

YSG Workshop 2024 – DGA Young Scholars Group Theory Workshop 2024 “Nation and Religion”

Freiburg, June 14–16, 2024

Report by Anastasia Kostromina

The biannual DGA Young Scholars Group (YSG) workshop took place in Freiburg from June 14th to 16th. Young academics with backgrounds in Asian Studies gathered to learn about and discuss the application of theories in their research, as well as the differences between theory-driven and data-driven research.

The workshop was opened on Friday evening by the current YSG representatives: Yasmin Koppen, Dan Petersen, Katharina Dressen, Lars Konheiser, and Munkhzul Bat-Erdene. Thereafter, the participants got to know each other. Prof. Dr. Jörg Plassen, Chair of East Asian Religions, Department of East Asian Studies, Ruhr Universität Bochum, gave a keynote lecture on the topic of “Some Remarks on the Concept of Nation in the Study of East Asian Buddhism.”

Professor Plassen's speech began with a discussion of recent criticism directed at Thomas Heberer and Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, specialists in Chinese philology. Kai Vogelsang scrutinized these scholars, arguing that they fail to adequately explain China and suggesting that philology reaches its limits in interpreting contemporary China. Professor Plassen reminded the participants of Germany's 1980s debate on theory-driven and data-driven research methodologies in sinology. He expressed concern that the development of Vogelsang's thought might pose a risk to the field of Asian Studies. By tracing the concept of sinification (中国化) back to Johann Herder and Hegel's ideas, he showcased how philology can construct arguments against contemporary politics in China using philological methods. In the end, he invited participants to reflect on the role of theories in Asian Studies research.

On Saturday morning, Hendrik Johannemann presented his recently defended PhD dissertation on the topic “Opposing Desires — The Contentious Politics of the South Korean Anti-LGBT Movement.” He examined the anti-LGBT movement through the lens of “dynamic continuity” and revealed the four-fold meaning behind the title “Opposing Desires.”

His research uncovered contradictory movement strategies and internal conflicts within the movement. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's theoretical framework of "war of position," Johannemann highlighted the religious and political interplay, arguing that the anti-LGBT movement, largely led by protestant followers, serves political interests and acts as an innovator for conservative politics. Using protest-event and frame analysis, he constructed the first systematic PEA database on anti-LGBT activism. The presentation sparked numerous questions on the societal perception of LGBT issues, the role of American movements in shaping the Korean anti-LGBT movement, and more. Professor Plassen also challenged the view of the anti-LGBT movement purely as a political issue, suggesting it is a reaction to the strengthening of the LGBT movement. Workshop participants were then encouraged to examine citations from interviews with proponents of the anti-LGBT movement and analyze the arguments they present.

The workshop prepared by Dr. Yasmin Koppen, titled "Spatiality of Religion in Historical Settings," focused on the spaces of religion. Participants discussed various types of religious spaces and layers of sites. Young scholars were introduced to criteria for inner, outer, and external hierarchies used to measure changes in these spaces. The workshop compared differences between Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist temples through the prism of hierarchical structures, and also explored aspects of mosques, including conflicts of autonomy and proselytizing, cultural hybridity, and issues related to sacred sites. Then, participants were encouraged to examine a map of a temple with a Buddhist layout but with Confucian inscriptions. Besides, by demonstrating the inconsistency of textual comments on the place, the exercise highlighted the importance of visiting study sites to see them first-hand, so as to understand their appearance.

At the end of the day, the participants had the opportunity to present their own projects and receive feedback from other participants and representatives from the YSG.

Sunday morning began with Prof. em. Dr. Judith Schlehe, former director of the Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology at Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, presenting on "Religion-State Relations and Alternative Practices in Indonesia." She employed frameworks such as decoloniality, religious syncretism, ontological turn, planetary healing, and power theory to discuss her recent studies on paranormal social group changes observed post-COVID.

Following her presentation, Richard Takhun addressed "Challenges in Research under Authoritarian Regimes." He delved into the history of the Myanmar civil war and shared insights from his field research conducted amidst conflict. Mr. Takhun also tackled ethical considerations in research, emphasizing the principle of "do no harm."

Following these presentations, participants engaged in a discussion on research ethics and voiced concerns related to their own projects. The workshop concluded with reflections from participants on their key takeaways from the three-day event, followed by closing remarks from the current YSG representatives.

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