elderly care (e.g. “families who lost their only child”), deliberating on the respective phenomena behind the academic concepts and definitions. Francesco Zaratin (University of Vienna) focused on ideas of future rural development circulating among the discourse-dominant voices at Chinese universities, pointing to these scholars’ role in policy consultation. Elena Meyer-Clement reflected on her many years of doing fieldwork on rural urbanization, shedding light on the discursive arena wherein the different social worlds of cadres, urban planners, property-management companies, and villagers clash. Her work brought back to mind the varying state interests which can be found across respective administrative levels.

Second, the workshop concentrated on the social worlds of internal migrants in China, dealing with agency (restrictions) in a country characterized by job and welfare insecurity. Tian Yueran (University of Bielefeld) examined factory workers in a third-tier city and their attempts to fill the governmental welfare gap through commercial-insurance products. While some become insurance sales agents themselves, with their work occupying thereby a grey area between wealth management, speculation, and Ponzi scheme, the underlying financial uncertainties remain. Tian’s colleague Mao Jingyu (University of Bielefeld) presented their coauthored paper based on the same fieldwork, analyzing the role of the seasonal bonus offered in factories. While many workers prefer this lump sum and thus forego long-term welfare bound to the regular low salary, the factories preserve the flexibility and informality on which China’s workbench system is based. In contrast, Bettina Gransow (Free University Berlin) focused on those rural migrants who managed uncertainty through acquiring a college education and thus attempting to climb the social ladder in Guangzhou. However, education hierarchies and devaluation of their training, gender discrimination, as well as strict migration regimes constantly threaten their foothold in this first-tier city. Interestingly, Gransow’s interlocutors did not perceive these difficulties as systemic but emphasized instead how “you have to rely on yourself.”

Gil Hizi (University of Cologne) and Michael Malzer (University of Würzburg) embedded this tendency toward individualized struggle in the broader social context, showing that these issues go beyond the social worlds of migrants alone. The former analyzed trends in psychological counselling and self-help in China, which have gained momentum in recent years in response to the socioeconomic changes accompanying the Chinese market’s transformation. He explained how psychology allies with the state discourse of “self-reliance,” rendering individual challenges apolitical. In contrast, Michael Malzer elucidated a microcosm of Chinese society: an “English Corner” in a café in Yinchuan, a city in China’s northwestern periphery that has found itself increasingly affected by the political tightening taking place in the Xi Jinping era. The English Corner provided room for discussion on various topics, for ideas of self-improvement (going well beyond mere language practice), social advancement, or escaping everyday pressures, but was also subject to more or less explicit forms of regulation and censorship. That English appeared to be a language of possibilities and worldliness made it attractive to participants but to the state potentially threatening.

The sixth session illustrated how Chinese actors create social worlds beyond the mainland. Ryanne Flock (University of Würzburg) and Yuan Mingqing (University of Erlangen-Nürnberg) focused on migrants who moved abroad for longer or shorter periods, more specifically to Malaysia and Kenya respectively. Yuan analyzed the books of Deng Changwu, a businessman who has been involved in various local Chinese associations during his 20 years of experience in the East African country. His works are a mixture of fiction writing and novels, guidebooks, and detective stories; they seek to engage the community of Chinese citizens in Africa on the issue

of remaining safe in foreign lands. In contrast, Ryanne Flock looked at the Malaysian Chinese community near Kuala Lumpur, which has been involved in the state's development for several generations. She offered an overview of her recent exploratory fieldwork and potential research directions on "Chinese New Villages" — once established as residential prison areas under British colonial rule. Ryanne Flock's interest lay in how the local Chinese community's various members have dealt with the New Villages' sociospatial changes in the course of Kuala Lumpur's mega-urbanization.

The "Social Worlds Workshop" was dedicated to the empirical research of different Chinese social worlds and is part of a workshop series continued in 2024.

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