

# ASIEN

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## Neue Herausforderungen für die Asienforschung

- Ein Gespenst geht um ... Zur Prekarität und Resilienz der Mongolistik
- Where and How Will the Southeast Asianists of Tomorrow Be Educated?
- Regionalwissenschaften für die Zukunft fit machen – ein Kommentar
- China Research, Politics and Expertise in Germany: Some Reflections on a Tension-Fraught Field
- The Role of German Universities in Academic Engagement with China
- Zugang unter Vorbehalt: Kooperationen bei der Digitalisierung ostasiatischer Kulturgüter
- Focus Group Interviews with Japanese University Students: Reflections on the Joys and Challenges of Fieldwork
- Motivation and Meaning in Regional Studies: The Case of Indian Studies in Israel

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# ASIEN

Begründet von Günter Diehl  
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## Editorial

# Neue Herausforderungen für die Asienforschung

Carmen Brandt und Wiegand Körber

Es ist mittlerweile Tradition, dass in der ASIEN in unregelmäßigen Abständen über den Stand und die Perspektiven der Asienforschung und der Asienwissenschaften im deutschsprachigen Raum berichtet wird. Zuletzt erschien im Jahr 2017 zum 50-jährigen Jubiläum der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Asienkunde (DGA) ein Schwerpunktheft, in dem sich Autor:innen dezidiert mit der Geschichte und den aktuellen Herausforderungen ihrer jeweiligen Fächer und der Asienforschung im Allgemeinen auseinandergesetzt haben.<sup>1</sup> Vieles von dem, was dort als Herausforderungen beschrieben wurde, hat leider nichts an Aktualität verloren. Geradezu prophetisch wirkt der Beitrag „Die deutsche Südasienforschung im Wandel der Zeit“, in dem gewarnt wurde, dass sogenannte Kleine Fächer oft nur einen Ruhestand von ihrem Verschwinden entfernt sind (Brandt und Hackenbroch 2017: 55)<sup>2</sup>. Dies wissen die beiden verantwortlichen Redakteur:innen dieses Heftes nur allzu gut: An ihrer Alma Mater, der Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, wurden im Zuge der Emeritierung von zwei Professoren – Walter Slaje im Jahr 2019 und Rahul Peter Das 2020 – sowohl die Indologie als auch die Südasienwissenschaft abgeschafft. Ein weiteres Fach, das der Sparpolitik des Landes Sachsen-Anhalt zum Opfer fiel, ist die Japanologie. Obwohl diese Disziplin im Vergleich zu den beiden südasienbezogenen mit beeindruckenden Studierendenzahlen glänzen konnte, wurde bereits die Professur von Gesine Foljanty-Jost, der Japanologin, die dieses Fach an der Universität in Halle (Saale) aufgebaut hatte, mit ihrem Eintritt in den Ruhestand 2019 gestrichen. Ob die zweite Professur im Stellenplan des Rektorats bereits mit dem berüchtigten Kürzel „k.w.“ – „Kann weg!“ – versehen ist oder es zu einer Nachbesetzung kommen wird, wenn ihr derzeitiger Inhaber in Rente gehen wird, ist völlig unklar.

Der Umgang mit institutionellen Perspektiven bildet sich entsprechend auch in diesem Schwerpunktheft ab. Dies betrifft jedoch nicht automatisch die Streichung von Professuren oder gar ganzer Fächer, sondern auch deren prekäre Ausstattung, mit der Fachvertreter:innen den Alltag meistern müssen. In ihrem kämpferischen und

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1 ASIEN 144 (2017): <https://hasp.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/asien/issue/view/940> (Aufruf: 19.07.2025).

2 Brandt, Carmen; Hackenbroch, Kirsten (2017): „Die Südasienforschung im Wandel der Zeit“, in: ASIEN 144: 36–57, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11588/asien.2017.144.14772> (Aufruf: 19.07.2025).

zuweilen augenzwinkernden Essay „Ein Gespenst geht um: Zur Prekarität und Resilienz der Mongolistik“ beschreibt Ines Stolpe die Herausforderungen, vor denen eines der kleinsten asienwissenschaftlichen Fächer steht. Neben dem Lehrstuhl der Autorin, Professorin für Mongolistik an der Universität Bonn, existiert nur an der Universität München eine weitere Professur, allerdings offiziell für Sinologie, deren Inhaber auch die Mongolistik vertritt. In Anbetracht der gegenwärtigen Sparzwänge an deutschen Hochschulen, die immer öfter im Gewand einer Quantifizierungslogik daherkommen, die jenseits der Auslastung von Studiengängen kaum weitere Kriterien kennen, verliert sich die Mongolistik in Bonn glücklicherweise nicht im Defätismus. Stattdessen plädiert die Autorin für mehr Wissenstransfer und innovative Formate in Forschung und Lehre, die in der Bonner Praxis u.a. durch Exkursionen, öffentliche Kolloquien und andere Veranstaltungen, die die Bonner Bevölkerung einbeziehen und somit auch interkulturelle Kontakte ermöglichen, umgesetzt werden.

Im gleichen Feld bewegt sich auch der Beitrag von Antje Missbach und Jemma Purdey, die der titelgebenden Frage „Where and How Will the Southeast Asianists of Tomorrow be Educated?“ nachgehen. Ihre Analyse der acht deutschen Hochschulen an denen Südostasienstudien derzeit (noch) unterrichtet werden, zeigt, dass Studienprogramme inhaltlich zunehmend flexibler ausgerichtet werden, während klassische Curricula an Einfluss verlieren. Dieser Trend finde sich auch auf der Ebene der Forschung wieder, bei der die Autorinnen eine zunehmende Projektifizierung konstatieren. Punktuell könnten so teilweise auch umfangreiche Drittmittel eingeworben werden, die die Bearbeitung von aktuellen Problemfeldern interdisziplinär ermöglichen. Die Kehrseite: Durch festgelegte Projektlaufzeiten fehle es an Nachhaltigkeit. Dementsprechend plädieren die Autorinnen dafür, der Falle der oftmals unberechenbaren föderalen Wissenschaftsfinanzierung mit Hilfe einer nationalen und auf lange Sicht ausgelegten Förderstrategie zu Gunsten der Südostasienstudien zu entkommen.

Flexibilisierung und Planungsunsicherheit sind Phänomene, die mit einem inhärenten Charakteristikum der Asienwissenschaften zusammenhängen: der Abhängigkeit ihrer finanziellen Ausstattung und ihres studentischen Zuspruchs von politischen Großwetterlagen und kulturellen Trends. Letztere fanden ihren Ausdruck z.B. im Bollywood-Boom im Falle der Indologie und Südasienswissenschaft, der heute in seiner Wirkkraft durch die Begeisterung junger Menschen für koreanische Popkultur auf die Entscheidung für ein Studium der Koreanistik bei Weitem übertroffen wird. Auch die Japanologie kann im Vergleich zu anderen Asienwissenschaften auf erfreuliche Studierendenzahlen blicken, die nicht zuletzt auch auf die Popularität der japanischen Popkultur zurückzuführen sind. Allen asienwissenschaftlichen Studiengängen ist aber gemein, dass die Zahl der Studierenden stetig abnimmt. Das ist sowohl der demographischen Entwicklung geschuldet als auch eine Folge der Corona-Pandemie, durch die jungen Menschen drei Jahre lang die Möglichkeit genommen wurde, Asien zu bereisen und sich im Anschluss für ein entsprechendes Studium zu

entscheiden. Hinzukommt die unter Studieninteressierten weit verbreitete Unsicherheit, welche beruflichen Perspektiven ein regionalwissenschaftliches Studium bietet, die sich insbesondere in Zeiten multipolarer Krisen und ökonomischer Unsicherheiten zuspitzt. Eine weitere Herausforderung stellen die schwindelerregenden Fortschritte im Bereich der Künstlichen Intelligenz dar. Diese stellen nicht nur die noch immer weit verbreitete Prüfungsform der schriftlichen Haus- und Abschlussarbeit infrage, sondern auch das Erlernen einer Fremdsprache von der Pike auf. Auch wenn unbestreitbar bleibt, dass das Beherrschen der jeweiligen Sprache zentral für das Verständnis einer fremden Kultur ist, besteht doch die Sorge, dass die Verbreitung immer effizienterer technischer Übersetzungsmöglichkeiten den Erwerb einer komplexen und komplizierten Fremdsprache für Studieninteressierte erst einmal obsolet erscheinen lässt. Insbesondere für stark philologisch ausgerichtete Studiengänge könnte dies zu einem weiteren Rückgang von Studierenden führen, die nicht selten im Laufe des Studiums an den oftmals hohen Anforderungen in der Sprachlehre scheitern.

Dass manche Studiengänge eine hohe Anzahl von Sprachmodulen und zudem einen starken historischen Fokus haben, trifft unter Studierenden teilweise auf Kritik, da sie sich so für den Arbeitsmarkt nicht vorbereitet fühlen. Diesem Problem widmet sich Julia Marinacchio in ihrem Beitrag „Regionalwissenschaften für die Zukunft fit machen“. Die Reformvorschläge, die sie aus ihrer Erfahrung als Koordinatorin der Initiative „European Universities“ an einer österreichischen Hochschule ableitet, zielen darauf ab, die asienwissenschaftlichen Curricula stärker als bisher an den Bedürfnissen der Studierenden und des Arbeitsmarktes auszurichten, und brechen so mit traditionellen Vorstellungen davon, wie Regionalwissenschaften ihre Lehre organisieren sollten. Ihr Beitrag regt zur Debatte darüber an, wie Asienwissenschaften moderner werden könnten, um dadurch ihren einzigartigen Kern auch weiterhin in die Welt tragen zu können: das Eröffnen neuer Perspektiven und der Erwerb interkultureller Kompetenzen. Der Artikel markiert gleichzeitig Julia Marinacchios Abschied aus der Redaktion der ASIEN. Im Namen der gesamten Redaktion und des Vorstands der DGA möchten wir uns deshalb ganz herzlich bei ihr für ihre jahrelange Mitarbeit, ihre Zuverlässigkeit und ihren humorvollen Pragmatismus auch in schwierigen Zeiten bedanken.

Die Abhängigkeit der Asienwissenschaften von politischen Großwetterlagen und dadurch aufkommende gute oder schlechte Zeiten für ein Fach ist an keiner Stelle so prominent sichtbar wie im Falle der Sinologie bzw. der Chinastudien. Dieser Umstand ist Thema des Beitrags „China Research, Politics and Expertise in Germany – Some Reflections on a Tension-Fraught Field“ von Stefan Messingschlager. Darin widmet sich der Autor der Rekonstruktion des Wechselspiels zwischen Chinaforschung und Politik in Deutschland seit 1949: Als ein vorwiegend philologisches Unterfangen begonnen, stellt sich das Feld heute als hochgradig dynamisch und von geopolitischen Interessen sowie wirtschaftlichen Interdependenzen durchzogen dar. Seine Aufmerksamkeit gilt dabei auch den Wissenschaftler:innen, die sich in diesem

Terrain zurechtfinden müssen, ihrerseits aber auch zur Formung desselbigen beitragen. Die jüngsten Verfestigungen globaler Neuordnungen wirkten sich dementsprechend direkt auf die gegenwärtigen Forschungsbedingungen aus. Um den einzelnen Wissenschaftler:innen das Navigieren in diesem Terrain zu erleichtern, sei daher die Entwicklung transparenter Ethikstandards eine zwingend notwendige Voraussetzung.

Dass ein zu diesem Zweck denkbarer einheitlicher Ansatz für die Strukturierung des wissenschaftlichen Umgangs mit China weder machbar noch wünschenswert ist, zeigen Matthias Stepan, Ilker Gündoğan, Rosa Schmidt-Drewniok und Jörn-Carsten Gottwald. Unter dem Titel „The Role of German Universities in Academic Engagement with China“ präsentieren die Autor:innen Ergebnisse aus einem von der Mercator-Stiftung geförderten Forschungsprojekt. Aus diesen ergibt sich einerseits ein umfangreiches Bild über die deutsch-chinesischen Hochschulkooperationen der Universitäten im Ruhrgebiet und in der Region Frankfurt-Rhein-Main sowie deren vielfältige Facetten und Potenziale. Andererseits zeigen Interviews mit Wissenschaftler:innen und verantwortlichen Mitarbeiter:innen der Universitätsverwaltungen, dass bilaterale Kooperationen oftmals auf dem Engagement einzelner basieren und aus Gründen der Wissenschaftsfreiheit nur begrenzt reguliert werden können. Dadurch werde viel Verantwortung für die Ausgestaltung der Beziehungen auf die einzelnen Wissenschaftler:innen selbst verlagert. Deutsche Universitäten träten somit nicht als homogene Akteure auf, durch die schiere Fülle an institutionellen Kontakten kommt ihnen jedoch trotzdem eine Schlüsselrolle bei der Ausgestaltung akademischer Kooperationen mit China zu. Dementsprechend ist der Rückzug aus den deutsch-chinesischen Partnerschaften für die Autor:innen keine Option. Stattdessen gelte es, diese sorgfältig zu strukturieren, um Integrität und Sicherheit der Chinaforschung und -forschenden angesichts angespannter politischer Verhältnisse weiterhin zu gewährleisten.

Von der Zusammenarbeit mit Institutionen eines anderen ostasiatischen Landes berichtet Reinhard Zöllner in seinem Artikel „Zugang unter Vorbehalt: Kooperationen bei der Digitalisierung ostasiatischer Kulturgüter“. Aus seinen Erfahrungen, die sich vorrangig auf Japan beziehen, berichtet er über die teils erheblichen Hürden, denen Forschende begegnen, die versuchen, Zugang zu japanischen Universitätsbibliotheken, staatlichen Museen und privaten Archiven zu erlangen. Jüngere Digitalisierungsbemühungen etwa durch die japanische Nationalbibliothek seien jedoch Ausdruck eines wahrnehmbaren und zu begrüßenden Umdenkens. Zu dieser Demokratisierung des Wissens könnten Wissenschaftler:innen auch hierzulande beitragen, existieren doch erhebliche Sammlungen von asienwissenschaftlicher Bedeutung auch im deutschsprachigen Raum, deren Digitalisierung neue Chancen für eine vertiefte Zusammenarbeit über Ländergrenzen hinweg eröffnet. Ein Beispiel für eine solch gelungene Digitalisierung von Seiten der Japanologie an der Universität Bonn ist die Kataoka-Sammlung, die tausende Schellackplatten aus den Jahren 1915–1950 umfasst und nach kostenloser Anmeldung frei verfügbar ist. Von ihrem wissenschaftlichen Wert abgesehen, bieten gerade die Audioaufnahmen dieser Sammlung

auch dem uninformierten Laien (hier: dem mitverantwortlichen Redakteur dieses Heftes) einen einzigartigen Einblick in das Japan der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts.

Einen weiteren Einblick in die Forschungsarbeit aus dem Bereich der Japanologie bietet der Artikel „Focus Group Interviews with Japanese University Students: Reflections on the Joys and Challenges of Fieldwork“ von Antonia Vesting, Stefanie Schwarte, Anne-Sophie König und Gabriele Vogt. Die Autorinnengruppe aus München reflektiert in ihrem Beitrag Fokusgruppendifkussionen, die sie im Rahmen eines Forschungsprojektes zu Interessen und Einstellungen junger Menschen zur Politik im Zuge der alternden Gesellschaft in Japan durchgeführt hat. Neben den technischen Herausforderungen thematisieren die Forscherinnen auch interkulturelle Hürden, die im Rahmen dieser Art Erhebung von empirischen Daten entstehen, und reflektieren, wie sich diese überwinden lassen. Auch wenn diese Überlegungen auf Erfahrungen aus einer Feldforschung in Japan basieren, so sind sie mit Sicherheit eine große Hilfe für Forschende, die diese Methode in anderen asiatischen Ländern anwenden.

Den Abschluss des Schwerpunktheftes bildet ein Beitrag zur indienbezogenen Lehre und Forschung in Israel. Anhand der Porträts dreier etablierter Wissenschaftler:innen und auf der Grundlage zahlreicher Interviews mit gegenwärtigen Studierenden in Israel zeichnen Carmen Brandt und Marina Rimscha in ihrem Essay „Motivation and Meaning in Regional Studies: The Case of Indian Studies in Israel“ die institutionelle Verankerung der Indienstudien in Israel sowie die Wege der drei Fachvertreter:innen in die Wissenschaft und die Beweggründe junger Menschen, sich für ein Studium mit Indienbezug zu entscheiden, nach. Die biografischen Zeugnisse bilden dabei nicht nur die gesammelten Erfahrungen Einzelner ab, sondern spiegeln die oft verschlungenen Pfade, Chancen und Zufälle wider, die zu einem asienwissenschaftlichen Studium und zur Asienforschung führen können und mit denen sich viele von uns sicherlich identifizieren können. Heute, wo der persönlichen Eingebundenheit in historische und asymmetrische Machtverhältnisse eine nie dagewesene Aufmerksamkeit gewidmet wird, scheint die Anerkennung dieser Diversität notwendiger denn je.

Neben den wie in jedem ASIEN-Heft vertretenen Konferenzberichten und Rezensionen gibt es auch in dieser Ausgabe noch weitere Beiträge, die die vielfältige Asienforschung im deutschsprachigen Raum verdeutlichen: eine Research Note von Klaus Schlichtmann zum Thema „Ueki Emori und die japanische Freiheits- und Bürgerrechtsbewegung (jiyū minken undō) – zugleich ein Beitrag zur japanischen Verfassungsgeschichte“ und einen Kommentar von Jörg Rodenwaldt und Alexis Stanimiroudis zum „Tourismus zwischen Taiwan und China: Brücke oder Hindernis für kulturellen und politischen Dialog?“.

Wir hoffen, dass dieses Heft den Anstoß für weitergehende Debatten um die vielfältigen Herausforderungen bietet, vor denen die Asienforschung steht und wünschen uns, dass Autor:innen die hier aufgeworfenen Diskussionsfäden aufnehmen, daran

anknüpfen oder neue hinzufügen. Auch werden nur Fälle aus einer kleinen Auswahl asienbezogener Fächer beschrieben, weshalb wir uns über Zusendungen aus anderen Disziplinen umso mehr freuen.

Abschließend möchten wir darauf aufmerksam machen, dass die Herausforderungen, denen Asienforschende begegnen, leider auch vor unserer Zeitschrift nicht haltmachen. Auch die ASIEN muss mit diesen Entwicklungen Schritt halten und auf eine veränderte Publikationslandschaft und die Bedürfnisse ihrer Mitglieder reagieren. Hinzukommt, dass die Veränderungen in der Geschäftsführung Spuren hinterlassen haben. Mancherlei ruckelt sich erst wieder zurecht, die Laufnummer dieses Heftes und ihr Verhältnis zum realen Erscheinungsjahr ist ein mahnender Zeuge davon. Mit der Einstellung von Jeanette Gerhardt als neue Geschäftsführerin ist der DGA aber ein echter Coup gelungen: Ihre Energie hat auch die ASIEN erfasst, dank ihres Werbens sind zahlreiche neue Mitglieder in die Redaktion eingetreten. Das ist wichtig, denn verabschieden müssen wir an dieser Stelle auch Diana Schnelle. Sie hat die Redaktion nicht nur mit japanologischem Fachwissen und Zuverlässigkeit bereichert, sondern auch durch ihr Wesen: Immer mit einem Lachen auf den Lippen war sie eine echte Stütze für unsere kleine Gruppe. Im Namen der Redaktion und des DGA-Vorstands bedanken wir uns für viele Stunden ehrenamtlicher Arbeit und wünschen ihr alles Gute für alle weiteren Wege.

Die nächste Ausgabe der ASIEN – auch ein Themenheft – steht schon in den Startlöchern: Sie trägt den Titel „Navigating In-betweenness: Literary and Filmic Bordercrossings in the Cultural Sinosphere“ und wird im Herbst erscheinen. Für die darauffolgenden Hefte freuen wir uns weiterhin über Ihre Einreichungen. Die ASIEN war und ist eine starke Stimme im Navigieren durch die vielschichtigen Herausforderungen, denen Asienforschende auch in den nächsten Jahrzehnten begegnen werden. Lassen Sie uns gemeinsam dafür sorgen, dass dies so bleibt.

# THEMENSCHWERPUNKT

## Essay

### Ein Gespenst geht um ... Zur Prekarität und Resilienz der Mongolistik

Ines Stolpe

#### Abstract

In this essay, some implications of the alarmingly reduced teaching capacities in Mongolian studies in Germany are discussed. The focus is on possibilities and limits of compensation at the University of Bonn against the background of current dynamics, framework conditions and discrepancies. We have seen the restart of our discipline in 2013 as an opportunity to breathe new life into the subject and accordingly introduced innovative approaches to its further development on many levels, some of which are outlined here as examples with regard to teaching and academic communication. However, no matter how hard we strive for resilience, precarious human resources affect the substance of a subject and erode it from within, as knowledge transfer must inevitably be curtailed when language teaching capacities are reduced to a minimum due to a lack of sustainable funding.

**Keywords:** Mongolian studies, precariousness of small disciplines, situated knowledge, participatory teaching methods, communities of practice, resilience, sustainability

**Ines Stolpe** studierte Mongolistik und Erziehungswissenschaften in Berlin und Ulaanbaatar. Seit April 2013 ist sie Professorin für Mongolistik an der Rheinischen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn, wo sie 2017 mit dem Lehrpreis ausgezeichnet wurde. Zu ihren Lehr- und Forschungsgebieten gehören mongolische Sprache und Kultur, Interdependenzen von räumlicher und sozialer Mobilität, Bildungsgerechtigkeit, Intercultural Awareness, Nachhaltigkeit, Postsozialismusforschung, Alltagskulturen, Transfer und sozialer Wandel.

Gäbe es eine Rote Liste gefährdeter Fächer, wäre die Mongolistik hierzulande in der Kategorie *critically endangered* zu finden. Das Gespenst, das seit dem Ende der deutschen Teilung in unserem Fach umgeht, ist nicht das des Kommunismus – im Gegenteil: Während des Kalten Krieges ging es der Mongolistik auf beiden Seiten des Eisernen Vorhangs weit besser. Nach Herstellung der Einheit Deutschlands, als erweiterte Forschungsmöglichkeiten endlich neue Chancen boten, begann, zuerst in Ostdeutschland, die klammheimliche Abwicklung der Lehrkapazitäten des Faches.<sup>1</sup> Der Ungeist neoliberaler Ideologie spukte fatalerweise weder in deutlich erkennbarer Gestalt noch folgte sein Erscheinen bei der schleichenden Demontage personeller Ausstattungen fairen Kriterien – von Transparenz ganz zu schweigen. Und noch immer geistert er nebulös umher und richtet als latente Gefahr hinter den Kulissen Schäden an, die erst mit Verzögerung erkennbar werden.

In diesem Essay sollen einige Implikationen bedenklich reduzierter Lehrkapazitäten der Mongolistik in Deutschland schlaglichtartig diskutiert werden. Der Fokus liegt auf Möglichkeiten und Grenzen einer Kompensation an der Universität Bonn vor dem Hintergrund aktueller Dynamiken, Rahmenbedingungen und Diskrepanzen. Da universitäre Lehre eine tragende Rolle für die Zukunft jeder Disziplin spielt, gehen prekäre personelle Ressourcen an die Substanz eines Faches und höhlen es von innen aus, denn die Wissensvermittlung muss zwangsläufig stark eingedampft werden, wenn Lehrkapazitäten auf ein Minimum reduziert sind. Der Kartierung durch die *Arbeitsstelle Kleine Fächer* ist zu entnehmen, dass die Mongolistik deutschlandweit aktuell nur mit einer Professur in Bonn und einer halben in München vertreten ist.<sup>2</sup> Allein an der Universität Bonn existiert das Fach noch mit einem eigenständigen Bachelor- (Kernfach und Zwei-Fach) und einem Masterstudiengang. Jedoch stellt sich die Frage, ob dieses Alleinstellungsmerkmal künftig erhalten bleiben kann. Denn das als Sparzwang gewandete Gespenst steht wieder diffus im Raum, es treibt sein schauriges Wesen und mittels Quantifizierungskult auch bizarre Blüten.

Zunächst sei kurz die Lage skizziert: Den Neubeginn der Bonner Mongolistik<sup>3</sup> im Jahr 2013 verdanken wir zuerst Prof. em. Klaus Sagaster, der schon im Kalten Krieg

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- 1 An der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin fiel die Mongolistik-Professur nach der Wende stillschweigend weg. Von zehn Dozierenden im Jahr 1991 blieben nur fünf bis 1996, vier bis 1997 und drei bis 1999 beschäftigt; im selben Jahr lief der Masterstudiengang aus, und die zuletzt einzige Lehrkraftstelle wurde 2006 auf 50% reduziert, als die Fachvertreterin in den Ruhestand ging. An der Universität Leipzig war der Professor für mongolische und tibetische Philologie noch in der ersten Hälfte der 1990er Jahre am Institut tätig. Seit die letzte Mongolistik-Mittelbaustelle mit Renteneintritt des Dozenten verschwand, kann nur eine Einführung in die uiguro-mongolische Schrift angeboten werden. In Göttingen war der Studiengang Mongolistik 2005 eingestellt worden; dort sind allein im Turkologie-BA noch Mongolisch-Einführungsmodule wählbar.
  - 2 Dies wird so gezählt, weil der Inhaber des Münchner Sinologie-Lehrstuhls auch die Mongolistik vertritt, weshalb sie dort im Nebenfach studiert werden kann: [www.kleinefaecher.de/kartierung/kleine-faecher-von-a-z/mongolistik](http://www.kleinefaecher.de/kartierung/kleine-faecher-von-a-z/mongolistik).
  - 3 An der Universität Bonn war die Mongolistik 1964 als integraler Bestandteil des Seminars für Sprach- und Kulturwissenschaft Zentralasiens begründet, 2005 in das Institut für Orient- und Asienwissenschaften eingegliedert und im Jahr 2012 nach dem Freiwerden der letzten Professur aus dem Fächerkatalog gestrichen worden (Sagaster 2014).

Brücken gebaut und seine Verbindungen zur damaligen mongolischen Regierung genutzt hat, um sich für den Fortbestand des Faches einzusetzen. Das Rektorat und die Philosophische Fakultät hatten dies seinerzeit unterstützt und einer Patchwork-Finanzierung zugestimmt, bei der für das Mongolisch-Lektorat nach der Besetzung des Lehrstuhls immer wieder Drittmittel vom DAAD einzuwerben waren.<sup>4</sup> Diese Konstellation erwies sich zwar damals als Segen, doch nach der Ausschöpfung des Maximalförderzeitraums der DAAD-Finanzierung als Fluch: Denn seit dem Wintersemester 2022/23 ist die Mongolistik mit Blick auf das fachlich unentbehrliche Sprachlektorat in einer prekären Situation. Nachdem damals ein ganzes Studienjahr mühsam mit mehreren Lehraufträgen<sup>5</sup> durchgestanden war, bewilligte das Prorektorat für Studium und Lehre eine zweijährige Finanzierung aus zentralen ZSL-Mitteln.<sup>6</sup> Mit Ablauf dieser als Überbrückung gedachten Frist besteht derzeit nur Aussicht auf eine 75%-Teilfinanzierung, welche der Solidarität unseres Institutes zu verdanken ist. Denn Asienwissenschaften sind ohne Fremdsprachenkenntnisse nicht denkbar, und in unserem Fall ist neben dem modernen Mongolischen mindestens auch das Erlernen der vertikal geschriebenen mongolischen Schrift essentiell.<sup>7</sup>

Die sich unter Verweis auf Sparzwänge (erneut) andeutende Aushöhlung mutet aus drei Gründen gespenstisch an. Zum einen, weil die drohende fachliche Erosion dabei nicht adressiert wird, obwohl im *Portal Kleine Fächer* die deutschlandweit prekäre Lage der Mongolistik ersichtlich ist.<sup>8</sup> Für uns in Bonn resultiert aus dem letzten noch existenten eigenständigen Bachelor- und Master-Studiengang die Verantwortung, bei dessen Gestaltung auch künftig ein möglichst breites Spektrum mit fachlicher Tiefe abzudecken. Mit Blick auf die von ihm vertretene Disziplin schrieb der jetzige Dekan unserer Philosophischen Fakultät: „Die Islamwissenschaft ist letzten Endes eine allumfassende Gesellschaftswissenschaft, die Wissensgebiete, die in anderen Bereichen als eigene Fächer geführt werden, beinhaltet [...]“ (Conermann 2012: 10). Gleiches gilt für die moderne Mongolistik, jedoch bei weit größerem Legitimationsdruck, den G. Cameron Hurst für Mongolian studies so auf den Punkt brachte: “First of all, size does matter. Cold War or not, Russia and China will continue to receive

4 Eine Kurzdarstellung findet sich online im Pressearchiv der Universität Bonn [www.uni-bonn.de/de/universitaet/presse-kommunikation/pressearchiv/pressemitteilungen/2014/275-2014](http://www.uni-bonn.de/de/universitaet/presse-kommunikation/pressearchiv/pressemitteilungen/2014/275-2014) und beim Informationsdienst Wissenschaft: [idw-online.de/de/news614849](http://idw-online.de/de/news614849).

5 Weil ein/e Lehrbeauftragte/r nur eine begrenzte Anzahl Stunden übernehmen darf. Dies verschärft die ohnehin prekäre Lage vieler Lehrbeauftragter zusätzlich.

6 ZSL – Zukunftsvertrag „Studium und Lehre stärken“: [www.land.nrw/pressemitteilung/landesregierung-stellt-hochschulen-dauerhaft-mehr-als-900-millionen-euro-zur](http://www.land.nrw/pressemitteilung/landesregierung-stellt-hochschulen-dauerhaft-mehr-als-900-millionen-euro-zur).

7 Die Mongolei ist ein Beispiel für Digraphie, denn die *Mongγol bičig* (ᠮᠣᠩᠭᠣᠯᠪᠢᠴᠢᠭ) oder Klassisches Mongolisch genannte Schrift soll das seit Ende des Zweiten Weltkrieges in der einstigen Mongolischen VR gebräuchliche Kyrillische schrittweise ablösen. Ab 2025 erscheinen offizielle Schriftstücke und Dokumente immer (auch) in *Mongγol bičig*. Historisch waren für das Mongolische noch etliche weitere Schriften im Gebrauch.

8 Die Kartierungsdatenbank des Portals war eigens geschaffen worden, um innerhalb föderaler Strukturen alle Standorte sogenannter Kleiner Fächer in ganz Deutschland übersichtlich zu erfassen.

attention simply because of their size (both landmass and population) and their relative impact on the larger world. [...] If you are not a threat, you are not likely to be funded” (Hurst 2011: 14). Doch der sogenannte Mongolensturm liegt lange zurück. Heute wird der Staat Mongolei, der sich zwischen seinen beiden übermächtigen Nachbarn behaupten muss, zwar gern als Insel der Demokratie in Zentralasien charakterisiert, doch zugleich stand seitens deutscher Politik oft ökonomisches Interesse (Stichwort Rohstoffe) im Vordergrund.<sup>9</sup> 2020 war die bilaterale deutsch-mongolische Entwicklungszusammenarbeit<sup>10</sup> abrupt und kurzfristig für beendet erklärt, dann aber 2022 angesichts des von Russlands Präsidenten gestarteten Angriffskrieges gegen die Ukraine aus geopolitisch-strategischen Erwägungen hastig wieder aufgenommen worden. 2024 empörten sich etliche deutsche Medien anlässlich des Putin-Besuchs in der Mongolei, dass diese den Haftbefehl des Internationalen Strafgerichtshofs nicht vollstreckte, ohne Gründe dafür zu recherchieren.<sup>11</sup> Als an dieser Stelle letztes Beispiel, das einen dringenden Bedarf an aktuell gesellschaftsrelevanter Regionalexpertise hierzulande stichwortartig illustrieren mag, sei mit Blick auf Globalität das Thema Nachhaltigkeit erwähnt, bei dem wir u.a. bezüglich *Education for Sustainable Development* von der Mongolei viel lernen können (Oyuntuya 2021).<sup>12</sup> Für tiefergehende Erkenntnisse und Einsichten, in unserem Fall für die verstehende Erschließung mongolischer Perspektiven in ihrer Heterogenität, sind gute Sprachkenntnisse eine elementare Voraussetzung. Aber auch für einen informierten, respektvoll-kultursensiblen Austausch auf Augenhöhe. Diesen vermisst man, entgegen offizieller Rhetorik, in Bezug auf die Mongolei allzu oft, zumal sie besonders gern exotisiert und/oder auf historische Bedeutsamkeit reduziert wird. Als moderne Mongolistik engagieren wir uns deshalb für eine wissenschaftsbasierte Vermittlung kultureller Dynamiken, welche weder oberflächlich ist noch vergangenheitsfixiert. Die traditionellen historisch-philologischen Ausrichtungen unseres Faches stehen dabei nicht im Gegensatz zu gegenwartsbezogen-sozialwissenschaftlichen, sondern sie ergänzen und befruchten sich gegenseitig. Bislang konnten wir unseren Studierenden in Bonn beide Optionen für die fachliche Profilbildung anbieten, was sich bei Kürzungen der Kapazitäten des Sprachlektorates aber nicht aufrechterhalten lässt.

Der zweite Grund, aus dem im Raum stehende personelle Einbußen in der Lehre gespenstisch erscheinen, ist die zwar als Effizienz getarnte, doch von Fakten, Sinn

9 Anlässlich des Mongolei-Besuches der damaligen Bundeskanzlerin Angela Merkel erschienen Presseartikel, von denen einige illustrieren, mit welcher ignorant-eurozentrischer Borniertheit Journalisten in Deutschland durchkommen können, wenn sie über asiatische Länder schreiben, siehe z.B.:

[www.morgenpost.de/printarchiv/politik/article105315113/Jaegerin-der-Seltenen-Erden.html](http://www.morgenpost.de/printarchiv/politik/article105315113/Jaegerin-der-Seltenen-Erden.html).

10 Der entsprechende Eintrag auf der Homepage des BMZ liest sich, als habe es bis zur Wende keine entsprechende bilaterale Kooperation gegeben, obwohl die DDR der wichtigste Partner der Mongolischen VR in Europa war: [www.bmz.de/de/laender/mongolei](http://www.bmz.de/de/laender/mongolei).

11 Beispielsweise der Tagesschau-Bericht: [www.tagesschau.de/ausland/asien/putin-mongolei-staatsbesuch-trotz-haftbefehl-100.html](http://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/asien/putin-mongolei-staatsbesuch-trotz-haftbefehl-100.html).

12 Siehe auch: [www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/aktivitaeten/posterwettbewerb-nachhaltigkeit-2018](http://www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/aktivitaeten/posterwettbewerb-nachhaltigkeit-2018).

und Inhalten weitgehend entkoppelte Argumentation mit Zahlen. Von Fakten insofern, als strategische Entscheidungen u.a. auf sogenannten Kenndaten basieren, die mit Blick auf Studierendenzahlen unseres Faches stellenweise fehlerhaft sind: Es zeigte sich wiederholt, dass beispielsweise Zwei-Fach-Studierende (warum auch immer) scheinbar arbiträr in nur einem Fach gezählt werden; Pech also, wenn es das jeweils andere ist und die effizienzlogisch herumgeisternde Quantifizierung in diesen Fällen zwar valide empirische Evidenz suggeriert, aber Tatsachen verzerrt. Doch selbst mit verlässlichen Messinstrumenten ist es fragwürdig, wenn die Legitimation von Fächern vernunftwidrig an Studierendenzahlen geknüpft wird. Dabei außen vor bleibt die Sinnfrage, weshalb sich alle sogenannten Kleinen Fächer bei den Studierendenzahlen überhaupt mit sogenannten Massenfächern messen sollten. Adäquatere Parameter wären hier angebracht. Stattdessen wird mittels Kosten-Nutzen-Argumentation im *New public management*-Stil suggeriert „[...] es ließe sich einfach ausrechnen, was für eine Gesellschaft das Beste ist. Dies ist keine Verdrängung von Politik, sondern ihre Leugnung, wie sie für den Neoliberalismus charakteristisch ist“ (Schlaudt 2018: 15). Ebenfalls absurd mutet an, wenn Fächer mit geringeren Studierendenzahlen pauschal und etwas abfällig unter „schlecht ausgelastet“ verbucht werden. Denn dieses Framing erfolgt, ohne gebührende Kriterien anzulegen und danach zu fragen, was viele von ihnen – auch in der Lehre und Wissenschaftskommunikation – qualitativ leisten. Und es unterstellt implizit, dass Vertreter/innen dieser Fächer ihre Lehre isoliert von anderen halten wollen. Zugleich werden sie aber einerseits unter Verweis auf starre administrative Hürden (Stichwort „Abbildbarkeit“ von Strukturbäumen) daran gehindert, ihre Expertise noch mehr fächerübergreifend einzubringen, und andererseits durch rigide (oder gar intransparent gewandelte) Vorgaben bei Zugangsvoraussetzungen eingeschränkt.

Dies leitet über zum dritten Grund, aus dem ein drohender Abbau elementarer Kapazitäten gespenstisch anmutet: Er erscheint frappierend widersprüchlich angesichts offizieller Verlautbarungen. In diesen nämlich geht es um Weltoffenheit, internationale Kooperation und Vernetzung, Diversität, freie akademische Entfaltung, Investitionen in Menschen und das Verständnis asymmetrischer Machtverhältnisse – auch in ihrer Globalität. Es geht um die Überwindung eurozentrischer Sichtweisen, um Interdisziplinarität sowie die Förderung und Qualifikation des wissenschaftlichen Nachwuchses für anstehende Herausforderungen.<sup>13</sup> Es geht um Vielfalt, Pluralität, Chancengleichheit, Wertschätzung, um Internationalisierung sowie Internationalität in der Lehre, inklusive interkultureller Dialogmöglichkeiten und Förderung von Fremdsprachigkeit bei Einbindung ausländischer Lehrender und Studierender, um Mobilität und Auslandsaufenthalte.<sup>14</sup> – Zu all diesen Zielen trägt auch die Bonner

13 Zu entnehmen dem aktuellen Hochschulentwicklungsplan: [www.uni-bonn.de/de/universitaet/medien-universitaet/medien-presse-kommunikation/medien-hochschulentwicklungsplan/ubo\\_21\\_56\\_hochschulentwicklungsplan\\_rz2\\_web.pdf](http://www.uni-bonn.de/de/universitaet/medien-universitaet/medien-presse-kommunikation/medien-hochschulentwicklungsplan/ubo_21_56_hochschulentwicklungsplan_rz2_web.pdf).

14 Siehe die Leitlinien der Universität Bonn: [www.uni-bonn.de/de/international/internationales-profil/strategie-zur-internationalisierung-2025/download/ubn\\_leitlinien\\_internationalitaet\\_in\\_der\\_lehre.pdf](http://www.uni-bonn.de/de/international/internationales-profil/strategie-zur-internationalisierung-2025/download/ubn_leitlinien_internationalitaet_in_der_lehre.pdf).

Mongolistik mit ihren seit 2013 bislang fünf vertraglich beschäftigten Lektorinnen und Lektoren<sup>15</sup> aus der Mongolei aktiv und über das Fach hinausweisend bei.

Und damit kommen wir zur Resilienz. Ausgangspunkt ist die unbequeme Tatsache, dass es angesichts der seit den 1990er Jahren sukzessive erfolgten personellen Erosion der Mongolistik nicht mehr machbar ist, alle Verluste an spezialisiertem Wissen mit den verbliebenen Kapazitäten zu kompensieren. Doch statt in einem Meer der Verdrossenheit zu versinken, galt und gilt es, mit noch vorhandenen Ressourcen viele Potentiale unseres Faches sichtbar zum Tragen zu bringen und unseren Studierenden die bestmöglichen Optionen zu erschließen. Dies impliziert neben guter Vernetzung und Kooperationsfähigkeit, unser kapazitär limitiertes Lehrangebot vielseitig anschlussfähig zu gestalten und stetig zu optimieren, interessante komplementäre Lern- und Forschungsmöglichkeiten – darunter auch solche mit Praxisnähe – zu bieten sowie beim Wissenstransfer und der Kulturvermittlung Studierende aktiv und kreativ einzubinden. Wir haben die Wiedereröffnung der Mongolistik an der Universität Bonn als Chance begriffen, dem Fach neues Leben einzuhauchen und entsprechend auf vielen Ebenen innovative Ansätze zur Weiterentwicklung eingebracht, von denen einige mit Blick auf die Lehre und Wissenschaftskommunikation hier exemplarisch skizziert seien:

Gleich nach der Neubesetzung des Lehrstuhls im April 2013 führten wir als öffentlich zugängliche Vortragsreihe das Mongolei-Colloquium<sup>16</sup> in Bonn ein. Es ist konzipiert als transdisziplinäres Austauschforum, in dem Praxisfelder und Projekte der Mongolistik und anderer mongoleibezogener Wissenschaften vorgestellt werden, damit Forschende verschiedener Karrierestufen, Studierende, Lehrende und die interessierte Öffentlichkeit miteinander ins Gespräch kommen.<sup>17</sup>

Um die stärker gegenwartsbezogene Neuaufstellung des Faches mit Sichtbarkeit mongolischer Kultur in der Öffentlichkeit zu verbinden, organisierte unser kleines Team 2013 in Kooperation mit dem Mongoleizentrum und Angehörigen der mongolischen Community erstmals in der Geschichte der Stadt Bonn im Hofgarten ein *Naadam*-Fest (Abb. 1).<sup>18</sup>

15 Deren Verträge waren auf jeweils zwei Jahre befristet, und es brauchte jedes Mal volle sechs Monate Vorlauf, um angesichts zeitraubender bürokratischer Prozesse (v.a. der Visa-Beantragung, der KMK-Zeugnisbewertung und der NRW-Zentralstelle für Fachkräfteeinwanderung) die pünktliche Einstellung zum Beginn eines Studienjahres sicherzustellen.

16 Das Mongolei-Colloquium war ursprünglich schon im Jahr 2003 von der Autorin dieses Essays an der Humboldt-Universität ins Leben gerufen worden.

17 Eine Übersicht der bisher an der Universität Bonn organisierten über 70 Mongolei-Colloquien ist hier verfügbar: [www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/colloquien/mongoleicolloquien](http://www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/colloquien/mongoleicolloquien).

18 *Naadam* ist ein – heute als Nationalfest begangenes – mongolisches Festival, dessen Kern traditionell die Sportarten Ringen, Pferderennen und Bogenschießen bildeten. Es wurde 2010 auf die „Repräsentative Liste des immateriellen Kulturerbes“ der UNESCO aufgenommen und hat sich durch das Zelebrieren an vielen Orten der Welt als attraktiver Exportschlager etabliert, bei dem Elemente der mongolischen Kultur präsentiert werden.

**Abb. 1:** Vorbereitungen für das 1. Bonner *Naadam*-Fest auf der Hofgartenwiese im Jahr 2013.



Außer lebendigen Zeugnissen der mongolischen Kultur inklusive Musik-, Tanz- und Akrobatikprogramm bot die sehr gut besuchte Veranstaltung relevante Informationen sowie bei unterhaltsamen Mitmach-Elementen für Jung und Alt vielseitige Gelegenheiten zu interkulturellen Begegnungen.<sup>19</sup> Nach diesem Erfolg organisierten wir 2014 das 2. Bonner *Naadam*, bei dem wir in Kooperation mit der Initiative *KinderKulturKarawane*<sup>20</sup> die Gruppe „Steppenkids“ zu Gast hatten, deren Mitglieder im Hofgarten mit Darbietungen auftraten, Workshops mit Studierenden gestalteten und denen wir zum Dank eine Fahrt auf dem Rhein spendierten.<sup>21</sup> Im Vorfeld beider Feste hatten wir mit Studierenden eine Reihe von Informations- und Anschauungsmaterialien zur Geschichte und Kultur des *Naadam* sowie zu mongolischen Jurten in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart erstellt, die wir seither immer wieder an Vereine für Veranstaltungen ausleihen.<sup>22</sup> Unsere Studierenden gründeten damals eine – bis heute in veränderter Zusammensetzung existierende – Band, die seither unter Anleitung der jeweiligen Sprachlehrkraft mit Begeisterung mongolisches Liedgut einstudiert. Zu beiden Bonner *Naadam*-Festen waren Vertreterinnen und Vertreter der Botschaft der Mongolei in Deutschland unserer Einladung gefolgt, und die Veranstaltungen fanden auch in lokalen Medien ein positives Echo.

19 Einblicke gewährt die Fotostory: [www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/aktivitaeten/bilder-und-pdfs/1-bonner-naadam-2013\\_fotostory-2.pdf](http://www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/aktivitaeten/bilder-und-pdfs/1-bonner-naadam-2013_fotostory-2.pdf).

20 Unter dem Motto „Eine Bühne für die Jugend der Welt“ sind jugendliche Kunst- und Kulturgruppen aus Ländern des Globalen Südens in Europa unterwegs: [kinderkulturkarawane.de/wp/waswirmachen/](http://kinderkulturkarawane.de/wp/waswirmachen/).

21 Zur Fotostory: [www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/aktivitaeten/bilder-und-pdfs/2-bonner-naadam-2014\\_fotostory-2.pdf](http://www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/aktivitaeten/bilder-und-pdfs/2-bonner-naadam-2014_fotostory-2.pdf).

22 Beispielsweise für das Bonner Kultur- und Begegnungsfest *Vielfalt!*

In den zwei darauffolgenden Jahren gestalteten wir mit Kolleginnen und Kollegen der Fächer Japanologie, Koreanistik und Sinologie unseres Instituts zwei interdisziplinäre Veranstaltungsreihen mit Filmen sowie in Zusammenarbeit mit Engagement Global und der Deutsch-Mongolischen Gesellschaft zwei Bildungsabende: So trugen z.B. Studierende 2016 im Anschluss an eine Mongolei-Exkursion, die wir gemeinsam mit der Südostasienwissenschaft des IOA organisiert hatten, im Bonner *Haus der Vielfalt MIGRApolis* vor. Im Vorfeld hatte es eine thematisch einschlägige Filmvorführung am Institut sowie einen Gastvortrag im Mongoleizentrum gegeben.<sup>23</sup> 2017 veranstalteten wir einen entwicklungspolitischen Bildungsabend, dieses Mal u.a. in Kooperation mit der Stadt Bonn im Alten Rathaus. Das inhaltliche Herzstück bildete eine durch Vorträge eingeleitete Panel-Diskussion dreier Masterstudentinnen der Mongolistik.<sup>24</sup> Die Veranstaltung war ausgebucht, und das von unserer Mongolisch-Lektorin gemeinsam mit Studierenden ansprechend gestaltete Umfeld mit Postern und Schautafeln trug zu einem gelungenen Abend bei. Um unser Fach weiteren interessierten Zielgruppen nahezubringen, öffnen wir Lehrveranstaltungen für Schülerinnen und Schüler, tragen an der Bonner Volkshochschule und im Rahmen der Kinderuni vor.

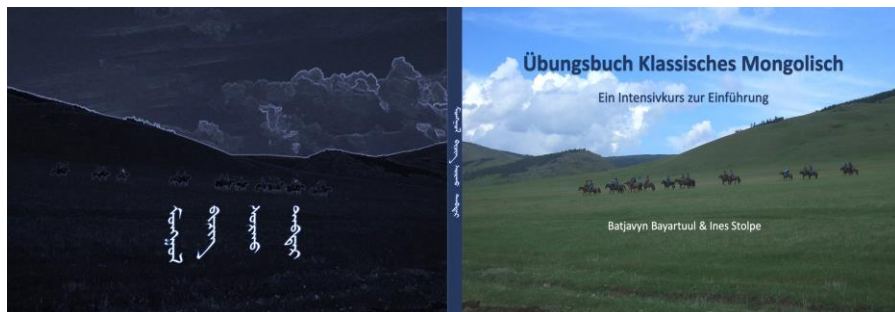
Gemeinsam mit unseren Lektorinnen und Lektoren aus der Mongolei erarbeiten wir unter aktiver Einbeziehung Studierender immer wieder innovative Lehr- und Lernmittel. Besonders dringlich war in Ermangelung didaktisch geeigneter Materialien die Erstellung eines Übungsbuches (Abb. 2), das als kompakter Intensivkurs in die (vertikal geschriebene) klassische mongolische Schrift einführt und bei der effizienten Gestaltung des Sprachunterrichts seither gute Dienste leistet.<sup>25</sup>

23 Die Ankündigung findet sich hier: [www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/aktivitaeten/bilder-und-pdfs/vortrag-mongolistik-2016-issues-of-current-leftist-politics-in-mongolia.pdf](http://www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/aktivitaeten/bilder-und-pdfs/vortrag-mongolistik-2016-issues-of-current-leftist-politics-in-mongolia.pdf).

24 Das Programm ist hier sichtbar: [www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/aktivitaeten/bilder-und-pdfs/bildungsabend-2017-flyer-1.pdf](http://www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/aktivitaeten/bilder-und-pdfs/bildungsabend-2017-flyer-1.pdf).

25 Die Publikation wurde auf Antrag gefördert vom Deutschen Akademischen Austauschdienst (DAAD) aus Mitteln des Auswärtigen Amtes (AA). Nach Bitten von Fachkolleginnen im Ausland folgte eine englischsprachige Fassung (Bayartuul und Stolpe 2019, 2020).

**Abb. 2:** Cover der deutschsprachigen Ausgabe des Übungsbuches (2019).



Sehr produktiv und erkenntnisreich waren und sind unsere mit mongolischen Lektorinnen und Lektoren durchgeführten Lehrforschungsprojekte: Während der COVID-19-Pandemie beantragten wir mehrfach erfolgreich Gelder für studentische Hilfskräfte, um gemeinsam digitale Lehr- und Lernmittel zu erstellen, die seither als *Blended Learning*-Elemente in Sprachkursen zum Einsatz kommen (Stolpe und Erdene-Očir 2022). Drei der an unserem so entstandenen *DigiTeam* beteiligten Studentinnen reflektierten ihre Erfahrungen in kurzen Essays (Bakhtyar 2022; Kodura 2022; Schürkamp 2022). Sie waren auch am folgenden Lehrforschungsprojekt beteiligt, bei dem wir uns unter Einbezug mongolischsprachiger Umfragen gezielt mit sensiblen Begriffen, Taxonomien, Framing und der Nachhaltigkeit von Übersetzungen befassen (Stolpe et al. 2023). In den Lehrforschungen konnten wir das Konzept des situierten Wissens um lebendige interaktive Prozesse situierten Lehrens und Lernens unter Erprobung verschiedener Methoden erweitern und anhand konkreter Beispiele verdeutlichen, wie wichtig fundierte Kenntnisse anderer Sprach- und Wissenskulturen sind. Solche partizipativen Angebote tragen zu einer motivierenden Lern- und Studienatmosphäre bei.

Mongolistik mit moderner Ausrichtung ist keine Schreibtischwissenschaft und umfasst jenseits von Texten und Medien auch das Studium diverser mongolischer Lebenswelten. Exkursionen im In- und Ausland ermöglichen durch Anschauung und Begegnung Zugänge zu Erkenntnissen, die innerhalb der Universität nicht vergleichbar oder gar nicht vermittelt werden können. Zudem eröffnen sich den Studierenden durch kooperative Ansätze mehrdimensionale Möglichkeiten für Vernetzungen. Seit dem Neustart der Bonner Mongolistik 2013 fanden bislang acht Exkursionen und eine internationale Winterschule statt:

- 2015 gab es in Kooperation mit der NGO Urban Nomads//Nomad Citizens eine Tagesexkursion zur FH Dortmund zum Austausch mit Lehrenden und Studierenden der Mongolischen Staatsuniversität für Kunst und Kultur.<sup>26</sup>
- 2016 organisierten wir gemeinsam mit der Abteilung Südostasienwissenschaft unseres Instituts und mongolischen NROs eine Exkursion in die Mongolei, als dort erstmals das Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) und das Asia Europe People's Forum (AEPF) stattfand.<sup>27</sup>
- Die nächste Inlands-Exkursion führte 2017 zum *Naadam*-Fest nach Schönefeld, wo Studierende mit den aus halb Europa angereisten Mongolinnen und Mongolen thematisch fokussierte Interviews führten sowie Foto- und Tonaufnahmen erstellten, die in Portfolios und Hausarbeiten einfließen.<sup>28</sup>
- Bei der Exkursion 2018 ging es wieder in die Mongolei.<sup>29</sup> In Vorbereitungsseminaren erarbeiteten sich die Studierenden Kenntnisse und Fragestellungen, denen sie vor Ort nachgingen, und sie beteiligten sich kreativ am universitätsweiten Posterwettbewerb zum Thema Nachhaltigkeit (Abb. 3).<sup>30</sup> Im Anschluss an die Exkursion gab es eine Wanderausstellung, die 2019 u.a. beim *dies academicus* an der Universität Bonn einer breiteren Öffentlichkeit präsentiert wurde.<sup>31</sup>
- 2023 erkundeten wir nach pandemiebedingter Exkursionspause in Halle/Saale und Leipzig wissenschaftliche und kulturelle mongolisch-deutsche Beziehungen in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Wir lernten dabei viel über Biodiversitätsforschung, Menschenrechte und Bergbau, über mongolische Gruppen in Migrantenorganisationen und schließlich über das umstrittene Verschwinden der Mongolica aus der Ausstellung des Grassi-Museums sowie das der Mongolistik aus dem Fächerspektrum der Universität Leipzig.<sup>32</sup>

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26 Link zur Fotostory:  
[www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/studium/exkursionen/bilder-und-pdfs/exkursion-dortmund-2015.pdf](http://www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/studium/exkursionen/bilder-und-pdfs/exkursion-dortmund-2015.pdf).

27 Eine Kurzpräsentation mit Fotos ist hier zu finden:  
[www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/studium/exkursionen/bilder-und-pdfs/mongoleiexkursion-2016.pdf](http://www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/studium/exkursionen/bilder-und-pdfs/mongoleiexkursion-2016.pdf).

28 Link zur Fotostory:  
[www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/studium/exkursionen/bilder-und-pdfs/exkursion-naadam-2017\\_fotostory.pdf](http://www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/studium/exkursionen/bilder-und-pdfs/exkursion-naadam-2017_fotostory.pdf).

29 Link zur Fotostory:  
[www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/studium/exkursionen/bilder-und-pdfs/mongolei-exkursion-2018\\_mongolistik-bonn.pdf](http://www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/studium/exkursionen/bilder-und-pdfs/mongolei-exkursion-2018_mongolistik-bonn.pdf).

30 Die Ergebnisse sind hier zu sehen: [www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/aktivitaeten/posterwettbewerb-nachhaltigkeit-2018](http://www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/aktivitaeten/posterwettbewerb-nachhaltigkeit-2018).

31 Zwei Fotos davon sind zu sehen: [www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/aktivitaeten/ub-themenseite](http://www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/aktivitaeten/ub-themenseite).

32 Link zur Fotostory:  
[www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/studium/exkursionen/bilder-und-pdfs/2023\\_mongolistik\\_exkursion.pdf](http://www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/studium/exkursionen/bilder-und-pdfs/2023_mongolistik_exkursion.pdf).  
 Reflexionen ihrer Eindrücke vom Museumsbesuch publizierten Studierende in der Zeitschrift *Mongolische Notizen*.

- Im Herbst 2024 gab es eine Tagesexkursion ins Düsseldorfer Hetjens-Museum, wo eine Mongolistik-Doktorandin eine Studioausstellung kuratiert hatte.<sup>33</sup>
- Ein besonderes Highlight zum Ende des Jahres 2024 war die erste im italienischen Venedig kooperativ mit Kolleginnen und Kollegen veranstaltete *International Winter School for Mongolian Studies*, an der Studierende der Mongolistik aus sieben Ländern teilnahmen.<sup>34</sup> Fortsetzungen sind in Planung.
- Anfang 2025 besuchten wir in Düsseldorf die deutschlandweit aktivste mongolische Ergänzungsschule *Soyol* und erfuhren viel Neues über deren lebendiges Programm sowie engagierte mongolische Netzwerke in Deutschland.<sup>35</sup>
- Bei unserer Exkursion im Juni 2025 erhielten wir in der Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Einblicke in die Vielfalt des mongolischen Publikationswesens, an der Hochschule für Nachhaltige Entwicklung Eberswalde lernten wir u.a. Forschungsprojekte in Zentralasien sowie ein studentisches Jurten-Projekt kennen und in Joachimsthal die Geschichte und aktuelle Rolle der mongolischen Palastjurte in einer internationalen Begegnungsstätte.<sup>36</sup>

Durch Exkursionen, Winter- oder Sommerschulen<sup>37</sup> entstehen inspirierende *Communities of Practice* „deren Ziel es ist, mit- und voneinander zu lernen – in Bezug auf ein geteiltes Problem oder Thema“ (Rabsch und Weißköppel 2025: 37). Auch für Promovierende organisieren wir immer wieder Austauschforen<sup>38</sup> und beteiligen uns mit Methoden-Seminaren am Curriculum der BIGS-OAS.<sup>39</sup> – Diese Beispiele für Ansätze und Initiativen, unser Fach auch mit Blick auf Lehre, Nachwuchsförderung und kooperativen Wissenstransfer resilienter und sichtbarer zu machen, verdeutlichen hoffentlich, dass wir keineswegs „unausgelastet“ sind und in versteckten Nischen weltfremd vor uns hindösen.

33 Link zur Fotostory:

[www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/colloquien/bilder-und-pdfs/2024\\_exkursion\\_museum\\_geheimnisse-der-mongolei.pdf](http://www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/colloquien/bilder-und-pdfs/2024_exkursion_museum_geheimnisse-der-mongolei.pdf).

34 Link zur Fotostory: [www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/colloquien/bilder-und-pdfs/fotostory-venedig.pdf](http://www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/colloquien/bilder-und-pdfs/fotostory-venedig.pdf).

35 Link zur Fotostory:

[www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/aktivitaeten/bilder-und-pdfs/exkursion-zur-soyol-schule-in-duesseldorf.pdf](http://www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/aktivitaeten/bilder-und-pdfs/exkursion-zur-soyol-schule-in-duesseldorf.pdf).

36 Link zur Fotostory:

[www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/aktivitaeten/bilder-und-pdfs/mongolistik-exkursion-nach-eberswalde\\_joachimsthal-2025.pdf](http://www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/aktivitaeten/bilder-und-pdfs/mongolistik-exkursion-nach-eberswalde_joachimsthal-2025.pdf).

37 Diese fanden bislang in der Mongolei statt; derzeit besteht über deren Zukunft leider Unklarheit.

38 Z.B. 2025 ein Symposium mongolischer Promovierender in Deutschland: [www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/aktivitaeten/bilder-und-pdfs/1st-symposium-of-mongolian-phd-candidates-fotos.pdf](http://www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/mongtib/de/aktivitaeten/bilder-und-pdfs/1st-symposium-of-mongolian-phd-candidates-fotos.pdf).

39 Das aktuelle Programm ist hier zu sehen: [www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/bigs-oas/de/program/bigs-oas-curriculum/bigs-oas-curriculum-2024-2026](http://www.ioa.uni-bonn.de/bigs-oas/de/program/bigs-oas-curriculum/bigs-oas-curriculum-2024-2026).

**Abb. 3:** Einer der drei Mongolistik-Beiträge beim „Posterwettbewerb Nachhaltigkeit“ (2018).



### Ausgangspunkt

In der Mongolei sind die 17 Ziele für nachhaltige Entwicklung, die **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, sogar in abgelegenen Regionen mit überwiegend nomadischer Bevölkerung gut bekannt. **Wie wurde das erreicht?**

Schon Jahre vor der weltweiten SDG-Implementierung begann das Bildungsprogramm **Education for Sustainable Development** als landesweite soziale Bewegung:

- Ausgehend von Schulen, die alle Nachhaltigkeit in Lehrplänen vermittelten, wurden landesweit Communities und Interessengruppen jeder Art einbezogen.
- Experten erarbeiteten Materialien in mongolischer Sprache (inkl. Videoclips), welche die Dimensionen nachhaltiger Entwicklung (ökologisch, sozial, ökonomisch) anhand lokaler Beispiele („Best Practices“) thematisieren.

Dank dieses konzentrierten Vorgehens und der Aufwertung des Kulturerbes einer nomadisch geprägten Zivilisation erreichte die Mongolei auf allen gesellschaftlichen Ebenen ein flächendeckendes Engagement. Dessen Ausmaß wird von Experten als weltweit einzigartig eingeschätzt.

### Fallbeispiele

Die **Mongolei-Exkursion** (August 2018) ermöglicht, unter Anwendung regionalwissenschaftlicher Schlüsselkompetenzen die Umsetzung von Nachhaltigkeitskonzepten in verschiedenen Bereichen zu erkunden:

- Umweltschutz
- Gesundheitskampagnen
- Community-basierter Tourismus
- Zivilgesellschaftliches Engagement
- Nutzung und Entwicklung des kulturellen Erbes
- Schulische Entwicklung und non-formales Lernen
- Ländliche Entwicklung und einkommensgenerierende Aktivitäten



Philosophische Fakultät  
Institut für Orient- und Asienwissenschaften  
Abt. für Mongolistik und Tibetstudien

**Potentiale und Grenzen ländlicher Entwicklung in der Mongolei**  
Modul Aktuelle Forschung: Vorbereitung der Mongolei-Exkursion 2018  
Wintersemester 2017/18 & Sommersemester 2018  
Seminarleitung: Prof. Dr. Ines Stolpe (Mongolistik)  
Plakatgestaltung: Uta Barz, Sharleena Goerlitz, Ricardo Muirrag, Angelina Vetter

### Literatur & Quellen

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<http://e-book.must.edu.mn/index.php/section/show/4/1359>  
GIZ International Services Germany in consortium with Uppsala University/Sweden and IZB, University of Teachers Education Zug/Switzerland: EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT. Progress Report 2017, prepared for the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

Sieht man Hochschulen als „Motoren des gesellschaftlichen Wandels“ (Weißköppel 2025: 13), sollte das Querschnittsthema Nachhaltigkeit in keinem Fach fehlen. Bei uns ist es in alle Module integriert, und zwar nicht bloß als Abstraktum, sondern immer wieder neu mit der Frage verbunden, wo jede/r Fachwissen, Ideen und Kompetenzen aktiv einbringen kann. Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Professor für Epistemologien des Globalen Südens, fragt aus gutem Grund: “How can we ensure that all the knowledge that reflects the diversity and plurality of humanity really gets a hearing?” (zitiert in Halser 2024: 25). Unsere mongolischen Sprachlektorinnen und -lektoren trugen stets aktiv dazu bei, Kenntnisse aus und Respekt vor außereuropäischen Perspektiven sowohl an Studierende als auch in die Gesellschaft zu vermitteln, und sie fördern fachliche und überfachliche Kompetenzen wie interkulturelles Bewusstsein sowie Fähigkeiten zur Reflexion der Kontextabhängigkeit von Begriffen und Konzepten. Zunehmend gewinnt auch die kritische Auseinandersetzung mit KI-generierten Inhalten über den transnationalen mongolischen Kulturraum an Brisanz und fließt in die Weiterentwicklung der Lehre ein.

– Soweit exemplarisch zu Aspekten einer innovativen Studiengangsgestaltung, die wir durch engagierten Einsatz und fruchtbare Kooperationen positiv beeinflussen können. Eher nicht beeinflussen jedoch können wir gesellschafts- und hochschulpolitische oder infrastrukturelle Rahmenbedingungen, welche Prekarität direkt oder indirekt verstärken. Aktuell findet das Studium einiger asienwissenschaftlicher Fächer an der Universität Bonn unter Gegebenheiten statt, die teils weit von dem entfernt sind, was hierzulande von einer Lernumgebung für Studierende erwartet werden darf. Denn einige Abteilungen unseres Institutes sind seit nunmehr acht (!) Jahren inmitten eines dezentralen und unwirtlichen Industrie- und Gewerbegebietes untergebracht.<sup>40</sup> Lärm, Feinstaub und Abgase, im Sommer auch Hitze, dringen von der nahen Autobahn in die Seminarräume, vor denen Studierende während der Pausen in einem fenster- und trostlosen Korridor auf ihre Lehrkräfte warten müssen. Sicherheit und Infrastruktur des Umfeldes lassen viel zu wünschen übrig, die Anbindung an den öffentlichen Nahverkehr ist bescheiden, und der abgelegene Standort bleibt bei vielen universitären Services sowie der Campuserwicklung außen vor.<sup>41</sup> Die Kurzbeschreibung könnte lauten: *Kein Ort. Nirgends*. Denn Studierende haben daselbst keinen Aufenthaltsraum und nicht einmal ein spartanisches gastronomisches Angebot in Gestalt eines Kaffeeautomaten.<sup>42</sup> Der dortige Teil der Institutsbibliothek verfügt weder über einen Lesesaal noch über ausreichend Arbeitsplätze. Fast alle Bücher stehen schwer zugänglich im Magazin (einem von Schimmel bedrohten

40 Der Umzug dorthin war im Frühjahr 2017 mit der anstehenden Renovierung des Hauptgebäudes begründet und als Interimslösung kommuniziert worden. Ein Ende ist jedoch nicht absehbar.

41 Vgl. Hochschulentwicklungsplan 2021–2026: [www.uni-bonn.de/de/universitaet/medien-universitaet/medien-presse-kommunikation/medien-hochschulentwicklungsplan/ubo\\_21\\_56\\_hochschulentwicklungsplan\\_rz2\\_web.pdf](http://www.uni-bonn.de/de/universitaet/medien-universitaet/medien-presse-kommunikation/medien-hochschulentwicklungsplan/ubo_21_56_hochschulentwicklungsplan_rz2_web.pdf).

42 Von der Fachschaft wurden die Zustände vermittelt einer Petition kommuniziert.

Vgl. die Information auf der Homepage des Studierendenparlaments:

[www.sp.uni-bonn.de/beschluesse/dl/46/20241218\\_Unterstuetzung\\_der\\_Petition\\_der\\_Fachschaft\\_OrientAsia.pdf](http://www.sp.uni-bonn.de/beschluesse/dl/46/20241218_Unterstuetzung_der_Petition_der_Fachschaft_OrientAsia.pdf).

Keller), und nun muss sogar um die Kernöffnungszeiten gerungen werden, weil infolge von Kürzungen Mittel für die studentischen Hilfskräfte an der Ausleihtheke fehlen.

In solch erschrecklicher Gestalt ist uns also zum Ende dieses Essays das als Sparzwang gewandete Gespenst wieder erschienen. Zwar haben wir – u.a. dank Mongoleierfahrung – viel Übung darin, immer das Beste daraus zu machen, allerlei Ungemach nebst fehlender Planungssicherheit mit Ambiguitätstoleranz, dynamischem Pragmatismus und einer Kultur der Ermöglichung zu begegnen, indes bleiben anhaltend widrige Umstände eben doch kontraproduktive Faktoren. Als vorletzter Punkt sei daher noch ein Tabu angesprochen: Eine dauerhaft prekäre Personalsituation geht mit Verschleiß einher. In sehr Kleinen Fächern muss mangels einer Möglichkeit zur Vertretung die Leitung eines Lehrstuhls nicht nur während der Urlaubszeit, sondern auch im Krankheitsfall arbeiten, wenn Gefahr besteht, dass z.B. Studierende beim Ausfall von Lehre ein ganzes Semester verlieren, keine Prüfungen ablegen, ohne Gutachten keine Zeugnisse und in wichtigen Lebensphasen keine Empfehlungsschreiben erhalten können. Auf maximal zwei Jahre befristete Verträge für Sprachlektorate, zu überbrückende Besetzungssperren sowie mangelnde Planungssicherheit erschweren eine Qualitätssicherung in der Lehre, und Forschungssemester können, sofern überhaupt, nicht in den üblichen Abständen in Anspruch genommen werden. Zudem „ist in strukturprekären Disziplinen der Aufwand für die Sichtbarkeit und den Erkenntnistransfer in die Gesellschaft, aber auch für eine erfolgreiche Einreichung von Förderanträgen, höher“ (Bauer 2016: 19).

Natürlich ist die strukturell prekäre Situation sogenannter Kleiner Fächer an sich schon vielfach adressiert worden. Trotz aller Würdigungen z.B. durch die Hochschulrektorenkonferenz als „wissenschaftlich und gesellschaftlich hochrelevant“ und als „attraktive Partner in interdisziplinären und internationalen Austausch“<sup>43</sup> oder als angesichts globaler Herausforderungen besonders wichtiger Beitrag zur „vielschichtigen Erforschung der Welt“ (VolkswagenStiftung 2020: 1), wird die Existenzberechtigung bei jeder neuen Sparrunde angezweifelt. Auch Warnungen, dass kurzfristige Einsparungen nicht im Verhältnis zu mittel- und langfristigen Schäden stehen, sind längst in den Diskurs eingeflossen:

Wer die Stärkung und Entwicklung fachwissenschaftlicher Kompetenzen allein von aktuellen Studierendenzahlen und gegenwärtigen Wissensbedarfen in Forschung und Gesellschaft abhängig macht, handelt leichtsinnig. Denn er vergisst, dass sich der Bedarf an Wissen buchstäblich über Nacht verändern kann und dass Handlungsfähigkeit und Resilienz einer pluralistischen Gesellschaft nicht zuletzt von der Vielfalt des in ihr verfügbaren Wissens abhängen. (Hilgert 2016: 1–2)

Wer auf prekäre Lagen seiner Disziplin aufmerksam macht, fühlt sich wie ein Rufer in der Wüste (hier: Gobi). Sparzwänge erscheinen gespenstisch als unabwendbares Schicksal. So läuft es eben, könnte man fatalistisch seufzen (und dazu *Everybody*

43 Online: [www.hrk.de/themen/hochschulsystem/kleine-faecher/](http://www.hrk.de/themen/hochschulsystem/kleine-faecher/).

*Knows* hören).<sup>44</sup> Doch ist, dass andere Fächer in vergleichbaren Situationen waren oder sind, weder ein Trost, noch ein Argument, daher soll nichts unversucht bleiben. Es mag riskant sein, schon bei drohendem Rückbau der Lektoratskapazitäten das irrlichternde Gespenst offen anzusprechen, anstatt die Füße still zu halten und darauf zu hoffen, dass es sich als gnädig erweisen möge. Das tut es vielleicht sogar, doch man bleibt (Stichwort asymmetrische Abhängigkeit) seinem Ermessen ausgeliefert und ist versucht, zu fragen: Bist du der Geist, der stets verneint? – Bislang fanden sich zwar noch Mittel und Wege, unser Fach über Wasser zu halten, aber letzten Endes bleibt es eine (hochschul-)politische Entscheidung, ob nötige Lehrkapazitäten auch nachhaltig finanziert werden.

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44 Songwriters: Leonard Cohen und Sharon Robinson (1988).

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## Forschungsbeitrag (nicht begutachtet)

# Where and How Will the Southeast Asianists of Tomorrow Be Educated?<sup>1</sup>

Antje Missbach and Jemma Purdey

### Abstract

In Germany, the state of Southeast Asian Studies reflects a pattern of institutional decline, which is unfortunately not unlike current developments in the US, UK, Australia and other parts of Western Europe. As first- or second-generation scholars reach retirement age, some of whom were pioneers in the field in the two Germanies post-WWII, their positions are not being replaced, or where they are, it is not always by scholars with similar expertise. At the same time, interest by students in studying Southeast Asian Studies continues to decline and so too the interest of research funding agencies and policy makers. This article offers some explanations of why and how this has happened, referring to general structural problems in the German academic system but also to some missed opportunities to gain more intellectual attention within the broader social sciences community. After mapping the current state of affairs at several universities in Germany, this article raises crucial questions about where and by whom the next generation of Southeast Asianists will be trained, and whether the current approach can sustain the field in the German academy and ultimately for German and European strategic interests in this increasingly crucial region, for the long term?

**Keywords:** Area Studies, future, expert, early career researcher, Germany, academic development

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**Jemma Purdey** is ReelOzInd! Fellow at the Australia Indonesia Centre, Monash University. She is the author of *Anti-Chinese Violence in Indonesia, 1996-1998* (NUS Publishing 2006) and *From Vienna to Yogyakarta: The life of Herb Feith* (UNSW Press, 2011) and co-author with Antje Missbach and Dave McRae of *Indonesia: State and Society in Transition* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2020). Jemma is Chair of the board and Commissioning Editor of the magazine *Inside Indonesia*, co-host of the podcast *Talking Indonesia* and founding Director of ReelOzInd! Australia Indonesia Short Film Festival.

Es gibt also eine auffällige Differenz zwischen politischer Rhetorik über die Bedeutung Asiens und den Alltag an den deutschen Universitäten. Die Asienstudien und andere Regionalwissenschaften stehen dabei unter großem Druck und in manchen Fällen unmittelbar vor dem Zusammenbruch.<sup>2</sup>

(Houben 2004: 87)

Indonesia would like to see a partnership with Germany that is about more than just trade and would include promoting the Indonesian economy and achieving a better understanding of local needs.

(Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit, GiZ 2024)

## Keep On Keeping On, Barely

More than twenty years ago, Vincent Houben sounded an alarm about the state of Southeast Asian Studies in the German academy (2004). This brief survey of the current situation reveals that his warnings went largely unheeded. Moreover, in the last five years, the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic to Southeast Asian Studies teaching and research programs have been dramatic, and the field is yet to recover. Based on our findings, we warn that, without serious intervention, the current lack of interest in Southeast Asia – a linguistically, culturally and politically extremely heterogeneous area that currently consist of 11 states – within the academy will lead to drastic consequences for this field of study.

In Germany, the state of the field of Southeast Asian Studies reflects a pattern also seen elsewhere, whereby a significant generational shift is under way. As first- or second-generation scholars reach retirement age, some of whom were pioneers in the field in the two Germanies post-WWII their positions are not being replaced, or where they are, it is not always by scholars with similar expertise (see for comparisons elsewhere Aspinall and Crouch 2023; Carey 2023). In Europe, this is seen nowhere more starkly than in the discontinuation of the Nordic Institute for Asian Studies (NIAS) in Copenhagen at the end of 2023, and a general reduction in professorships/chairs, as well as missed opportunities for new appointments more broadly. This comes at a serious cost to the field as a whole and raises crucial questions about where and by whom the next generation of Southeast Asianists will be trained.

This assessment should not come as a surprise to those who research Southeast Asia themselves or supervise MA, PhD and postdoctoral research in Germany. When searching the databank of the German Research Association (DFG) in mid-2024, we found merely eleven projects currently funded by the DFG or completed in 2024 that

2 There is a striking difference between political rhetoric about the importance of Asia and everyday life at German universities. Asian Studies and other regional studies are under great pressure and in some cases on the verge of collapse.

were related to Southeast Asia in the social sciences and humanities category.<sup>3</sup> There are other third-party funder bodies supporting research in and on Southeast Asia, including the German Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) and the European Research Council (ERC), but most projects are temporary in nature, lasting between three and four years on average, sometimes less, and rarely allowing even the Principle Investigator to be dedicated full-time to the research project due to the ongoing and comparatively high teaching demands. There is a trend across the academy, not only within Southeast Asian studies, towards increasing “projectivisation” of knowledge production without any recognisable long-term planning or vision. This means that, where researchers undertake projects or set up groups and initiatives, these are limited in scope and unlikely to be sustainable over the longer term. Among other things, this has severe consequences for early career scholars and students who are considering a career in academia. The general epistemic flaws of the German Higher Education system are widely known but have seen little or no change in the last two decades. We also acknowledge the widespread and ongoing tensions across the Western academy between arguments for teaching “Area Studies” (i.e. a multi-disciplinary setting for the deep study of a particular country or region, encompassing both the Social Sciences and the Humanities) versus teaching content related to certain countries and cultures from within the disciplines (Aspinall 2012, Sutherland 2012). In Germany, these tensions are also apparent, and we would argue that with few exceptions, this approach has led to the isolation and near eradication of Southeast Asia specialisation in the social sciences and humanities (Schäfer 2020).

Our brief survey reveals that an even more acute crisis is currently underway with regards to the teaching of Southeast Asian studies in German universities. Whilst systematic training in Southeast Asian studies might still be possible in a limited number of places, the range and variety of subjects available today are fewer than they were 20 years ago and, as is the case elsewhere in the social sciences and humanities, student enrolments are declining.<sup>4</sup>

While Southeast Asian Studies in Germany cannot aspire to match the scale and scope of world-leading hubs for the study of the region, such as the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Australian National University (ANU), there needs to be an urgent conversation about the viability of Southeast Asian Studies in

3 DFG (2024), [https://gepris.dfg.de/gepris/OCTOPUS?task=doSearchExtended&context=projekt&keywords\\_criterion=Southeast+Asia&nurProjekteMitAB=false&findButton=Finden&person=&location=&fachlicheZuordnung=%23&pemu=%23&zk\\_transferprojekt=false&teilprojekte=false&teilprojekte=true&bewilligungsStatus=&beginOffFunding=&gefoerdertIn=2024&oldContinentId=%23&continentId=%23&oldSubContinentId=%23%23&subContinentId=%23%23&oldCountryId=%23%23%23&countryKey=%23%23%23&einrichtungsart=-1](https://gepris.dfg.de/gepris/OCTOPUS?task=doSearchExtended&context=projekt&keywords_criterion=Southeast+Asia&nurProjekteMitAB=false&findButton=Finden&person=&location=&fachlicheZuordnung=%23&pemu=%23&zk_transferprojekt=false&teilprojekte=false&teilprojekte=true&bewilligungsStatus=&beginOffFunding=&gefoerdertIn=2024&oldContinentId=%23&continentId=%23&oldSubContinentId=%23%23&subContinentId=%23%23&oldCountryId=%23%23%23&countryKey=%23%23%23&einrichtungsart=-1). This compares to 10 DFG-funded projects (including humanities, human geography, politics, history) in 2010.

4 <https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bildung-Forschung-Kultur/Hochschulen/Tabellen/studierende-insgesamt-faechergruppe.html>

Germany in the medium to long term. Should Germany try to “stay in the game”, not least for the sake of national interests in the region, or is it content to relegate this “small subject” to tokenism, spread across various institutions without requisite depth in teaching and learning and the loss of an inherent characteristic of the field, its multi-disciplinarity?

To sustain high-quality research about Southeast Asia in the German academy, we must ensure that there is systematic and consistent teaching of the languages, politics, history, economics and cultures of Southeast Asia at undergraduate and postgraduate level. There can be no harvest without planting. How can we expect high quality research outcomes that are internationally recognised and meet the expectations of policy makers in Germany/Europe, without investing in training the scholars and diplomats of the future? Bringing experts from elsewhere to bolster research profiles is possible and indeed, arguably, important and beneficial, but will this prove to be a solution for the long-term sustainability of the field in the German academy and ultimately for Germany and Europe’s strategic interests in this increasingly crucial region? In place of the current arrangement of a few programs struggling to survive, could a centralised system be imagined whereby such expertise is concentrated in one or two teaching and research institutions?

The debate around decolonising Area Studies and academia more broadly by overcoming our Eurocentric preoccupation is an ongoing and vital one and it must underline any discussions about the future directions of our teaching and researching. It is beyond the parameters of our essay to reflect with any rigour on the substance of “what is Southeast Asian studies?”, or to offer comment on important concerns related to the relationship between Area Studies and the disciplines and structural challenges within Germany’s higher education sector. These debates and reflexive discussions are long established among the European community of scholars in this field (Sutherland 2012; Houben 2013 and 2020; Derichs 2017; Baumann and Fleschenberg 2020). Whilst we would argue that research outcomes will be different when the researcher is trained in an inter-/multi-disciplinary way, we restrict our comments here to how Area Studies and Southeast Asian Studies in particular could be (and in some cases *have* already become) a distinct site for these discussions, with resonances across the academy and beyond.

Alongside this debate, we believe there is an urgent need for a conversation that reaches beyond academia to articulate *the relevance of Southeast Asian Studies* in the European and especially the German context. This conversation needs to be both outward-focused and inward-looking in that it should have a coherent message about the importance of the field of study both within and beyond the academy, and also should look for ways to ensure the field can be sustained and developed. The field should seek to attract new students through innovative teaching and learning pedagogies and by offering a multi-disciplinary approach to the region, to help foster a more sincere interest in and engagement with Southeast Asia.

We base our appeal for a more intense focus on Southeast Asia, including by preserving the capacity to train future Southeast Asianists at German universities, on two core competencies within Southeast Asian Studies. The first is related to the political situation, specifically Germany's international relations that include both diplomatic priorities and trade interests. The second, is related to a broader need to recalibrate an overwhelmingly Eurocentric focus within our academy, and in turn participate in the ongoing process of decolonising knowledge production. In both these nationally critical endeavours, we believe Southeast Asian Studies has a vital role to play and there are indeed some research initiatives in German universities including professors of Southeast Asia studies that are attempting to contribute to this.

## A National Imperative

In January 2024, on the back of a trip to the Middle East, Germany's Foreign Minister, Annalena Baerbock, visited Malaysia and the Philippines. The visits to these Southeast Asian nations by a high-ranking German official were the first in close to, or over a decade.<sup>5</sup> Media coverage of the trip pointed to Germany as trying to "make up for lost time" and salvage its image in the region. Indeed, within Germany's diplomatic corps, by observers and Southeast Asians alike, the relationship is openly described as neglected almost to the point of irrelevance (GiZ 2024; DW 16.1.24).<sup>6</sup>

Baerbock's visit was seen to serve an overarching purpose: to re-establish German-Southeast Asian relations at a time when Southeast Asian countries are, like Germany, seeking a strategy that offers them the opportunity to hedge against an overdependence on Chinese markets (Heiduk 2024; Suarsana 2024). In this context, developing more robust economic and strategic links with Southeast Asian economies could be mutually beneficial (DW 16.1.24).

Within the Foreign Office this need for greater emphasis on Asia, and the Indo-Pacific, is well understood. In 2018, the German Parliament (Bundestag) commissioned a study on Germany's relations with the states of Southeast Asia and published a major policy report entitled "Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific: Shaping the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Together" (Bundestag, 2018). This report details opportunities for German commerce, particularly in the energy sector, and the importance of cooperation related to climate change mitigation. The report's overall tone is optimistic and positive but presents only one side of the story.

In March 2024, in an effort to understand its bilateral and regional relationships from the perspectives of its partners, GiZ conducted a series of interviews with Indonesians as part of its "Germany in the Eyes of the World" series. The report, entitled *Germany in the Eyes of Indonesia – A strategic partnership under scrutiny*,

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<sup>5</sup> The FM also attended the G20 in Bali in 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Germany is not alone in this (Fontaine and Blackwill 2024).

is the result of 40 interviews conducted with Indonesians over two weeks immediately following the 2024 presidential elections. Whilst presenting the viewpoint of Indonesians only (we would love to see conducted a similar study of Germans on how they see Indonesia), the report adopts a significantly different tone from that of the earlier policy papers. Instead, it presents a stark assessment of the poor state of German-Indonesian relations. Although viewpoints on issues would vary from country to country, with Indonesia as Southeast Asia's largest nation and leader of the ASEAN grouping, the general findings of this report may be extrapolated as indicative of a broader regional view. As the report's executive summary warns, the results make for highly uncomfortable reading. Germany is deemed to have diminished visibility, and its partnership model is regarded as old-fashioned, as well as somewhat neo-colonial and lacking in dynamism and local knowhow. Where Germany has existing partnerships in commerce and technology, they are seen as distant and aloof. This is all framed within a context in which Indonesia's other partners, especially China, are taking the exact opposite approach (Xue and Fu 2024). GiZ concluded,

Indonesia's recommendation is for Germany to cultivate a deeper and long-term commitment that goes beyond economic interests. The view of the interviewees is that only an integrated strategic approach can sustainably strengthen the partnership. To this end, they believe it also makes sense to step up cooperation in education and research because sharing knowledge and working on joint projects offers great potential. Last but not least, as they pointed out, the cultural exchange between Germany and Indonesia should be intensified to promote mutual understanding and cooperation. (GiZ 2024)

The GiZ-commissioned report may offer something of a wake-up call for German-Southeast Asian relations, but as mentioned above, the reality is that alarm bells have been ringing for some decades now (Houben 2004; 2019). This lack of attention and interest in this burgeoning region is reflected in Germany's investment in developing and maintaining educational centres for building knowledge about the peoples, cultures, economies, politics and languages of Southeast Asia. In the early 2000s, Houben pointed out the blatant contradiction between the overall inadequate representation of Southeast Asian Studies in the academic structures in Germany on the one hand, and the growing economic, political and strategic importance of Southeast Asia on the other (2004, 45). Since then, this "capacity gap" has only grown wider and the stakes, both politically and economically for Germany much higher if it misses out.

Another area of political interest relates to the migration of highly skilled migrants and students from Asia, including Southeast Asia, to Germany (BAMF 2014). In the competition to attract global talent, Germany is losing out.<sup>7</sup> Whilst there has been a modest increase in the numbers of highly skilled migrant workers from Southeast

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<sup>7</sup> The latest bans on foreign students in the US under Trump, however, could potentially benefit Germany and other European countries.

Asia, the total numbers remain at low levels (Geis-Thöne 2023 and 2024). Nor has Germany been able to attract substantially more international students from Southeast Asia despite fee-free study opportunities (Geis-Thöne 2024). It seems clear that not only is Germany deemed unattractive as a partner or a destination country for workers and students, but also, to make things worse, it seems to matter less to Southeast Asians in other areas of potential exchange as well – areas that would have economic and political benefits for Germany.

The reasons for this lack of interest are, of course, manifold. As the GiZ report found, a lack of top-down government-to-government engagement with Germany's Southeast Asian partners and perhaps also a complacency in business exchange appear to be factors. It is very clear that while universities in countries like China, Australia and even the United Kingdom have been investing significantly in education-led opportunities in Southeast Asia, including establishing large campuses in the region,<sup>8</sup> this is rarely the case for Germany.<sup>9</sup> Whilst generally speaking German universities may not have the same ambitions, arguably there is an important role for Southeast Asian Studies academics in Germany to act as facilitators and help recruit students and engage with researchers from Southeast Asia. Ostensibly, as German universities move to internationalise and overcome their provincial mindset, networking activity is an important role that those area studies experts can play. During a recent conference visit in Bandung, Indonesia, we met a colleague from Korea who was sent by his department to recruit full fee-paying students from Indonesia to come and study at his university. He told us that if he found just two students this would justify the costs incurred for his trip.<sup>10</sup> We do not know of any similar arrangements vis-à-vis international student recruitment activities in the German context. To make matters worse, over the past three years, efforts to attract higher degree students from the region to Germany's universities were dealt a direct blow. Government-issued scholarships from the German Academic Exchange

8 For more on China's interests in education in the regions see Xue and Fu (2024). Monash University has campuses in Malaysia, Indonesia, China, and India. Other Australian universities are establishing campuses in Indonesia (Western Sydney, Deakin and Central Queensland). RMIT has a university in Vietnam. Several UK universities have a long-established presence in Malaysia and are now beginning to replicate this in Indonesia (Lancaster).  
See <https://leveragededu.com/blog/uk-universities-in-malaysia/>

9 The Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nuremberg has had a campus in Busan/South Korea since 2009. Other universities such as RWTH Aachen offer individual courses, for example in Bangkok/Thailand. Professors and lecturers from the participating faculties fly to the Asian partner universities for a few weeks a year and give their lectures in blocks.  
(<https://www.deutschland.de/en/topic/knowledge/education-learning/german-higher-education-programmes-in-asia>)

10 In Australia and the US universities there is a similar level of integrated collaboration between academic staff from Area Studies working with their university's international office and alumni organisations in countries in the region. Together, they act as ambassadors for the university providing a profile that translates across academic and governmental networking and marketing programs to attract new students and to enhance the institutions' brand as a destination for undergraduate and higher research degrees. This is accompanied by large, targeted scholarships programs facilitated by the government and in some cases the universities themselves.

Service (DAAD) were cut by 6%, which translated into the cancellation of 6000 scholarships, including those for students from Southeast Asia.<sup>11</sup>

There is no space here to illustrate the positive long-term consequences of training international students or the successful integration of skilled labour migrants into a German economy that is heavily lacking in young skilled employees. Suffice to say, by ignoring Southeast Asia for so long and failing to tap into the existing expertise within Southeast Asian Studies in the German academy, opportunities for engaging this cohort in the work of building bridges and creating and maintaining people-to-people and institutional relationships in the region, continue to be missed. Besides these unfulfilled political and economic interests, it might only be a slight exaggeration to say that a failure to grasp the importance of Southeast Asian Studies may have consequences for not only the national interest, but also for how we will conceptualise, understand and know the world in which we live into the future.

## **Decolonising Academia and the Role of Southeast Asian Studies Therein**

With all its different meanings and enduring questions, decolonisation has become an important focus both within academic institutions and society at large. The need to be more critical and reflexive about work done in “the name of science” is reflected in university curricula and syllabi. Compared to disciplines such as Gender Studies, Development Studies, Literature Studies, Geography and Anthropology (Langdon 2013; Melber 2018; Clayton and Kumar 2019; Clapham 2020), for various reasons, Area Studies, including Southeast Asian Studies, have not been at the forefront of this discussion. However, almost thirty years ago, Kubitscheck observed that Area Studies had a particular role to help address parochialism and “the need to overcome the extraordinarily large deficit that exists in Germany with regard to non-European history, political science, social science and economics and the need to pursue the historical and social sciences in a much more universal manner in the future than has been the case so far” (1996, 46).

The methodological and theoretical innovation potential of regional studies, which challenges established disciplinary canons, is not yet fully recognised in the German higher education system (Houben 2019). Southeast Asian Studies scholars from both inside and outside the region are deeply engaged in debate about understanding “local knowledge” and the lived experiences, (self-) representations and (self-) understandings of Southeast Asians themselves and their attempts to decolonise knowledge (Heryanto 2002; Acharya and Buzan 2017; Curaming 2017; Chua et al.

11 <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/wissen/aussenministerium-begrundet-kurzungen-bei-austauschdienst-mit-haushaltseinsparungen-5151055.html>.

A number of postgraduate scholarships from the Catholic German Academic Exchange Service (KAAD, <https://www.kaad.de/stipendien/stipendienprogramm-1>) and the Gerda Henkel Foundation (<https://www.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de/en/phd-scholarships>) are available each year, but the total number is very small and preferences particular countries or religions.

2019; Goh 2020; Amoah and Quame 2021; Lee 2023). Learning *about* Southeast Asia will thus also strengthen efforts to learn *from* Southeast Asia, a humbling and yet extremely mind-opening exercise, especially in the light of the persistence of scholarly and political Eurocentrism.

We recently attended the biennial conference of the Consortium for Southeast Asian Studies in Asia (SEASIA) held in Manila in July 2024.<sup>12</sup> Established in 2013 by Area Studies institutes from Southeast and Northeast Asia, the consortium offers opportunities for networking and collaboration with scholars from across the region and Asia more broadly.<sup>13</sup> The theme of this conference, “De/centering Southeast Asia” demonstrated its position not only as a site for deep critique of the field itself, but also for innovation and its sense of the potential for the future of the field. Far from sounding the death knell of Southeast Asian studies, the conference’s agenda was one of renewal:

The conference is intended to be platform for *centering* Southeast Asian scholarship within Asia, by shifting one’s analytical position away from a dominant center towards the periphery to strengthen expertise, amplify voices, and resist subordination in these peripheries. De/Centering challenges dominant narratives and perspectives historically centered in the “West” and its gaze on Southeast Asia, and highlights the diverse and complex experiences, histories and cultures of the region as told by Southeast Asians themselves. (SEASIA 2024)

Across the days of the conference, it became clear to us that unless the diminishing centres of Southeast Asian Studies based in the West, including Germany, find meaningful ways to participate in and collaborate with our colleagues in the region, then the gap between the “traditional/Western” academy and Southeast Asia will only continue to widen, and Germany’s contributions (small in number though they already are) will become less and less relevant.

## **A Brief History of Southeast Asian Studies in Germany**

To understand the current crisis in Southeast Asian Studies in Germany, we will start by offering some historical context for what has been a steady decline over the past few decades. What did Germany’s research and teaching on Southeast Asia look like in the past, and what has emerged more recently?

This includes acknowledging the origins of Southeast Asian Studies as a colonial discipline, together with its political instrumentalisation during the Cold War, before

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<sup>12</sup> <https://seasia2024.upd.edu.ph/>

<sup>13</sup> When first established in 2013 inaugural members were Center for Asia-Pacific Studies, Academia Sinica; the Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University; the Indonesian Institute of Sciences; the Korean Association of Southeast Asian Studies; the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University; the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore; the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University; the Taiwan Association of Southeast Asian Studies; the Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam; the Asian Center, University of the Philippines. Its membership has since expanded to include more institutions from the China, Korea and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. (<https://seasia-consortium.org/>)

being reimagined in a post-colonial framework in a newly united Germany. This history reveals an evolutionary story about networks, patterns and centres of knowledge production, which may inform decisions and pathways for the future.

In the development of Southeast Asian Studies in Germany, two streams can be traced from the beginning. On the one hand is the purely academic stream, with a focus on philological and ancient scientific or historical studies; and on the other is a deliberate orientation towards contemporary issues, combined with questions of practical and political relevance (Kubitscheck 1996). Arguably, this tension within the field and the institutions supporting it remains, with stakeholders – institutions and individual scholars alike – engaging in a difficult balancing act between being reduced to performing the role of a service provider for commercial and diplomatic interests and becoming so niche in orientation as to be rendered obsolete.

Whilst the field of Southeast Asian Studies was relatively late to institutionalise, programs dedicated to the languages and cultures of Southeast Asia have a longer history. For many years, the Southeast Asia Institute of the Humboldt University was the largest scientific institution of its kind in Germany. Its beginnings and scientific traditions in this field date back to the founding years of the University of Berlin under the Prussian king. With Wilhelm von Humboldt and Adolf Bastian as intellectual forefathers, Southeast Asian Studies *avant la lettre* separated from other Oriental Studies and to avoid clashes of interests a new institution was set up outside the university: the Seminar for Oriental Languages (1887). Undeniably overshadowed by colonial interests and rivalries, Southeast Asia was not necessarily a priority to German governments. After WWI, as “colonial wishful thinking” about regaining its lost colonies surfaced, so too did academic interest in Southeast Asia (Kubitscheck 1996, 17). During this period the Seminar for Oriental Languages added Malay and Javanese (1926) and Thai (1928) to its syllabus. The Hamburg Colonial Institute, established in 1908, included Austronesian studies, then called “Indonesian and Oceanic Studies”, as an independent field in 1931. One can only speculate, however, on the progressive impact the teaching of these languages may have had. The Third Reich’s total politicisation of universities and other institutions of tertiary education with its racial fanaticism and fascist indoctrination offset any cosmopolitan orientations (Kubitscheck 1996).

In light of the destruction the Nazi regime and WWII brought upon German academia, it took almost a decade for academic institutions to be reinstated. The political and ideological reorientation also offered room for new disciplines and approaches inspired by new social demands on science. In the context of the GDR, the inclination was mostly towards country studies (Länderstudien), such as Vietnamese studies and Indonesian studies, which began to play an important role in the political and developmental agendas of that period. In the 1950s, Humboldt University established relations with universities in Indonesia and Burma/Myanmar. In 1962, Usman Effendi was appointed its inaugural professor of Indonesian language and literature. Just three years later, however, close relations with

Indonesia quickly soured after the so-called attempted communist coup on 30 September 1965, which served as a pretext to a military-led crackdown on communists and their sympathisers resulting in the murders of up to 500,000 people (Roosa 2006). The disciplinarian approach to academia, and the attempt to create Marxist-Leninist Asian Studies from the 1960s onwards, came at a high cost for many researchers. Freedom in research and teaching dwindled and many were forced to leave academia. Research was difficult because permits for travel overseas were hard to come by and material resources were scarce in the words of Kubitscheck, the “library contained more gaps than books” (1996, 36).

From the 1980s onwards, Humboldt’s Southeast Asia Institute was largely focused on training politically loyal country experts (caderisation). Only a small number of students enrolled in the program. Between 1983 and 1989 only 63 graduated from what by then had become Southeast Asian Studies (Kubitscheck 1996). This number of graduates is remarkably small considering that the program boasted five professors, six foreign language tutors and 18 lecturers. After the reunification, economic pressure in the early 1990s meant that almost half of the existing staff lost their jobs, and those who remained had to reconceptualise Southeast Asian Studies and create new academic offerings. Nevertheless, Southeast Asian Studies at Humboldt University remained multi-disciplinary, and the regional emphasis continued to be on Vietnam and Indonesia. The transition from a one-subject diploma to a two-subject diploma meant a decrease in language tuition but also more flexibility for students to design curricula according to their specific interests and career pathways. With three professors, the Berlin Department for Southeast Asian Studies would remain the largest in Germany for another two decades.

In West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany), the founding fathers of modern Southeast Asian Studies in Germany – Bernd Nothofer, Hans-Dieter Evers and Bernhard Dahm – transferred their experiences gleaned at Yale University in the late-1960s and early-1970s, to their respective institutions in the 1980s. The linguist, Bernd Nothofer, was appointed Professor of Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Frankfurt am Main in 1981. His primary research interests included Austronesian historical linguistics, Malayic dialectology, and the languages of Indonesia. After his retirement in 2006, he stayed on as a professor emeritus. Hans-Dieter Evers did not receive a chair in Southeast Asian Studies, but rather served as Professor for Developmental Studies at Bielefeld University (1974–2001). During his tenure, he spent six years as guest professor at different universities across Southeast Asia and conducted extensive research in Indonesia, Malaysia and Sri Lanka. In addition to his academic duties, he worked as a consultant for German and international think tanks and funding organisations. The first Chair of Southeast Asian Studies was not established in West Germany until 1984. Historian Bernhard Dahm was appointed the inaugural Chair at the University of Passau and remained in the role until his retirement in 1997.

After WWII, in addition to the teaching of Austronesian languages, Thai and Vietnamese were introduced at the University of Hamburg in 1958 and 1972 respectively. In 2005, these three language and area studies teaching programs were brought together under the Southeast Asia Department at the Asia-Africa Institute. Elsewhere at the university, the German Overseas Institute was established in 1964 as an umbrella organisation for various Area Studies groupings, including the Institute for Asian Studies. In 2007, these were all brought under the newly named German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA). Today GIGA is a major research institute for Southeast Asian Studies research in Germany and publishes the *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* (JCSAA) (Weiss 2009).

At the University of Bonn, the aforementioned “Seminar for Oriental Language” was re-established and incorporated into the Faculty of Philosophy in 1959. In 2005, during the reorganisation of the teaching and research facilities of that faculty, a relatively loose research association in the form of an “Asia Center” was created. Subsequently, the Institute for Oriental and Asian Studies (IOA) was established, which now hosts the Department for Southeast Asian Studies. In 2012 the Institute for South Asia and Southeast Asian Studies was established at the University of Cologne. This followed an amalgamation of the Institute for Indology and the Malay Institute, “allowing a broader perspective on the cultural dynamics between South India and Southeast Asia, e.g. Cambodia and Bali”<sup>14</sup>, although elsewhere on the same website it is claimed that the regional foci were “Indonesia and Cambodia”<sup>15</sup> or “Cambodia and Singapore”.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond universities, associations have sought to strengthen Germany’s focus on Asia. The German Society for Asian Studies (DGA) was founded in Bonn in 1961 as an initiative of the Volkswagen Foundation. While initially focused only on East Asia, in 1977 the DGA opened its programs to the countries of Southeast Asia and South Asia. The DGA has published the quarterly publication *Asien: German Journal for Politics, Economics and Culture* since 1981. In 2015, the Southeast Asia Working Group (AK-SOA) was set up under the DGA, which aims to bring together academics who study Southeast Asia from a social science perspective. The group’s activities, including a biennial conference, aim to increase trans-disciplinary exchange and foster collaboration between Southeast Asia scholars in Europe, as well as with institutions in Southeast Asia.

Such a *longue durée* view – albeit it very brief – may indeed give the impression that the level of activity within the so-called “small field” of Southeast Asian Studies in Germany’s academy is not insignificant. Indeed, the pace and range of institution building since the 1970s and 1980s, though later to emerge than seen elsewhere in the Western academy, was ambitious and included some internationally leading scholars in the field. However, the critical question for our study is to ask what

14 <https://indologie.phil-fak.uni-koeln.de/en/indtam/institute/about-the-iits>

15 <https://indologie.phil-fak.uni-koeln.de/en/indtam>

16 <https://indologie.phil-fak.uni-koeln.de/en/indtam/institute/profile>

remains of this legacy in the academy today and what it might tell us about what the future holds. To this end, the next part of our survey now turns its specific focus to teaching activity in Southeast Asian Studies currently underway in Germany's universities.

## Current State of the Field

We began our survey of the current state of the field, with the website *Kleine Fächer* (minor disciplines), funded by the BMBF, the Association of Universities and other Higher Education Institutions in Germany (*Hochschulrektorenkonferenz*) and a number of individual universities, to map and highlight the outputs of so-called “small subjects/disciplines” across the academy. In 2017, a joint statement issued by the presidiums of the German Rectors' Conference and the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany explained that these “so-called minor subjects”:

are an essential part of the diverse German academic landscape. They are essential for maintaining relevant subject-specific skills, contribute to the preservation of our cultural heritage and also promote the international profile and networking of German universities – in many cases they enjoy a global reputation.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, the premise of the website (and apparent support for small subjects) is encouraging, but in what way might the site be useful as a tool for policy makers and university leaders in assessing and planning for the future of small subjects like Southeast Asian Studies? Our investigation found that whilst the website was helpful for identifying key institutions with active programs in Southeast Asian studies, the data was limited to a broad overview and was not always accurate or up-to-date. To augment this, we reached out directly to colleagues teaching in Southeast Asian Studies and combed the webpages of their institutions to understand the range of subjects currently on offer for students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) and the particular research focus of staff.

Comprehensive data detailing exactly where and by whom Southeast Asian Studies (Südostasienstudien/-kunde/-wissenschaften) is currently *taught* in Germany's public universities is decidedly lacking.<sup>18</sup> As mentioned, an attempt is being made to collate some of this information on the website *Kleine Fächer*<sup>19</sup>, which purports to provide a map of centres of Southeast Asian Studies across the country. Each “small subject” area lists the institutions, courses and personnel for the period 1997–

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.kleinefaecher.de/>

<sup>18</sup> This contrasts with the situation in Australia (where we have both worked). A strong and active association for Asian Studies (ASAA) and smaller country-based organisations of scholars exist, enabling the collection of data alongside a regular method of surveys to track the state of the field. For some decades now, it has been understood that providing data-based and driven evidence is imperative to fight off headwinds associated with government funding pressures on university budgets.

<sup>19</sup> According to the website authors, small subjects are those with now more than three professorships attached at any one centre.

2024, but this data is not comprehensive and is often outdated. The information provided is limited to the former and current number of professorships and names of staff, plus study programs offered as undergraduate and postgraduate majors. No distinction is made between active (i.e. teaching) professors and those who are retired or hold adjunct appointments. The key institutions listed as *currently teaching* Southeast Asian Studies are: Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn, Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt am Main, Universität Hamburg, Universität zu Köln, Universität Passau, and Hochschule Konstanz. A closer look at the syllabi/courses on offer (if freely available in the first place) indicates a shift to a more varied and variable offering for students and away from the “classical” multi-disciplinary Southeast Asian teachings,<sup>20</sup> which in addition to language, includes studies of the politics, cultures and societies of the countries of the region.

When we looked closely at the Southeast Asian Studies courses at each of these institutions, including the subjects available, number of staff and the expertise of key personnel within the program, it was apparent that whilst in some cases the programs are strong, in others the use of the term “Southeast Asian studies” to describe what is offered, is barely (or no longer) applicable.

As suspected, we found that these programs are not particularly well-resourced. On average, there are one to two professorships attached to these programs, although given the casualisation of teaching staff, especially in language studies, it is difficult to ascertain numbers of full-time tenured staff across these programs. In fact, additional courses are often taught as one-off subjects by poorly paid guest researchers or PhD students (Lehraufträge; Projektseminare) who tend to teach their specialist knowledge, rather than provide a broader understanding of the subject matter.

In all cases, courses aspire to offer basic introductions and language training, and sometimes require study overseas as a compulsory part of the program. We discovered that whilst the subjects offered to undergraduates in particular are interesting and exciting, they are often not multi-disciplinary but tend to be skewed to one specific discipline – anthropology/sociology; media and communications; linguistics; global studies; Islamic studies; economics and two specific countries, thereby echoing a prevailing methodological nationalism and falling short in regard to intra/trans-regional comparative perspectives. Largely missing is a focus on political science, IR and more specialised histories. In what follows we offer a selective overview of publicly available information on syllabi and teaching foci in

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20 We reference Aspinall and Crouch’s definition: “By Asian Studies, we mean the in-depth study of Asia using language skills, in-country expertise, and interdisciplinary knowledge of the broad social, economic, and political contexts of particular Asian countries and/ or regions. Undergraduate students often undertake Asian Studies as a program or major as part of an Arts degree, which usually includes subjects such as political science, history, cultural studies, and anthropology, as well as language study, and may require or provide an opportunity for students to study for a semester or even a year in Asia.” (Aspinall and Crouch, 2023)

key German institutions currently offering Southeast Asian Studies programs.<sup>21</sup> We do not claim that this survey is exhaustive.

### **Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin**

The Institute of Asian and African Studies at the pioneering institution for Southeast Asian Studies ceased to offer a dedicated program in Southeast Asian Studies in 2005, which it replaced with a BA in “Area Studies Asia/Africa” and the MA program in “South and Southeast Asian Studies”, and more recently “Asian/African Studies”. Significant changes in staff around this time precipitated a change. These new programs favour a trans-regional perspective for Area Studies. The university’s website explains how over six semesters, the BA students will receive a “broad introduction with the opportunity to specialize in the area of regional studies of Asia and Africa”.<sup>22</sup> For the required language component they can choose from several Southeast Asian languages, including Bahasa Indonesia, Thai, Vietnamese and Burmese and at various times also Tagalog. The focus is threefold: language/communication; culture/identity, which focusses on literary, religious and cultural studies; and society/transformation, which offers historical, social science and ethnological perspectives.

Subjects currently offered include requisite broad overviews (“Introduction to the history and politics of Southeast Asia”; “Identity foundations of civil society movements in Southeast Asia”); and comparative studies (“Malaysia and Indonesia: Politics and Religion”); and limited country specialisation (“Malaysia: language, history, politics, religion and society”); and a more global approach (“Global peace movements”). There is also an emphasis on research methods, with two subjects offered, although it is not clear what percentage of undergraduates move on to higher research degrees. BA students are encouraged to spend at least one semester in Southeast Asia, ideally in their third semester. There does not appear to be a university-led exchange program, rather students must make their own arrangements.

### **Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn**

The BA program in Southeast Asian Studies is a two-programme model, it must be taken in combination with a second major in either Geography, Sociology or Political Sciences. The Southeast Asian Studies component consists of a social science/anthropology regional studies focus and a Southeast Asian language focus. Basic language skills are offered in either Indonesian or Vietnamese and recently Thai has been added. The program is application-oriented, meaning that in addition to language training, students are familiarised with social developments in Southeast Asia. Subjects include broad introductory units: “SEA in context”; “Society and

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21 The research was conducted in August-September 2024

22 <https://www.iaaw.hu-berlin.de/de/studium/ba/ba>

culture”; “Politics, economics and environment in Southeast Asia”. BA students are required to spend a semester overseas. The university maintains several partnerships in Singapore, Indonesia and Vietnam, and students are required to organise the exchange semesters themselves via Erasmus or Global Exchange. The university also offers an MA in Asian Studies where students can specialise in Southeast Asia, which is one of fifteen areas of focus. The MA program is conceptualised as an advanced study, with emphasis on dealing with vernacular sources.

### **Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt am Main**

The university offers a BA in Languages and Cultures in Southeast Asia and an MA in Southeast Asian Studies. The BA can be studied as a major or minor, with the major requiring one semester to be spent in the region. In addition to language, the BA program offers subjects in literature and media, politics, economics, religion, and art in Southeast Asia. The focus of the course is on insular Southeast Asia, especially on the countries of Indonesia and Malaysia. Languages offered are Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia) and Malay (Bahasa Malaysia), Vietnamese and Thai. Next to language learning, the teaching offerings are quite broad, including general courses (“History of Southeast Asia”, “Introduction to Southeast Asian Studies”, “Economics and economic policy in Southeast Asia since 1945”), as well as more specialist courses with an emphasis on media and communication (“Social media in Southeast Asia”, “Indonesian short films”).<sup>23</sup> The MA program focuses on the modern languages and cultures of Southeast Asia and current issues, as well as media, politics and economy in modern Southeast Asia. Like other postgraduate programs we surveyed, the MA attracts students from Southeast Asia, especially from Indonesia and Malaysia, but also from other Asian and East European countries.

### **Universität Hamburg, Africa-Asia Institute**

With four professors, this program has the most senior academic staff of those included in this study. Unlike most universities that offer a three-year BA, the Africa-Asia Institute has a four-year BA with a compulsory overseas study semester to be spent in Southeast Asia. The BA program combines intensive language training, introductory courses on the historical, political, and cultural issues of select Southeast Asian states and courses on contemporary issues. Languages offered include Thai, Indonesian, Vietnamese and Khmer and students are expected to obtain at least basic knowledge in a second Southeast Asian language.<sup>24</sup> There are some general introductory courses (“Culture and Society in Modern Southeast Asia”) and a few specialist courses (“Gender, resistance and land: Gender relations in Asia-

23 [https://www.uni-frankfurt.de/157134310/WiSe24\\_25\\_LV\\_Semsterplan\\_Stand\\_27\\_08\\_24\\_PK.pdf](https://www.uni-frankfurt.de/157134310/WiSe24_25_LV_Semsterplan_Stand_27_08_24_PK.pdf) and <https://www.buecher.de/artikel/buch/towards-the-next-40-years-of-southeast-asian-studies-in-frankfurt/71164774/>.

24 <https://www.aai.uni-hamburg.de/soa/studium/vorlesungsverzeichnis/vv-2024-2025-wise.pdf>

Pacific and their impact on women's living and working conditions"). The MA program offers more specialist courses ("Classical Thai Literature" and "Thai short stories: reading and translating", "Chinese in Southeast Asian Literature and Media", "Indonesian modern art and visual culture: Multiple Modernities and Modern Art in Southeast Asia"). There is also an option to do internships in Germany or in Southeast Asia.

## **Universität Passau**

Home to Germany's first chair for Southeast Studies, since Bernhard Dahm's retirement in 1997 the University of Passau has seen a rapid succession of professors, replacements and reorientations due to frequent competing offers.<sup>25</sup> In 2024, the senior staff currently includes a professorship of Developmental Politics and a professorship of Critical Developmental Studies for Southeast Asia, both based at the Faculty for Social Sciences and Educational Sciences. Both appointments teach in the BA and MA programs of "International Cultural and Business Studies with Focus on Southeast Asia", as well as in the MA program of "Development Studies" (which replaced the Master of Southeast Asian Studies in 2015). The BA has a social sciences and cultural studies orientation and aims to provide students with an appreciation of current social, political and cultural dynamics in the region and the relevant historical background as well as to enable them to analyse and interpret current affairs. The Southeast Asian languages taught in the program are Bahasa Indonesia and Thai. Subjects include general introductory courses ("Southeast Asian Studies: an introduction", "Colonial history of Southeast Asia: power, modernity and mobility"), as well as more specialised subjects ("Soft Power: Indonesia in the world", "Migration, flight and nutrition: food and mobility in transnational living environments", "Role of UNESCO in Urban Heritage Management (cases from Southeast Asia)").

## **Universität zu Köln**

The Institute for Languages and Cultures of the Islamic World offers BA and MA programs for "Languages and Cultures of the Islamic World", with the option to study Bahasa Indonesia and specialise in "Insular Southeast Asia: Malaysia and Indonesia".<sup>26</sup> Students are encouraged to undertake a period of study overseas. Courses taught include "Contemporary Muslim Societies – Indonesia: Of Generals and Oligarchs", "Religion, politics and society in insular Indonesia: Indonesian comics [books]" and "Indonesian language variant: Javanese". What was once the

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25 <https://www.sobi.uni-passau.de/en/southeast-asian-studies/southeast-asia/history-of-the-chairs-in-southeast-asian-studies>

26 <https://iskiw.phil-fak.uni-koeln.de/en/alte-seiten/content>

Detailed information about the courses offered at Cologne is difficult to obtain via open sources.

Institute for South Asian and Southeast Asian Studies appears now to be largely defunct<sup>27</sup>, with the last known professors attached to the institute no longer in place.

## HTWG Konstanz

A university of applied science, HTWG Konstanz offers a 3.5-year BA program in “Asian Studies and Management: Southeast Asia and South Asia”. It promotes the program to prospective students with the promise, “get a degree in only three-and-a-half years from one of Germany’s most unique academic programs and get your passport to the business world of the 21st century.”<sup>28</sup> The focus is on business administration, (macro-)economics and business law, which makes up 40% of coursework, with language (Indonesian or Chinese) around 20–30%, and the remainder spent on inter-disciplinary subjects related to politics, culture and cross-cultural management. Two-thirds of the BA is taught in English, while its MA offering is 100% in English, with an eye to attracting international students to the program. The BA students are required to spend one semester in the region as part of an organised exchange. Formerly, there was a requirement for two semesters – one focused on language study and a second as an intern with a company in the region. Students’ reluctance to live abroad for a full year forced this change in the program.

It is not insignificant that “Southeast Asian Studies” is still being offered to both undergraduates and postgraduates in some form in seven institutions in Germany. We want to acknowledge the hard work of academic and professional staff alike at these universities to ensure that programs continue, in the face of numerous structural and systemic challenges within the higher education system and in society at large. In a nutshell, however, our survey reveals that, in the German academy, a student wishing to undertake an undergraduate degree aimed at obtaining a deep knowledge of the language, history, politics and society of a country or countries in the region is finding it increasingly difficult to do so. While obtaining language skills is still possible, social sciences and other disciplines have suffered substantially within what used to be a multi-disciplinary approach to getting to know a region. In an environment in which universities try to carve out niches in order to preserve or pursue particular research foci that can sustain or open up funding streams and establish new chairs, it would appear that “broad and deep” multi-disciplinary Area Studies programs have suffered. Lacking in many cases is an overall program design to deliver a well-rounded and comprehensive BA in Southeast Asian Studies, with the resources and personnel required to teach it. In particular, the institutions that only have one permanent professorship might find it difficult to offer a truly multi-disciplinary or perhaps even inter-disciplinary approach for all of Southeast Asia, as

27 We could only find recent advertisements for summer schools to India. The professors listed are now emeritus or have died.

28 <https://www.htwg-konstanz.de/en/bachelor/asian-studies-and-management-southeast-and-south-asia/at-a-glance>

only very rarely can such an approach be pursued by one professor supported by temporary staff alone. Given that multi-/inter-disciplinary approaches used to be the flagship of Southeast Asian Studies (and other Area Studies), this is a sad loss and, in a way, also stands in deep contradiction to the omnipresent demands for more inter-disciplinarity, if not even trans-regionality, from the key academic funding bodies in Germany.

Besides the chairs and professorships mentioned in the *Kleine Fächer*, content relevant to Southeast Asia is taught in social science and humanities disciplines, for example in Anthropology (Freiburg, Heidelberg, Berlin, Münster and Erlangen-Nürnberg), or Sociology (Bielefeld), and Political Science (Heidelberg, Erlangen-Nürnberg). While we are unable in this brief survey, to establish whether or not those universities see an increase in interest in the region and therefore offer more courses that partially cover Southeast Asia, it is safe to assume that the range of subjects available and specialisations related to a particular country or region remains limited and that little to no associated language training is offered. More importantly, an increase in subjects taught in a single department is far from the ideal of multi-disciplinary embodied by the pioneering centres of Southeast Asian Studies. Once again, Germany is not a unique case in this regard. In their report on the state of Asian Studies in the Australian academy Aspinall and Crouch found,

At universities, there has been an accelerated shift away from a traditional area studies model of teaching Asian Studies that emphasised language acquisition and comprehensive study of a particular Asian country or region, to a post-area studies model where the study of Asia is dispersed within faculties or schools organised on a disciplinary basis. This shift presents a challenge for government and universities to ensure graduates acquire deep intellectual engagement with Asia, while providing opportunities to mainstream the study of Asia throughout the curriculum and across faculties. (Aspinall and Crouch 2023, 2)

We would similarly argue that Southeast Asian studies in Germany is at a point where neither the traditional Area Studies model nor the post-Area Studies model (where Southeast Asia subjects are embedded in the disciplines) is particularly successful. For Germany, where there is already a far smaller level of interest and engagement in Asia, let alone Southeast Asia, the consequences are likewise far more pronounced.

## What Can Be Done?

Letting go of Area Studies and Southeast Asian Studies would not only further decrease Germany's standing in the region, but it would support the populist political forces that favour isolationist eurocentrism and right-wing anti-globalism. (Houben 2019)

The days of area studies programs, including those on Indonesia, may seem numbered. But government policies and intellectual fashion are cyclical, and it could well be that the current obsessions with cultural difference, religion, local identities and globalisation will lead to a reinvention of area studies. If so, we should be there. (Sutherland 2012, 118)

We started this essay by asking where and by whom Germany's future Southeast Asia experts will be trained. The relevance of this question is based on our contention that there is a clear national imperative to produce and invest in homegrown Southeast Asian expertise, not only for language competency, but also in the pursuit of knowledge about the history, politics, cultures and economies of the countries within this growing and strategically vital region. Our survey reveals that despite concerns being raised about the decline of the field for some decades now, and an increased awareness within political circles of the need to improve relations with the region, there has been little investment. As described, Vincent Houben was foremost among those highlighting this disconnect between government policy and praxis in Germany. In 2019, in an interview he gave as a part of the *Kleine Fächer* initiative, he reprised his 2004 assessment and noted that further cuts to Berlin's Asian and Africa Institute had resulted in even more tasks needing to be completed by fewer teaching staff. Houben retired from his position as Professor of Southeast Asian Studies at Berlin in 2022. As of October 2024, this vacancy had not been filled.

We took a close look at the institutions currently teaching Southeast Asian Studies and their offerings. Positive findings include that the range of Southeast Asian languages being taught is relatively good. Indonesian, Thai, Vietnamese and Burmese (at one institution only), are available. In most cases, students are also encouraged to undertake a semester of coursework in-country, to deepen their language and cross-cultural knowledge. However, this semester abroad is in almost all cases voluntary, and students are provided with minimal assistance to facilitate such an exchange. Beyond anecdotal evidence to suggest they are not substantial, we do not have an account of the numbers enrolled in these courses. Nonetheless, it is encouraging to see that at least for now these three core languages remain in syllabi, noting that whilst Indonesian is offered at Australia's larger universities, majors in Thai, Vietnamese or Burmese languages are now only offered at a single university, the ANU.

It is also a good sign that recently other public voices (politicians, diplomats) have been speaking out about and lamenting the "lost decades" of interaction with Asia and pointing to Germany's declining relevance in the region. The *Kleine Fächer* initiative also purports to offer a glimmer of hope. So far, however, these words have not led to concrete action. When it comes to university funding, Area Studies, including Southeast Asian Studies, remain marginal and under threat. In 2024, a report from the federal auditing court has led to demands to shut down smaller disciplines in order to save costs, growing louder. Subjects that attract only a few

students are deemed uneconomic.<sup>29</sup> Such challenges for fields like Southeast Asian Studies are not new, and this logic sees the field caught in a catch-22. If small disciplines are not funded and resourced adequately, fewer students will be attracted to enrol in them. Low enrolments lead to a further decline in funding and so on.

In order to save Southeast Asian Studies in Germany, more is needed than short-term funding initiatives or university-level programs to attract overseas students, in order to bolster enrolments. Such initiatives have been tried and are unsustainable in the mid- to longer term. In 2004, Houben suggested we should stop thinking only in terms of chairs and individual professorships, but rather in terms of university and cross-institutional competence centres for Asian studies. With decisions about university funding made at the provincial, rather than the federal level, and cross-border coordination almost unheard of, such an approach would require an intervention akin to a national initiative. We believe that given the clear national interest in protecting and growing Germany's knowledge of and engagement with Southeast Asian countries and regional institutions, the time for such an intervention is rapidly approaching.

In July 2024, Germany's Ministry of Education and Research announced a short-term funding program for projects generating new knowledge about relevant research, innovation, social or geopolitical developments in "Modern Asian Studies" and to place the developments in the Asia-Pacific region in the German or European context. The program's aim is to consider overarching developments in the region, including within partnerships between several countries. As is normal for government-sponsored funding programs such as this, the relevance of the developments for Germany and Europe must always be assessed and a link to German science and industry must be established.<sup>30</sup> Due to budget limitations, cooperation with international colleagues and engagement in the region are only permissible on a miniscule scale. It is open to question whether this kind of limited and geographically curtailed seed funding can provide the stimulus for real action and coordinated planning, which is direly needed to boost the discipline of Southeast Asian Studies in Germany, or whether the short-lived attention to Southeast Asian Studies is nothing more than palliative care. Without a strong political commitment to the study of the region accompanied by a sustained boost of the remaining academic infrastructure, the German academy is likely to fall short of ensuring Southeast Asian Studies has a future here.

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29 <https://www.staatsanzeiger.de/nachrichten/politik-und-verwaltung/sind-orchideenfaecher-ein-ueberfluessiger-luxus/>

30 <https://www.bmbf.de/bmbf/shareddocs/bekanntmachungen/de/2024/07/2024-07-31-Bekanntmachung-Asienforschung.html>

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## Essay

# Regionalwissenschaften für die Zukunft fit machen – ein Kommentar

Julia Christine Marinaccio

### Abstract

Although language learning has become more attractive thanks to new, flexible, mobile software solutions, and foreign language skills are in demand in the labour market, many regional and language studies have experienced declining student numbers for years. This article assumes that this paradox is due not only to social changes, geopolitical influences, media coverage and soft power, but also to the structure of many study programmes and the skills they teach. These skills no longer meet the real requirements of the labour market, or only meet them inadequately. Departments therefore urgently need to adapt existing programmes to better meet the needs of students and the labour market, bearing in mind the various career paths students may take. This essay puts forward three proposals to make programmes of regional studies more attractive: promoting transversal competences through strategic partnerships; introducing new collaborative and international learning formats; developing alumni networks to better promote the study programmes on the one hand and providing individual coaching to help students prepare for a range of career opportunities after graduation.

**Keywords:** Regionalwissenschaften, strategische Weiterentwicklung, Arbeitsmarktrelevanz

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## Einleitung

Unter Regionalwissenschaftler:innen herrscht Einigkeit. Der Erwerb von sprachlichen und landeskundlichen Kompetenzen anderer Länder ist heute für die internationale Zusammenarbeit notwendiger denn je. In einer Welt, in der wir alle in der einen oder anderen Weise voneinander abhängig sind, und großen Herausforderungen nur mehr gemeinsam begegnet werden kann, ist das Verständnis für historische Gegebenheiten, politische Dynamiken, ökonomische und gesellschaftliche Entwicklungen und kulturelle Prägungen sowie die Fähigkeit, in den Landessprachen des Gegenübers kommunizieren zu können, ein wesentlicher Teil des Lösungsfindungsprozesses, ja sogar Bestandteil der Lösung selbst. Das trifft nicht nur, aber umso mehr auf Asien zu, wo heute mehr als zwei Drittel der Weltbevölkerung leben.

Trotz der Modernisierung vieler Curricula in den Asienwissenschaften, u.a. durch eine zunehmende Fokussierung auf aktuelle Themen, wie Umwelt- und Klimapolitik, Wirtschaftsentwicklung und Popkultur, und interdisziplinärer Initiativen und Innovationen in der Vermittlung wichtiger regionaler Kompetenzen, insbesondere der China-Kompetenzen (Thelen et al. 2022), sind Studierendenzahlen seit Jahren rückläufig. Dieser Trend betrifft fast alle Sprachstudien, mit Ausnahme von der Anglistik und Amerikanistik, wie statistische Zahlen des Statistischen Bundesamts in Deutschland und des Datawarehouse Hochschulbereich des Bundesministeriums für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung in Österreich belegen (Statistisches Bundesamt; uni:data Datawarehouse).

Strukturelle Faktoren, geopolitische Einflüsse, mediale Berichterstattung, Soft Power und Online-Sprachlernsoftware, die ein flexibles und individuelles Erlernen auch von entfernten Sprachen bequem und mobil ermöglichen, sind wesentliche Faktoren, die diesen Trend mitprägen. In den Studienrichtungen Slavistik, Sinologie, Japanologie und Koreanologie kommt der Einfluss von nicht-strukturellen Faktoren besonders zu tage. Während Russisch und Chinesisch vermutlich nicht zuletzt wegen politischen Entwicklungen wie Krieg und Freiheitsberaubung an den eigenen Bevölkerungen Studierende einbüßen, scheinen Japanisch und Koreanisch den mehr oder weniger konstanten bzw. verstärkten Zulauf von Studienanfänger:innen den auch in Europa beliebten Popkulturen zu verdanken. Koreanisch lag laut dem 2023 *Duolingo language learning report* auf Platz sechs in der globalen Rangliste und überholte dabei Italienisch (Blanco 2023). Die Nutzer:innenzahlen dieser Auswertung bezeugen ein großes Interesse am Erlernen von Fremdsprachen im Allgemeinen, vor allem aber in Deutschland (Österreich und die Schweiz waren wohl statistisch irrelevant); und das aus gutem Grund, denn der Vorteil von Mehrsprachigkeit ist empirisch belegt. Neben kultureller Bereicherung und der Verbesserung kommunikativer und kognitiver Fähigkeiten ist Mehrsprachigkeit auch am Arbeitsmarkt stark nachgefragt und steigert nachweislich Karrierechancen (Fox et al. 2019).

Während also das Erlernen von Sprachen durch das Internet und neuer Software-Entwicklungen an Attraktivität gewonnen hat, haben Regional- und Sprachstudien als Studienwahl diese mehrheitlich eingebüßt. Die hier vertretene Annahme ist, dass

dieses Paradoxon vordergründig mit der Struktur der Curricula zusammenhängt, nämlich mit den darin vermittelten Kompetenzen, die nicht mehr oder nur mehr ungenügend den realen Anforderungen des Arbeitsmarktes entsprechen. Wenn die versprochenen Kernkompetenzen, nämlich Sprach- und Landeskunde, analytische Fähigkeiten und kritisches Denken, auch durch flexibles und individuelles Selbststudium in Kombination mit einer methodischen Disziplin erworben werden können, die darüber hinaus auch eine anerkannt „handfeste“ und arbeitsmarktrelevante Qualifikation verleiht, wundert es nicht, dass Studierende sich gegen ein (Haupt)Studium in den Regionalwissenschaften entscheiden. Um mittelfristig nicht in der Bedeutungslosigkeit zu verschwinden, braucht es daher dringend Maßnahmen zur Attraktivierung der bestehenden Studienprogramme. Diese muss mit einer Strategie verbunden sein, die den Bedürfnissen der Studierenden besser entgegenkommt, und vor allem auch endlich die multiplen beruflichen Werdegänge der Studierenden berücksichtigt und als gleichwertig anerkennt.

Die 2018 erschienene Merics-Studie schlägt unter anderem vor, Chinesisch als Schulfach in allen deutschen Bundesländern (Österreich und die Schweiz wurden von der Studie nicht erfasst) zu etablieren, um den Status des Fachs zu heben, sowie vermehrt Doppelabschlussprogramme an Universitäten anzubieten (Stepan und Ives 2018: 41, 53). Ersteres ist vom politischen Willen abhängig und damit oft auch von geopolitischen und wirtschaftlichen Einflüssen. Außerdem würde dies nichts am grundlegenden, strukturellen Problem der regionalwissenschaftlichen Studienprogramme ändern. Letzteres ist ein aufwendiges Prozedere, das nicht immer den Erfolg liefert, den es verspricht. Außerdem werden Doppel- und Kombinationsstudien immer nur ergänzend zum Studienangebot eines Fachbereichs angeboten, die oftmals internationale Studierende anlocken (sollen). Zwischen Status quo und Doppelabschluss gibt es jedoch eine Reihe von Maßnahmen, die Fachbereiche setzen können – vereinzelt tun sie das auch schon. Voraussetzung ist jedoch eine strategische und langfristige Planung, um das Zusatzangebot nachhaltig in den Curricula und im Fachbereich zu verankern.

Im Folgenden führe ich drei Vorschläge näher aus, wie die Curricula der Asienwissenschaften unabhängig ihres geographischen, kulturellen oder sprachlichen Fokus mittelfristig innovativer und attraktiver gestaltet werden können, um neue Studierende zu gewinnen und diese zum erfolgreichen Abschluss zu bringen, weil Letzterer ihre Karrierechancen entscheidend verbessert. Langfristig werden Asien- oder Regionalwissenschaften aber nur dann überleben, wenn endlich tiefgreifende strukturelle Reformen an den Universitäten und in den Fachbereichen angegangen werden. Diese umfassen unter anderem Asien-Kompetenzen geographisch zu bündeln und zu modularisieren, sie als Teilzeitstudium und/oder in Form von zielgruppengerechten Micro-Credentials anzubieten.

## **Transversale Kompetenzen besser und strategisch fördern**

Studien zeigen schon längst, dass die wenigsten Studienabgänger:innen ihre Bestimmung in der Wissenschaft finden und der Trend zur Diversifizierung der beruflichen Werdegänge steigt – das gilt im Übrigen auch und immer mehr für Doktorand:innen. Sie unterstreichen auch, dass Studierende mehr Unterstützung in der Entwicklung von transversalen Kompetenzen benötigen und einfordern (St. Clair et al. 2017; Locke et al. 2018). Absolvent:innen von Asienwissenschaften haben ohne ein Kombinations- oder Zweitstudium mit entsprechender Spezialisierung, meist nur wenige berufliche Optionen, in der Privatwirtschaft oder Industrie eine Anstellung zu finden. Die wenigsten arbeiten schlussendlich als Journalist:innen, Diplomat:innen oder Analyst:innen in Stiftungen, Ministerien, Think Tanks oder internationalen Organisationen; attraktive Berufe also, in denen Asien-Kompetenzen direkt zur Anwendung kommen und die meist auf den Webseiten der Fachbereiche aufgelistet und beworben werden. Der überwiegende Teil der Absolvent:innen landet aber in den verschiedensten Sektoren und Berufsfeldern und kann darüber hinaus regionalwissenschaftliche Kompetenzen nicht direkt einsetzen. Der Weg zum erfüllenden Job ist meist steinig und führt über viele Umwege. Die zentralen jobrelevanten Qualifikationen eignen sich die Betroffenen über Volontariate, eigens bezahlte Zertifikatskurse und verschiedene neben- und hauptberufliche Erfahrungen an. Nichtsdestotrotz ist die regionalwissenschaftliche Studienerfahrung bei Bewerbungen nicht immer gänzlich unerheblich, da sie Offenheit, Toleranz und Dialogfähigkeit der Bewerber:innen verspricht.

Trotz der vielschichtigen beruflichen Realitäten ihrer Absolvent:innen steht in den Studienprogrammen von Regionalwissenschaften nach wie vor das Erlernen von analytischen und sprachlichen Fähigkeiten im Vordergrund. Hier wird mittels Expert:innen akkreditierte Expertise aufgebaut. Transversale Kompetenzen, wie zum Beispiel Projektmanagement, interkulturelle Kommunikation, unternehmerisches Denken (Intra- und Entrepreneurship), Konfliktmanagement und Gruppendynamik, die in Bewerbungen einen entscheidenden Vorteil bringen und in so gut wie allen Berufsfeldern eine alltägliche Relevanz haben, werden lediglich als Nebenprodukte des Unterrichts behandelt und leider nicht von Expert:innen der jeweiligen Materie vermittelt. Deswegen erwerben Studierende im Hauptstudium diese Fertigkeiten, denen an sich komplexe und dynamische theoretische und technische Entwicklungen zu Grunde liegen, häufig gar nicht oder nur sehr oberflächlich. Sie müssen sich selbst darum kümmern. Warum also nicht gleich ein anderes Studium wählen?

Um dieses Dilemma zu überwinden, sollten Regionalwissenschaften strukturierte Module sowie zertifizierte und am Arbeitsmarkt anerkannte Zusatzqualifikation in den sowieso vorgesehenen freien Wahlfeldern fördern. Das kann in-house in Zusammenarbeit mit anderen Fachbereichen passieren, aber zur Abwechslung auch mittels strategischer, externer Partnerschaften. Als zwei Beispiele von vielen sollen hier die Boot Camps der European Innovation Academy und das Projektmanage-

ment-MOOC von Google auf der Coursera-Lernplattform angeführt werden.<sup>1</sup> Fördern heißt aber auch, die Studierenden nicht sich selbst zu überlassen, sondern Angebote im Fachbereich zu schaffen und diese, ähnlich wie Mobilität (d.h. Stipendienprogramme) aktiv zu bewerben. Vor allem für Studierende in den Regionalwissenschaften ist es außerordentlich wichtig, Perspektiven und Wege für die berufliche (Weiter)Entwicklung aufzuzeigen. Wichtig wäre auch eine enge Abstimmung mit den Karrierezentren der Universitäten sowie das regelmäßige Abhalten von zugeschnittenen Karriereevents im Fachbereich mit Arbeitsmarktexpert:innen, Jobcoaches, und Alumni (dazu noch mehr im Punkt 3). Fachhochschulen und teilweise private Universitäten haben bereits vor Jahren begonnen, diese Maßnahmen umzusetzen, ihre Studierenden erwarten sich auch dieses Angebot.

### **Studienprogramme durch kollaboratives Lernen und moderne, aktive Pädagogik attraktiveren**

Das Gros der Asienwissenschaften hat den Anspruch, ihren Studierenden die Perspektiven und Verhältnisse asiatischer Länder näherzubringen und sie für einen konstruktiven Dialog und Zusammenarbeit mit Menschen aus diesen Ländern vorzubereiten und auszubilden. Der direkte Austausch ist dabei bereits in der Studienzeit essentiell. Längerfristige Aufenthalte zur immersiven kulturellen Erfahrung und zum intensiven Austausch vor Ort werden weitgehend als wichtiger Bestandteil der Studierenerfahrung und Ausbildung angesehen, auch wenn nicht alle Fachbereiche oder Studienprogramme ein verpflichtendes Auslandsjahr oder Semester vorsehen. Viele Studierende sehen aber zunehmend von längerfristigen Mobilitätsprogrammen ab und bevorzugen kürzere Aufenthalte, oftmals auch im Kollektiv. Das rührt nicht zuletzt daher, dass Studierende von heute erstens außerhalb des Universitätskontexts viel internationaler leben als die Generationen vor ihnen (Mykeblust 2024), zweitens mitten im Berufslebens stehen und drittens zunehmend vor ernsthafte finanzielle Hürden stehen. In Österreich sind mehr als zwei Drittel der Studierenden erwerbstätig (69 Prozent) und die durchschnittlichen Wohnkosten sind seit 2019 um 25 Prozent gestiegen (Zucha et al. 2023: 65, 73). Hinzu kommen andere Beweggründe, wie die örtliche Trennung von Partner:in und Familie, Bedenken bzgl. der Anrechenbarkeit und dem Zurechtfinden in der fremden Umgebung sowie unzureichende finanzielle Förderung der Mobilitätskosten. Letzteres manifestiert sich auch bei Erasmus+ Programmen immer stärker (Dias 2025).

Inklusiv gedachte und organisierte, fachliche Exkursionen sind daher ein guter Ansatz, diese vielschichtigen Hürden abzubauen und Studierenden einen „Geschmack“ der immersiven kulturellen Erfahrung und relevante Einsichten in Politik, Wirtschaft

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1 Google Project Management: Professional Certificate, Coursera, <https://shorturl.at/Ux1ju>; International Startup & Innovation Boot Camp, European Innovation Academy, <https://www.inacademy.eu/programs/> (Zugriff am 1. Februar 2025).

und Kultur zu ermöglichen, zumal kurzfristige Aufenthalte unter Studierenden sich viel größerer Beliebtheit erfreuen (Stepan und Ives 2018: 62).

Seit der COVID-19-Pandemie werden die Möglichkeiten von Internet und Video-konferenz-Technologien intensiv genutzt, um den wissenschaftlichen Austausch und damit auch die „Internationalisierung zu Hause“ zu fördern. Sie erlaubt Studierenden, unkompliziert in den direkten Austausch mit Forschenden, Kulturschaffenden, Aktivist:innen von anderen Ländern zu treten, sich mit ihren Perspektiven auseinanderzusetzen und von ihnen zu lernen. Webinars, virtuelle Diskussionsrunden und Vortragsserien sind nunmehr zu einem nicht mehr wegzudenkenden Bestandteil des Zusatzangebots von Fachbereichen geworden. Freilich, der virtuelle Austausch wird nie die Qualität der immersiven Erfahrung vor Ort ersetzen, aber nichtsdestotrotz ist er weithin als Erleichterung und positive Entwicklung im internationalen Dialog zu werten. Erfahrungen zeigen jedoch, dass die Teilnahme an diesen oft extracurricularen Formaten variiert. Neben Nichtanrechenbarkeit, Überschneidungen mit familiären oder beruflichen Verpflichtungen oder anderen Lehrveranstaltungen sind wohl auch die traditionellen Konferenz-Formate und Plenardiskussionen mitunter ein Erklärungsgrund für das bescheidene Interesse.

Um einen wirklichen Mehrwert zu schaffen und die Möglichkeiten der neuen Technologien voll auszuschöpfen, sollten Fachbereiche kollaboratives internationales Online-Lernen (Collaborative International Online Learning, COIL) und gemischte Kurzeitmobilitätsprogramme (Blended Intensive Program, BIP)<sup>2</sup> mit europäischen und asiatischen Partnern systematisch stärken. Beiden liegt das Prinzip zu Grunde, dass Studierende aktiv in den Austausch treten und mit Kolleg:innen aus anderen Ländern und Teilen der Welt ein gemeinsames Projekt erarbeiten – kollaboratives Lernen also. Studierende profitieren ungemein von diesen Lernformaten, wie Studien zeigen: sie lernen sich besser in andere Perspektiven hineinversetzen und die globale Dimension von lokalen Phänomenen besser zu verstehen (Craicun et al. 2013). Kombiniert mit so genannten Open Badges – digitalen Lernabzeichen – können sich Studierende so *nachweislich* Erfahrungen im Arbeiten in internationalen Teams erarbeiten. Des Weiteren wird insbesondere bei BIPs die internationale Netzwerkbildung mit jungen Kolleg:innen im Ausland bereits im Bachelor gefördert, die später im Studium und Beruf sehr nützlich ist. Um die Langfristigkeit des Angebots zu gewährleisten, sollte die Last dieser doch recht arbeitsintensiven Programme bereichsintern und eventuell auch über die Partner rotierend verteilt werden.

Schließlich kann auch das Sprachangebot noch mehr als bisher auf die technologie-affine Generation und deren Realitätsempfinden zugeschnitten werden. Immersives Sprachlernen könnte mit augmentierter Realität zu Hause und im Fachbereich unterstützt werden. Sprachtandems könnten sich daher in einem virtuellen Raum anstatt vor dem Computer abspielen und Sprachkurse könnten reale Szenen im Supermarkt,

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2 Fachbereiche bekommen bei BIPs zwar keine Förderung für Teilnehmer:innen aus Drittstaaten, Letztere sind jedoch nicht von der Teilnahme an den Programmen ausgeschlossen.

Flugzeug, Café und sogar im Unterricht realitätsgetreuer nachahmen. Der italienische Autor und Intellektuelle Alessandro Baricco (2018) hat in seinem Buch *The Game* richtig erkannt, dass die Wirklichkeitswahrnehmung der Generation, die nach 2000 geboren ist, sich von jener der *novecenteschi* grundlegend unterscheidet. Für sie sind online und offline keine verschiedenen Räume, vielmehr fließen sie ineinander und werden zu einer einzigen auch räumlichen Realität. Diese Wahrnehmung trifft noch viel mehr auf die „Generation Alpha“ zu, die bald unsere Universitäten füllen wird oder soll. Augmentierte Realität wäre ein Weg, diese Sichtweise und das Lernverhalten von jungen Menschen zu berücksichtigen. In technischen Fächern wird immersives Lernen immer mehr genutzt, human- und sprachwissenschaftliche Studien haben hier einen entscheidenden Nachholbedarf.

## **Alumni sind die besten Coaches und Werbung für den Studiengang**

Während Evaluationen von Lehrveranstaltungen inzwischen regelmäßig und systematisch durchgeführt werden, gibt es nur vereinzelt fachbereichsinterne Erhebungen zur Studienzufriedenheit und so gut wie keine unter Studienabgängern (egal ob mit oder ohne Abschlusszeugnis). Viel weniger wissen wir über die Beweggründe jener zehntausenden Studierenden, die sich NICHT für ein regionalwissenschaftliches Studium entschieden haben. Während Letzteres methodisch herausfordernd und womöglich auch wenig zielführend wäre, könnten Rückmeldungen und Einschätzungen von Absolvent:innen zur Relevanz ihrer im Studium erworbenen Kompetenzen für den späteren Beruf in die Gestaltung des Angebots im Fachbereich einfließen. Doch der Wert von Alumni geht weit darüber hinaus.

So gut wie jeder Fachbereich listet in der Beschreibung des Studiums auf der Webseite die Berufsmöglichkeiten nach dem Studium auf, die wenigsten haben jedoch einen umfassenden Überblick darüber, wo ihre Absolvent:innen später landen, und noch weniger kümmern sie sich darum, mit ihnen in Kontakt zu bleiben und sie für sich und ihre Studierenden zu nutzen. Dabei sind Alumni die besten Coaches und die effizienteste Werbung für das Studienprogramm, weil sie einerseits die Vielfalt der Berufsmöglichkeiten verkörpern und gleichzeitig als persönliche Ratgeber:innen fungieren können. Nebenbei würde auch unter den Lehrenden eine gewisse Offenheit gegenüber diversen beruflichen Entwicklungen gefördert. Wie unter Punkt 1 bereits erwähnt, sollten Alumni zu Karriereevents im Fachbereich eingeladen werden. Auf den Webseiten könnten Alumni-Profile angelegt und einfach mit deren LinkedIn-Profilen oder anderen Netzwerken verlinkt werden, wie das die Graduate School der University of Iceland seit mehreren Jahren tut (University of Iceland).

Expert:innen der neuen Studierendengenerationen zeigen klar die veränderten Realitäten für Universitäten auf: Studierende von heute informieren sich vorab umfassend über die Studienprogramme, evaluieren die gebotenen Möglichkeiten und welche Fachbereiche sie bestmöglich für das (Berufs)Leben vorbereiten (Ottero 2022).

Alumni sind eine glaubhafte Informationsquelle, welche die Studienwahl beeinflussen kann.

## Fazit

Der Rückgang von Studierenden an Hochschulen ist vorwiegend strukturell, nämlich den demographischen Entwicklungen, veränderten Lebensrealitäten und Verschiebungen am Arbeitsmarkt bedingt. Sie machen flexibles Lernen und Qualifizierungen nach dem Baukastenprinzip immer nötiger und klassische Vollzeitstudien zunehmend schwer umsetzbar. Während in einem Teil der Länder der European Higher Education Area (EHEA) Studierendenzahlen über die letzten fünf Jahre gewachsen sind und ein erhöhtes Interesse der Gesellschaften und Arbeitsmärkte an tertiären Bildungsabschlüssen verzeichnet wird, berichtet die andere Hälfte Rückgänge von bis zu 100 Prozent in den Bachelor-Studien (Litauen) und 74 Prozent in den Masterstudien (Polen). In Deutschland belaufen sich die Zahlen auf je 75 Prozent und 53 Prozent im ersten und zweiten Bildungszyklus (Michael et al. 2024). Kleine Fächer, insbesondere regionalwissenschaftliche Studien, sind von diesem Trend verhältnismäßig mehr betroffen.

Ein wesentliches Motiv für den Rückgang der Neuinskribierten und dem Nichtabschließen von Inskribierten liegt aber auch in der Struktur der Curricula und deren meist mangelnde Anpassungsfähigkeit an die beruflichen Realitäten ihrer Zielgruppen. Kombinations- und Doppelstudiengänge sowie Spezialisierungen wie Master of Education sind nur eine von vielen Möglichkeiten, um Asien-Kompetenzen zu stärken und regionalwissenschaftliche Fachbereiche an das 21. Jahrhundert anzupassen. Die hier angeführten Vorschläge sollen beispielhaft zeigen, wie ohne umfassende curriculare Reform oder Entwicklung dies geschehen kann, wenn auch langfristige und strategische Planung notwendig sind. Denn Regionalstudien sollten den Hochschulen unbedingt erhalten bleiben.

Als Absolventin der Sinologie bin ich überzeugt, dass Asien-Kompetenzen für Europa (und darüber hinaus) essentieller denn je sind. Trotz zugegeben oft nagender Zweifel befinde ich auch das Hauptstudium der Regionalwissenschaft zielführende Studienwahl, wenngleich ich den linearen Weg zum oder zur Asien-Expert:in vom Bachelor bis zum Doktorat, also die Ausdifferenzierung der Ausdifferenzierung, als obsolet erachte. Ja, die Multidisziplinarität der Studienprogramme ist gleichzeitig Stärke und Schwäche; aber wo, wenn nicht im Regionalstudium kann man sich umfassend mit einem Land oder einer Region auseinandersetzen? Sie mittels verschiedener disziplinärer Zugänge betrachten? Regionalstudien eröffnen neue Welten und Perspektiven, die andere Studienfächer nicht leisten. Ihre Multidisziplinarität und Ergebnisoffenheit erlauben Studierenden, sich vielseitig und für verschiedene Berufszweige zu qualifizieren.

Langfristig sind jedoch tiefgreifende strukturelle Reformen an den Universitäten und in den Fachbereichen notwendig. Nämliche die Bündelung der Asienwissenschaften

bzw. die Modularisierung verwandter Studienprogramme, um Effizienzen zu steigern und den Austausch zwischen Studierenden verschiedener Regionalstudien zu fördern, sowie Teilzeitstudien und/oder zielgruppengerechte Micro-Credentials, die ein flexibleres und lebenslanges Lernen erleichtern.

Ich möchte festhalten, dass ich mich weder wissenschaftlich mit dem Thema befasse, noch in einer leitenden Funktion einer Regionalwissenschaft bin. Ich erhebe daher nicht den Anspruch, einen ganzheitlichen Überblick und Einblick in alle aktuellen Studienprogramme, curriculare Reformbemühungen sowie Initiativen in den österreichischen und deutschen Asienwissenschaften zu besitzen. Meine Motivation, diesen Beitrag zu verfassen, entspringt vielmehr meiner aktuellen Position an der Fachhochschule Kärnten, wo ich seit mehr als einem Jahr für die Projektplanung und Umsetzung der Initiative „European Universities“ verantwortlich bin. Im Zuge meiner Arbeit bin ich mit mir zuvor völlig unbekannten Möglichkeiten für die Entwicklung von innovativen und interdisziplinären Methoden in der Lehre in Berührung gekommen und lerne täglich von Kolleg:innen, die internationales kollaboratives Lernen mit spannenden Inhalten entwickelt haben. Einige würden sich ganz besonders für Regionalwissenschaften eignen.<sup>3</sup> Für die deutschsprachige Asienwissenschaften ist diese regionale Hochschule deswegen relevant, weil sie ähnlich wie kleine Fächer von rückläufigen Studierendenzahlen betroffen ist und sich daher bemühen muss, Innovationen zu erarbeiten, um langfristig nicht bloß den Betrieb aufrechterhalten, sondern ihre Bedeutung auch steigern zu können.

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3 Eithne Knappitsch als Mitbegründerin des “Global work competency laboratory,” Global Case Study Challenge, <https://www.globalcasestudychallenge.com/> (Zugriff am 1. Februar 2025); Stefan Dreisiebners „Intercultural Perspectives on Artificial“ prämiert für den Ars Docendi 2024 in der Kategorie (BMBWF 2024)

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## Research Note

# China Research, Politics and Expertise in Germany: Some Reflections on a Tension-Fraught Field

Stefan Messingschlager

### Abstract

China research has always been characterized by a pronounced dependency on politics, significantly shaping its institutional structures, thematic orientations, and methodological approaches. Using the Federal Republic of Germany since 1949 as a case study, this research note systematically explores four central dimensions: the evolution of China research from philological origins toward interdisciplinary, politically engaged scholarship; macro-political contexts shaping research opportunities and agendas; scholars' strategies for balancing collaboration and integrity vis-à-vis the People's Republic of China; and the evolving advisory role of China researchers within German policy-making. By historicizing these complex interactions and critically reflecting upon current ethical debates, the analysis highlights the urgent need for clearer ethical standards and methodological transparency amid escalating geopolitical tensions and authoritarian challenges, thus preserving rigorous and independent scholarship as indispensable for informed policy-making and credible public discourse.

**Keywords:** China Research, German Sinology, Politics, Academia, Research Ethics, Geopolitical Tensions

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## Introduction: Approaching the Relationship Between China Research and Politics

From the 19th century to the present, the academic study of China – referred to variably as “China research”, “China studies” or more traditionally “Sinology” – has been profoundly influenced by the political contexts in which it has developed. As Mechthild Leutner aptly emphasizes in her insightful research note, *Zehn Thesen zur historischen Entwicklung der Chinastudien in Deutschland*, China research has always exhibited a pronounced dependency on politics, affecting its institutional structures, thematic orientations, and methodological frameworks (Leutner 2015: 141). Over time, the field has evolved significantly, shifting from classical philological roots concerned primarily with ancient texts toward an interdisciplinary approach integrating political science, sociology, and economics.<sup>1</sup> Throughout this evolution, German scholars have faced a fundamental challenge: navigating the tension between rigorous academic inquiry and the political demands associated with advisory roles, institutional constraints, and the complexities inherent in conducting research within the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

The German federal government’s recent “Strategy on China” exemplifies the urgency and fragility inherent in this tension, explicitly advocating for “solid, current, and independent expertise on China” within universities and think tanks (Federal Government 2023: 61). Simultaneously, it urges universities and scientific organizations to ensure that cooperation with Chinese institutions upholds the “freedom of science, research, and academic teaching”, emphasizing transparency, public scrutiny, and institutional accountability (ibid.: 44). This challenge has intensified under Xi Jinping’s rule, where heightened ideological vigilance and increasingly restrictive measures have severely limited research opportunities, especially for scholars investigating politically sensitive topics (Chen 2024; Schubert 2024). Consequently, China researchers find themselves at the center of an increasingly polarized debate: Should they sustain dialogue and collaboration at virtually any cost, or should they adopt a more critical stance openly acknowledging the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) tightening grip on academic discourse (Fulda et al. 2022; Schubert/ Alpermann 2022)? This polarization foregrounds controversies around perceived self-censorship and intensifies ethical concerns regarding the feasibility and legitimacy of conducting field research under authoritarian conditions (Habich-Sobiegalla/Steinhardt 2022; Klotzbücher 2022; Seiwert/Kinzelbach 2023).

These tensions highlight the complex interdependence between politics, research, and institutional practices. Against the backdrop of Cold War dynamics and shifting cycles in Sino-Western relations, the opportunities to study contemporary China, the permissibility of research topics, and the selection of methodological approaches

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1 For an introduction to the history of China studies in Germany, see in addition to Leutner (2015) especially Weigelin-Schwiedrzik (2022).

have all been repeatedly renegotiated. Yet, this relationship has never been one-directional. Whether serving as governmental advisors, acting as policy analysts or engaging publicly as intellectuals addressing contemporary issues, German China scholars have significantly influenced policy decisions and public debate alike. Government institutions, media outlets, and business communities actively seek their expertise to better understand China's domestic policies and international strategies, inevitably drawing scholars deeper into the political complexities of Sino-Western relations (Messingschlager 2024b).

Against this intricate historical backdrop, this historiographical research note critically analyzes the multidimensional interplay between China research and politics, focusing on the development of China research in the Federal Republic of Germany since 1949. The analysis unfolds along four clearly delineated dimensions: First, how contemporary Chinese politics transitioned from the periphery of classical Sinology to a core focus of interdisciplinary China studies. Second, how macro-political forces such as Cold War tensions, bilateral diplomatic agreements, and geopolitical shifts decisively shaped institutional structures, research opportunities, and thematic priorities. Third, how scholars and institutions have navigated their engagement with the PRC, balancing between close collaboration, deliberate distance, or cautious pragmatism aimed at safeguarding autonomy while ensuring necessary access. Fourth, how German China scholars evolved from academic observers into influential policy advisors, shaping public opinion and governmental policies on issues ranging from economic cooperation and human rights to technological security.

Across these four dimensions, a consistent pattern emerges: academic engagement with China unfolds within a perpetually shifting field of tension, in which scholarly independence and practical cooperation uneasily coexist. Recent developments, notably sanctions against European research institutes critical of the CCP, underscore the pressing need for clearer ethical guidelines to safeguard researchers, ensure transparency, and maintain the integrity of academic inquiry. Amid rising pressures from Chinese authorities and growing scrutiny from Western policymakers, scholars increasingly advocate for collectively articulated ethical standards to address these complex challenges transparently and consistently (Habich-Sobiegalla/ Steinhardt 2022).

In short, this contribution reconstructs the historical trajectory of German China research, tracing its transformation from a predominantly philological endeavor into a dynamic field shaped profoundly by geopolitical interests, authoritarian governance, and global economic interdependencies. Reflecting upon seven decades of Sino-German academic interactions, it critically examines how scholars, think tanks, and institutions have navigated their complex relationships with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), underscoring the enduring challenges that arise whenever scholarly inquiry intersects directly with political realities. Ultimately, this research note aims not only to elucidate these historical dynamics but also to foreground the

distinct ethical and methodological challenges that characterize contemporary scholarship, thereby fostering a nuanced and informed debate about the present and future of China research in Germany.

## **From Philology to Politics: Embracing Contemporary China**

For much of the early postwar era in West Germany, contemporary Chinese politics occupied only a marginal position within academic Sinology. Many senior scholars of the 1950s and 1960s focused primarily on classical texts and premodern history, regarding the People's Republic of China and its revolutionary politics as overly ideological and thus ill-suited to what they saw as "objective" scholarship (Leutner 2015: 148–150). This attitude stemmed from the inherited philological ethos of the discipline, which emphasized linguistic rigor and historical exegesis, as well as from a Cold War climate that cast detailed inquiries into a Communist state as politically fraught. In that environment, Sinology in West Germany presented itself as a neutral field bound to textual traditions, thereby evading what its practitioners deemed too topical or politicized – namely, Mao's radical transformations. The result was an often stark divide between Sinology's classical-linguistic focus and emerging social-scientific approaches that sought to engage with contemporary Chinese society, mass campaigns, ideology, and political change.

An important early exception was the Hamburg-based Sinologist Wolfgang Franke, who from 1950 onward argued that neglecting the PRC's current realities meant failing to understand China's broader cultural and social transformations. At his institute, he deliberately shifted the curriculum so that students learned modern Chinese before classical language, an unconventional pedagogy that exemplified his conviction that present-day developments deserved equal scholarly attention (Messingschlager 2024a). In his inaugural lecture at Hamburg University in 1951, Franke explicitly advocated for opening Sinology toward an interdisciplinary approach that incorporated methodologies from archaeology, history, and philosophy, clearly opposing the dominant philological tradition in Germany (Franke 1952). This innovative stance sharply contrasted with positions taken at other institutions, notably Munich University under Erich Haenisch, who explicitly rejected the introduction of modern Chinese into curricula as "unscientific", firmly adhering to a strictly philological orientation (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2022: 49; Messingschlager 2024a).

Despite Franke's progressive stance, he remained relatively isolated within the broader Sinological community throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. Thus, it was political scientists rather than classical Sinologists who began to systematically examine contemporary Chinese politics during this period. In the 1960s, Jürgen Domes emerged as a key proponent of "gegenwartsbezogene China-Forschung" (contemporary-oriented China research), situating the Chinese Communist Party's organizational structure, elite rivalries, and ideological campaigns at the heart of his

empirical inquiries.<sup>2</sup> His early publications, notably *Von der Volkskommune zur Krise in China* (1964) and *Die Ära Mao Tse-tung* (1971), deployed data-driven methods that departed sharply from the hermeneutic focus on classical texts. Domes' endeavors at the Free University of Berlin and later in Saarbrücken institutionalized the study of contemporary Chinese politics in West German higher education and paved the way for a broader realignment that would see politics become an increasingly vital research field.

By the late 1960s, several convergent factors sparked a decisive paradigm shift. Exposure to American-style "China Studies", which integrated politics and sociology, combined with a new generation of scholars keen to investigate Mao-era campaigns and early reform efforts, prompted West German universities to expand their programs. Particularly significant in this context, as Mechthild Leutner points out, were figures such as Hellmut Wilhelm, himself a student of Otto Franke, the so-called "Nestor of German Sinology". This interdisciplinary and politically engaged approach, introduced in the United States, was effectively re-imported into German academia, marking a substantial turning point (Leutner 2015: 150).

Additional impetus came from broader geopolitical developments, including Sino-American rapprochement and West Germany's diplomatic recognition of the PRC in 1972. Private foundations such as the Stiftung Volkswagenwerk increasingly supported interdisciplinary "Area Studies" models, facilitating institutional innovations. At the Ruhr University Bochum, the newly established Faculty of East Asian Studies under Wolfgang Franke's former student Bodo Wiethoff introduced parallel professorships in language, literature, history, economics, and politics, signifying a conscious move toward comprehensive regional expertise and a more interdisciplinary approach (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2022: 50–52). Meanwhile, the Free University of Berlin, in the wake of the 1968 student movement, reorganized its East Asian Institute to include specialized positions for modern Chinese politics and devoted more coursework to topics such as CCP governance, policy-making, and ideology.

Beyond the universities, a cluster of policy-oriented think tanks emerged or expanded their remit in ways that fostered rigorous analysis of modern China. The Hamburg-based Institute for Asian Studies (Institut für Asienkunde, IfA) began publishing *China aktuell* and supported new research on the PRC's domestic and foreign policies. The Bundesinstitut für Ostwissenschaftliche und Internationale Studien (BIOst) in Cologne, founded in 1961, widened its Soviet-centered scope to include the PRC, particularly after 1966. The Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) in Ebenhausen, also established in the early 1960s, produced influential policy analyses that positioned China's reforms and international ambitions within broader strategic debates. Scholars such as Oskar Weggel (IfA), Joachim Glaubitz (SWP) and Dieter Heinzig (BIOst) gained visibility in academic and policy circles.

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2 Cf. the author's telephone and written interview with Marie-Luise Domes-Näth conducted in May 2022.

These institutions, operating at the intersection of scholarship and policy advice, helped nurture a generation of researchers committed to empirically grounded, politically relevant China expertise (Messingschlager 2024b).

In the German Democratic Republic, China research underwent an ideologically distinct but parallel evolution. Initially, GDR scholars viewed Mao's China as a socialist counterpart to be praised, yet the Sino-Soviet rift of the 1960s led to a more critical approach framed by Soviet-aligned Marxist-Leninist interpretations. Rather than dissolving China studies programs outright, institutions like Humboldt University's Section for Asian Studies introduced courses examining Maoist policies through a lens that conformed to prevailing socialist doctrines. This perspective, while ideologically circumscribed, nonetheless engaged systematically with contemporary politics in China. Even where official guidelines mandated criticism of Mao's "cult of personality", GDR-based sinologists such as Eduard Erkes and Siegfried Behrsing continued to influence teaching on modern China, showing that both East and West German contexts ultimately contributed to the field's heightened interest in current affairs by the late 1970s (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2022: 56, 58).

From the 1980s onward, the emphasis on Chinese politics intensified, propelled by Deng Xiaoping's market-oriented reforms, the country's rising global profile, and the political shock of the 1989 Tiananmen protests. Research agendas diversified to include elite politics, minority policy, civil-military relations, and evolving legal frameworks. Scholars such as Jürgen Domes, Thomas Heberer, Eberhard Sandschneider, Thomas Scharping and Mechthild Leutner embraced a more eclectic methodological toolkit that combined historical depth with sociopolitical inquiry, and Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik's work on historiography and legitimacy discourses further bridged the gap between historical and contemporary approaches (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 1984). Policy think tanks like SWP and BIOst broadened their portfolios, publishing analyses on human rights, administrative reforms, and China's budding legal system. As a result, the line separating Sinology and political science blurred, and a new generation of China specialists emerged with a shared focus on contemporary realities.<sup>3</sup>

By the early 21st century, politics had become a cornerstone of China research, reflected in the creation of chairs dedicated specifically to contemporary Chinese politics at major universities such as Berlin, Duisburg, and Tübingen. Scholars including Sebastian Heilmann, Gunter Schubert, Kristin Shi-Kupfer, and Björn Alpermann have investigated everything from party institutions and cadre management to state-society relations under Xi Jinping, employing comparative frameworks that situate China's authoritarian governance alongside global political trends. This approach, however, has also prompted deeper ethical concerns about

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3 On the state of social-science research on China around the turn of the millennium, cf. Thomas Scharping, *Die sozialwissenschaftliche China-Forschung: Rückblick und Ausblick* (Kölner China-Studien Online, no. 1, 2000).

data reliability and the broader question of how a powerful party-state shapes the terms under which it can be studied (Alpermann 2022).

As this brief historical overview illustrates, the integration of political analysis into German China research evolved from a peripheral interest into a central pillar of Sinology and related disciplines. This transformation was neither linear nor uncontroversial: Cold War anxieties, disciplinary disputes, institutional reforms, and international scholarly exchanges all shaped the extent to which political themes could be explored. Nevertheless, by the turn of the millennium, a broad scholarly consensus had emerged that understanding contemporary China fundamentally required engaging with its political dynamics. This paradigmatic shift established the foundation for the politically attuned and socially engaged scholarship that now characterizes German China studies.

## **Geopolitical Shifts and Internal Dynamics: How Politics Mold China Research**

This disciplinary trajectory, however, has always been closely intertwined with the broader macro-political environment. Academic inquiry into China in Germany has never occurred in isolation; rather, from the earliest postwar years onward, it evolved within the political architecture of a divided Germany, the wider context of Cold War geopolitics, and subsequently the shifting currents of global power relations (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2022).

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, research into contemporary Chinese history and Mao Zedong's China remained marginal and was approached with considerable caution. The few Sinological institutes that survived or were re-established in West Germany predominantly concentrated on classical and pre-modern China, deliberately steering clear of contemporary political controversies. Scholars who ventured into an examination of Maoist developments risked being labeled as "communist sympathizers" – a considerable threat, given the prevailing anti-communist climate and the lack of formal diplomatic relations between West Germany and the People's Republic of China until 1972. This cautious and conservative stance was further reinforced by the earlier exodus of talented Sinologists under the Nazi regime, which severely weakened the discipline's capacity for intellectual renewal (Messingschlager 2024a).

By contrast, the German Democratic Republic formally recognized the PRC as early as 1949, aligning ideologically with China as part of the socialist bloc under Soviet leadership. Yet East German scholars also found themselves navigating shifting ideological demands, particularly after the Sino-Soviet split of the early 1960s. The ideological divide between East and West thus explicitly shaped research agendas: West German scholars faced political suspicion and potential isolation when studying Maoist China, while their East German counterparts, despite formal diplomatic recognition, were compelled to align their analyses closely with Soviet ideological positions. Paradoxically, however, this ideological rupture drove East

German institutions – particularly Humboldt University’s Section for Asian Studies – to engage more directly and systematically with contemporary political developments in the PRC. They analyzed Mao’s “deviant socialism” within an explicitly Marxist-Leninist interpretative framework. Although these analyses were overshadowed by doctrinal constraints, they often addressed contemporary developments more explicitly and rigorously than was typical in the predominantly philologically oriented environment of West German Sinology. This yielded valuable research, though much remained unpublished and restricted to archival obscurity (Kampen 1998; Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2022: 55–58).

A decisive turning point for West German engagement with contemporary China came toward the end of the 1960s, when Chancellor Willy Brandt’s Ostpolitik catalyzed a broader rapprochement with socialist states, culminating in the establishment of formal diplomatic relations with Beijing in 1972. This diplomatic shift allowed West German researchers for the first time to systematically study contemporary China. The intergovernmental agreement on scientific and technological cooperation, signed on October 9, 1978, proved especially significant for fostering academic exchanges and funded collaborations among government agencies, universities, and research institutes. While these initiatives were not solely academic – economic interests and strategic considerations played a considerable role – they did inspire delegations to explore the PRC’s evolving policy landscape. Early efforts by scholars like Oskar Weggel in Hamburg signaled a deliberate move toward policy-relevant China research, with political scientists and economists joining sinologists to assess Deng Xiaoping’s initial reforms, thereby accelerating an interdisciplinary turn in German China studies (Schütte 2006; Messingschlager 2024b).

Throughout the 1980s, cooperation between Germany and China continued to expand, further supported by additional agreements following the 1978 treaty. Subsequent accords covering economic cooperation and cultural exchanges provided the basis for extensive joint academic initiatives. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, projects such as the Chinese-German University of Applied Sciences (CDHAW) and the Chinesisch-Deutsches Hochschulkolleg in Shanghai introduced dual-degree programs, advanced language training, and various institutional collaborations. Concurrently, German research organizations intensified their partnerships with Chinese counterparts, exemplified by the Sino-German Center for Research Promotion, established in Beijing in 2000 (Chinesisch-Deutsches Zentrum für Wissenschaftsförderung). Operated jointly by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) and China’s National Natural Science Foundation, this institution initially prioritized collaboration in the natural sciences and engineering – fields viewed as less politically contentious – although the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) soon broadened their funding to encompass social sciences and the humanities as well. Initiatives such as “Sprache und Praxis in der VR China” aimed explicitly at cultivating linguistic and cultural competencies, thereby nurturing a new

generation of scholars equipped to engage deeply with contemporary Chinese realities (BMBF 2025)

This era of relative openness was marked by increased student mobility and a steadily expanding network of bilateral university partnerships, which, by 2024, would encompass over 1,300 formal collaborations. The proliferation of Confucius Institutes across Germany after 2004 further contributed to training a younger generation of Sinologists. Regular governmental consultations within the framework of the so-called “comprehensive strategic partnership”, initiated in 2011, provided an official forum for aligning bilateral research priorities, thus deepening academic and institutional connections between Germany and China (ibid.). These periods of positive diplomatic relations undoubtedly facilitated institutional growth, enhanced researchers’ access to visas, permitted on-the-ground data collection, and supported the establishment of robust scholarly networks – highlighting the profound interdependence between scholarship and political conditions.

However, the turmoil surrounding the late 1980s and early 1990s starkly exposed the fragility of these relationships. The Tiananmen Square crackdown in June 1989 triggered an immediate suspension of numerous academic exchanges and provoked public outrage, prompting German scholars to critically re-examine human rights conditions and the ethical dimensions of engaging with China (Domes-Näth 1995). This crisis initiated profound internal debates within the German academic community about scholars’ ethical responsibilities, resulting in lasting skepticism toward uncritical engagement with official Chinese narratives and reshaping both institutional and individual approaches to fieldwork and collaboration. Though the suspension of exchanges was not permanent, the events of 1989 underscored the extent to which developments in Beijing could abruptly restrict field research and fundamentally reshape German perceptions of China.

The post-Tiananmen period also witnessed accelerated methodological diversification, as German researchers increasingly adopted comparative analyses, discourse analysis, and intensified their cooperation with international scholarly networks. This shift mirrored broader methodological trends toward more critical and interdisciplinary scholarship, reflecting a significant departure from previous, more cautious approaches.

The turn of the millennium brought a fresh wave of enthusiasm for engaging with China, largely driven by its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 – a landmark event that substantially deepened Germany’s commercial involvement with the PRC. This development spurred increased funding for China-focused research, notably through the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and institutions such as the German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA), both of which shifted greater attention toward the economic and political dimensions of China’s rapid transformation. Many observers at the time anticipated that expanded trade relations and legal reforms would gradually facilitate political liberalization. Cooperative programs focusing on law and governance flourished,

including initiatives designed to train Chinese jurists in Germany. However, despite the proliferation of philanthropic and governmental grants, funding typically favored less politically contentious areas such as infrastructure development and technological cooperation, whereas sensitive issues related to human rights, minority repression, or the authoritarian nature of the Chinese party-state proved significantly more challenging to finance.

Since the early 2010s, China's ascendancy on the global stage has coincided with Xi Jinping's consolidation of political authority, creating an increasingly challenging environment for scholarly inquiry. Rising Sino-Western tensions – further exacerbated by events such as the COVID-19 pandemic – have heightened uncertainties for researchers (Schubert 2024). Those investigating sensitive topics such as elite politics or ethnic policies in regions like Xinjiang face growing restrictions, including travel bans and the risk of being blacklisted by Chinese authorities (Seiwert/ Kinzelbach 2023). Western governments, increasingly concerned about intellectual property rights and security implications, have intensified scrutiny of collaborative research with Chinese partners (The Federal Government 2023: 41–44). Consequently, German universities have been encouraged to adopt clearer guidelines addressing dual-use technologies and data protection. Moreover, the pandemic underscored the vulnerabilities associated with dependence on in-person fieldwork; as China closed its borders, scholars turned to digital methodologies and diaspora-based studies. This shift highlighted the substantial difficulties inherent in analyzing politically sensitive phenomena under conditions of limited transparency.<sup>4</sup>

Paradoxically, Xi Jinping's increasingly repressive policies have heightened international awareness of China's global ambitions, intensifying the demand for reliable and independent China expertise both in Germany and internationally. Institutions such as the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS), alongside renowned university-based institutes, have expanded their capacity to monitor Beijing's policy shifts through remote methodologies and strengthened collaboration with exile and diaspora communities. Simultaneously, established academic centers like the German Institute of Global and Area Studies continue striving to maintain open channels of scholarly communication. Newly developed guidelines from bodies such as the Federal Foreign Office and the BMBF underscore the critical need to safeguard academic independence and responsibly manage associated risks. Although these recommendations sometimes conflict with local interests in maintaining unrestricted cooperation, a heightened sense of caution regarding

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4 See, for example, the new EU-funded project “Remote Ethnography of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region”, led by Rune Steenberg (Palacký University, Olomouc), Vanessa Frangville (Université libre de Bruxelles), and Björn Alpermann (JMU Würzburg), URL: <https://www.phil.uni-wuerzburg.de/sinologie/forschung/forschungsprojekte/laufende-projekte/remote-ethnography-of-xinjiang-uyghur-autonomous-region/>.

technology transfer, data security, and the potential implications of authoritarian influence now characterizes many Sino-German research partnerships.

In retrospect, developments in German China research since 1949 reveal a consistent pattern: periods marked by intensive collaboration – facilitated through bilateral treaties, academic exchange agreements, and sustained institutional investment – have frequently resulted in significant scholarly achievements and extensive interpersonal networks. Conversely, abrupt political crises have periodically disrupted academic access and shifted researchers' scholarly agendas. Incidents such as the Tiananmen Square crackdown and intermittent travel restrictions vividly illustrate the inherent vulnerability of academic inquiry to external political dynamics. Yet these disruptions have simultaneously spurred methodological innovation, notably in remote sensing and big-data analytics, facilitating rigorous research even when traditional on-site fieldwork becomes impractical. While German funding agencies and policymakers continue to emphasize the importance of robust, autonomous scholarship resistant to political interference, contemporary researchers now routinely navigate complex ethical and methodological dilemmas posed by political constraints, intensifying geopolitical tensions, and increasing demands for specialized knowledge on China's swiftly evolving political and social landscape.

These macro-political conditions highlight the necessity for German China studies to remain flexible and resilient, drawing valuable lessons from past disruptions to refine both scholarly methodologies and ethical frameworks (Alpermann 2022; Fulda 2024: 181–196). As Xi Jinping's administration intensifies domestic control and global alliances shift, the question of how extensively scholars should or can collaborate with institutions in the People's Republic of China has grown increasingly complex. The manner in which this delicate balance is achieved will significantly shape the field's future trajectory, particularly given its historical experience navigating Cold War suspicion, post-Mao rapprochement, and the often contradictory forces inherent in globalization.

## **Balancing Access and Integrity: How China Researchers Manage Engagement with Beijing**

Since the 1970s, German-speaking China studies has repeatedly confronted the question of how closely scholars should align themselves with the People's Republic of China and its ruling Chinese Communist Party. This dilemma reflects a persistent tension: on one side, many researchers see engagement with the PRC as vital for accessing archives, field sites, and personal networks that enable deeper insight into Chinese society; on the other, such cooperation may invite self-censorship or a tacit acceptance of authoritarian norms, particularly if political sensitivities or unwritten rules restrict open inquiry. Over the decades, attitudes toward engagement with Beijing have shifted in response to China's internal developments – such as Deng Xiaoping's reforms, the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown, and Xi Jinping's increasingly

strict ideological controls – and to evolving debates in Germany itself, where discussions of “systemic rivalry” and authoritarian influence have grown increasingly contentious.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a climate of political rapprochement significantly expanded opportunities for West German scholars to conduct firsthand research in the PRC. Deng Xiaoping’s policy of “reform and opening up” enabled greater access to archives, field sites, and official institutions, encouraging many Western researchers to explore previously inaccessible aspects of contemporary Chinese society and politics.

Yet despite this new openness, scholars working in the PRC continued to encounter implicit but clearly delineated boundaries set by the CCP. Research typically needed to remain within politically acceptable frameworks, such as economic reform, rural modernization, and cultural subjects, while sensitive political topics – particularly those challenging CCP legitimacy – remained tacitly discouraged. Avoiding explicit criticism of the regime often facilitated visa approvals, extended fieldwork stays, and deeper collaboration with Chinese institutions. Consequently, researchers who ventured too openly into sensitive subjects risked subtle forms of obstruction, from delayed archival access to the quiet withdrawal of local cooperation.

Within this constrained but comparatively permissive environment, experiences varied considerably. In this context, some Western scholars were drawn to China not only by scholarly interest but also by ideological sympathies or revolutionary enthusiasm shaped by their experiences during the 1960s and 1970s. Their favorable stance toward China’s modernization policies often resulted in privileged access and official goodwill. Researchers who developed informal networks and trusted personal relationships frequently gained deeper insights and access to unofficial information compared to scholars who relied solely on formal institutional channels. Some scholars perceived as maintaining particularly close ties with Chinese authorities secured unique research opportunities. Thomas Heberer, who initiated fieldwork in China in the 1980s, cultivated robust relationships with local officials and community leaders, facilitating groundbreaking research into minority policies and grassroots political participation. Similarly, Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer developed a nuanced approach to understanding China’s historical and philosophical traditions, consistently warning Western audiences against oversimplified portrayals of the PRC as merely “authoritarian”. Their open stance toward dialogue resonated positively with Chinese institutions, culminating notably in their trip to Xinjiang in 2023. The subsequent reflections published by Heberer and Schmidt-Glintzer in a Swiss newspaper and later compiled into a book sparked significant controversy in Germany (Heberer/ Schmidt-Glintzer 2023). Critics argue that such visits risked unintentionally endorsing sanitized narratives regarding the treatment of Uyghurs, whereas supporters counter that direct, albeit carefully controlled, access was indispensable for obtaining authentic insights into sensitive issues.

This episode captures the ongoing dilemma for well-connected German sinologists: although proximity to the CCP can yield privileged data and insight, it also exposes researchers to accusations of legitimizing propaganda. The same dynamic applies, in reverse, to those taking a more distant or openly critical stance. In recent years, under Xi Jinping's tightened rule, foreign academics who publish or speak bluntly about minority repression, elite politics, or other sensitive subjects risk being blacklisted altogether (Kostka 2025). The ban on Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) staff in 2021, along with travel prohibitions against scholars such as Adrian Zenz, reflects Beijing's growing readiness to sanction outside researchers who challenge official narratives (Human Rights Foundation 2021; MERICS 2021). While such "distant" experts often achieve high visibility and moral authority in European policy circles and the media, they pay the price of losing direct access to field sites, data, and interlocutors within mainland China.<sup>5</sup>

In 2022, a significant and contentious debate emerged within German-speaking China studies concerning the appropriate stance and conduct of scholars researching China. This discourse centered on questions of moral responsibility related to human rights issues, conditions for fieldwork within China, and the positionality of researchers. On March 9, 2022, sinologists Björn Alpermann and Gunter Schubert published an article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) titled *Gegen das moralische Kreuzrittertum*, in which they criticized what they perceived as the increasing moralization of China studies. They cautioned against turning research into a "moral crusade", arguing instead for nuanced analysis and warning that an overly confrontational approach could undermine meaningful scholarly exchange and critical dialogue.

In response, on March 16, 2022, Andreas Fulda, Mareike Ohlberg, David Missal, Horst Fabian, and Sascha Klotzbücher published a rebuttal in the *FAZ* titled *Grenzenlos kompromissbereit?*. In their article, they accused Alpermann and Schubert of unfairly stigmatizing critical scholars and downplaying the Chinese government's growing influence on German universities. Fulda and his co-authors explicitly highlighted financial dependencies arising from collaborations with Chinese entities – such as Confucius Institutes – and pointed to the associated risks for academic freedom and scholarly independence.

Both sides acknowledged that the Chinese government under Xi Jinping has intensified repressive measures against researchers who critically examine sensitive political issues, using entry bans and sanctions as instruments to discipline academic inquiry. Consequently, these developments significantly influence researchers' methodological choices, the scope of accessible research topics, and even their public positioning. While Alpermann and Schubert advocate continued direct engagement and cooperation with Chinese scholars and institutions, Fulda and his

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5 For an introduction to the ethical challenges involved in conducting social science research on contemporary China, see the nuanced discussion provided by Björn Alpermann (2022); for a broader perspective on research in authoritarian contexts, see also Glasius, De Lange, Bartman et al. (2018).

colleagues urge a more critical approach, emphasizing transparency and caution in academic collaborations with China. Ultimately, this debate underscores persistent tensions between scholarly objectivity, practical necessity, and moral responsibility regarding human rights. It has profoundly impacted China studies in Germany, sparking an intensive discourse on academia's role within the current geopolitical landscape and prompting critical reflection on research ethics and positionality among scholars.

A similar trade-off shapes the role of China experts in policy advisory contexts. During periods of relative *détente* – such as the mid-2000s under Germany's “Wandel durch Handel” (“change through trade”) policy – the federal government predominantly sought guidance from experts who advocated constructive engagement and maintained cooperative relationships with Chinese counterparts. However, as tensions have risen under Xi Jinping's increasingly assertive and authoritarian governance, German officials have more frequently sought counsel from China scholars willing to deliver forthright assessments on politically sensitive topics such as human rights violations and technological security risks, even if these experts have consequently found themselves barred from entering the PRC. Within the broader scholarly community, a researcher's professional reputation hinges significantly on their ability to navigate these complex pressures without compromising academic integrity. Scholars who skillfully engage with Chinese sources, provide nuanced yet candid analyses of CCP policies, and maintain respectful dialogue with their Chinese counterparts typically earn substantial recognition among their peers. Conversely, academics perceived as overly accommodating towards official narratives or those whose critical advocacy verges on polemics at the expense of analytical depth are often subject to scrutiny regarding their scholarly rigor and ethical responsibilities.

The result is a broad spectrum of possible positions, influenced by personal convictions, institutional affiliations, career ambitions, and the broader macro-political climate. With Xi Jinping's consolidation of authority diminishing prospects for political liberalization, German China scholars increasingly confront challenging decisions. Close collaboration with Chinese institutions may promise privileged access to primary sources, valuable personal networks, and substantial policy influence, yet it simultaneously raises significant ethical dilemmas and carries reputational risks. Conversely, adopting a more critical or detached stance might provide clearer ethical grounding and align more closely with principles of academic freedom, but this approach often comes at the cost of severely limited access to research sites, data, and interlocutors within China. Recurrent controversies – ranging from accusations of self-censorship at Confucius Institutes to Beijing's awards and honors bestowed upon Western scholars – demonstrate how these decisions resonate beyond academia, affecting institutional credibility, funding opportunities, and public perceptions of scholarly independence.

Increasingly, there are calls within the scholarly community to develop collective strategies and clearer ethical standards to manage these challenges. For instance, some German academics have proposed that research visas should be treated as a collective European public good, preventing Beijing from selectively restricting access to scholars it deems critical. Others advocate the establishment of alternative funding mechanisms that reduce dependency on grants tied to the PRC, thereby mitigating the risk of sudden withdrawal of financial support in case of diplomatic disputes or academic disagreements (Habich-Sobieggalla/ Steinhardt 2022). More broadly, scholars increasingly recognize that their positionality – how closely or distantly they engage with CCP authorities – transcends personal decisions, representing instead the core challenge of preserving open and critical academic inquiry amidst growing tensions in Sino-Western relations (Diefenbach 2022).

Looking ahead, these positioning choices are likely to have profound and lasting consequences for German China studies. As Sino-German relations become more complex, with policymakers in Berlin growing increasingly wary of economic dependency and political influence from Beijing, China scholars will need to adapt their approaches without sacrificing methodological rigor. Experiences within the discipline – ranging from those who maintain research access through tactical restraint to those who relinquish such access due to outspoken criticism – underscore the inseparable link between knowledge production and ethical self-reflection. By carefully examining concrete cases across this spectrum, it becomes evident that research feasibility, moral responsibility, and scholarly reputation are fundamentally intertwined within the evolving landscape of Sino-German academic relations. Recognizing this interdependence underscores the urgent need for more transparent, collectively agreed-upon norms and standards, ensuring that the pursuit of firsthand knowledge does not compromise the integrity and independence of scholarly research.

## **Advisors in Demand: The Evolving Role of China Scholars in German Politics**

In the immediate postwar decades, German sinologists were few in number yet played a crucial role as intermediaries between the largely isolated People's Republic of China and West German policymakers, diplomats, and the broader public. This continued a tradition that had begun in the late 19th century and persisted through the first half of the 20th century: from its very inception, German sinology has been oriented toward producing politically useful knowledge, closely aligning the discipline with state and diplomatic interests (Leutner 2015).

During the 1950s, only a handful of scholars in West Germany systematically addressed contemporary developments in the People's Republic of China. Among these few, Wolfgang Franke stood out prominently. Having lived and taught in China until 1950, Franke possessed rare firsthand insights into the Communist regime, positioning him as a crucial interpreter of Maoist politics for West German

officials at a time when direct diplomatic channels with Beijing were nonexistent. Beyond his academic activities, Franke emerged as a pivotal advisor within West German policy circles. From the late 1950s onward, he was actively involved in an expert working group providing regular consultations to the Foreign Office on China-related matters. In the late 1960s, Franke delivered a detailed expert report at the request of the Foreign Office's planning staff, explicitly addressing the strategic question of how West Germany should position itself vis-à-vis China in the future. Furthermore, in preparation for the establishment of formal diplomatic relations with the PRC in the summer of 1972, Franke supported the Foreign Office substantially and also personally accompanied Foreign Minister Walter Scheel as an advisor during his official visit to Beijing in October 1972 (Messingschlager 2024a).

Alongside his colleague Kuo Heng-yü in West Berlin, Franke was thus recognized as one of the very few authoritative experts on a country that remained politically contentious and geographically distant. His influential publications, such as *Das Jahrhundert der chinesischen Revolution* (1958) and *China und das Abendland* (1962), significantly shaped public perception and political understanding in West Germany by introducing broader audiences to the profound transformations taking place in Mao's China.

From the mid-1960s onward, West German foreign policy increasingly drew upon systematically integrated policy advisory institutions. During this period, the German Foreign Office and the Chancellor's Office began extensively utilizing publicly funded think tanks that had progressively emerged since the previous decade. Institutions such as the Institut für Asienkunde (IfA), the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), and the Bundesinstitut für Ostwissenschaftliche und Internationale Studien (BIOst) formed an influential infrastructure of non-university expertise. Prominent scholars affiliated with these institutes – including Oskar Weggel (IfA), Dieter Heinzig (BIOst), and Joachim Glaubitz (SWP) – gained substantial recognition during the 1970s and 1980s, cultivating extensive networks across political, diplomatic, economic, and media circles. Together with university-based experts on Chinese politics, notably Jürgen Domes, these specialists significantly shaped West Germany's understanding of contemporary China, laying the groundwork for sinologists and China scholars to assume increasingly influential advisory roles (Messingschlager 2024b).

The Bundesinstitut für Ostwissenschaftliche und Internationale Studien, initially founded in 1961 as the “Institut zur Erforschung des Marxismus-Leninismus” and renamed in 1966, provides a notable example of this evolution. Its renaming signified a strategic shift away from ideologically driven Soviet studies toward empirically rigorous, interdisciplinary research focused on the Soviet Union, its successor states, East-Central and Southeastern Europe, and the People's Republic of China. Serving as a crucial nexus between academia and policy-making, BIOst regularly supplied federal ministries and the German parliament with detailed

analyses, significantly shaping West Germany's analytical capacities regarding developments in communist countries.

The diplomatic thaw of the early 1970s, culminating in the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between West Germany and the PRC in 1972, further elevated demand for comprehensive, politically relevant China expertise. Sinologists who previously operated predominantly in academic contexts became increasingly engaged in policy discussions. Wolfgang Franke's authoritative *China-Handbuch* (1974) emerged as a standard reference for policymakers, journalists, and business leaders seeking informed perspectives on China's politics, economy, and society. Institutional initiatives complemented this trend; the Institut für Asienkunde launched its monthly publication *China aktuell* (later the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*) in 1970, offering timely analyses of China's domestic and international developments and bridging academic research with practical policy concerns.

Throughout the subsequent two decades, German China scholars frequently advised diplomatic delegations, briefed government officials, and provided nuanced commentary on China's internal upheavals. As the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping's early reforms, and later events such as the Tiananmen Square crackdown captured international attention, experts from institutions like BIOst and SWP became essential interpreters, guiding German audiences and policymakers beyond sensationalism toward informed engagement with China's complex transformations. SWP notably expanded its Asia department from the 1970s onward, producing influential analyses informing parliamentary debates on deepening bilateral ties. Thus, the dual role of these scholars – as rigorous academics and influential policy advisors – was decisively consolidated, cementing their position as indispensable mediators between academic insight and political decision-making (Messingschlager 2024b).

China's accelerating rise in the 1990s and early 2000s pushed the demand for expert guidance to a new level. German governments led by Helmut Kohl and Gerhard Schröder embraced an engagement policy, encapsulated in the phrase "Wandel durch Handel", that required knowledgeable interpreters of China's evolving economy and governance. One leading figure was Eberhard Sandschneider, who became a professor of Chinese politics in 1998 and later directed the Research Institute of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP). His work exemplified the increasingly close intersection between scholarship and policy in the 2000s, as he regularly briefed government ministries and addressed parliamentary committees. In books like *Globale Rivalen. Chinas unheimlicher Aufstieg und die Ohnmacht des Westens* (2007) and in media appearances, Sandschneider argued for a balanced approach that avoided both alarmism and naive optimism. His emphasis on China's interest in a stable international order, particularly during the Eurozone crisis, resonated with officials who viewed steady Sino-German relations as economically vital. Such perspectives shaped the mainstream German stance on

China, especially in the early Merkel era, when policymakers favored forging deeper ties rather than drifting into confrontation.

Institutional transformations after 2000 further amplified the reach and influence of German China experts. Following the closure of BIOst in 2000, many of its experienced staff joined the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), significantly enhancing its analytical capabilities on topics ranging from China's military modernization to EU-China relations. Through targeted policy briefs, confidential consultations, and influential public reports, SWP effectively shaped foreign-policy debates and further reinforced the standing of sinologists as essential interpreters of Asia's largest power. Concurrently, the Hamburg-based GIGA Institute of Asian Studies expanded its advisory role through the widely disseminated *GIGA Focus* series and active participation in governmental working groups.

In this evolving landscape, Sebastian Heilmann – who began his career at the Institut für Asienkunde – emerged as a prominent figure known for integrating rigorous academic inquiry with timely, policy-relevant analysis. Under his leadership, the establishment of the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) in Berlin in 2013 marked a significant evolution in Germany's institutional structure for China research. Unbound by traditional university constraints, MERICS quickly became Europe's largest think tank dedicated exclusively to contemporary China, regularly delivering detailed and influential analyses directly to policymakers. The institute's close collaboration with the German Foreign Office was notably highlighted in 2023, when Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock chose MERICS' headquarters as the venue to publicly unveil Germany's official China Strategy. This Strategy explicitly praised MERICS as a critical research hub and indispensable contributor to German policymaking (The Federal Government 2023: 61).

This development represented a watershed moment in the history of China expertise in Germany. For the first time since the peak period of academic policy advising in the 1970s and 1980s, China-related scholarly expertise was systematically integrated into policy processes over a period spanning more than eighteen months, utilized in various formats ranging from confidential briefings to public events. This substantial reliance on China experts marked a notable shift, significantly raising the profile and impact of academic China research within German policymaking circles.

Traditional research institutes such as SWP and GIGA continued to sustain their influential advisory roles, conducting comprehensive analyses on critical topics such as China's Belt and Road Initiative, potential security risks associated with 5G technology, and the PRC's expanding economic footprint in Europe. Furthermore, experts from these institutions actively contributed to EU-level forums and international projects, underscoring their growing importance not only within Germany but also in broader European policy contexts. Reports regularly published by MERICS, SWP, and their affiliates frequently alerted policymakers to the emerging challenges posed by China's increasing international influence, thereby

catalyzing strategic discussions on how best to manage the political, economic, and technological risks inherent in deeper engagement with Beijing.

Over the last seventy years, then, the role of German sinologists has undergone a series of transformations. In the 1950s, they were isolated specialists assisting a cautious state. By the 1970s and 1980s, they were interpreters of a dynamic China undergoing both revolutionary and reformist upheavals. In the 1990s and early 2000s, with globalization accelerating, many sinologists became strategists who advised on what was widely seen as a mutually beneficial commercial relationship. The 2010s pushed that trajectory further, as entities like MERICS rose to shape policy debates, and by the early 2020s, contentious topics around human rights, geopolitical competition, and technology transfer made the expert role even more visible and politically charged (Messingschlager 2024b). The long-standing intersection of scholarship and political relevance remains the defining feature of German China studies, which continues to provide the deeper context needed for informed policymaking. With China occupying a central position in Germany's foreign policy agenda, experts in the field have become indispensable participants in public and governmental discussions alike, reminding decision-makers that nuanced, research-based perspectives are vital for navigating an increasingly complex relationship with the People's Republic of China.

## **Conclusion: Navigating the Complexities of Politics, Scholarship, and Ethics**

Tracing the evolution of German China research from 1949 through the early 2020s reveals its profound entanglement with broader political dynamics. Initially rooted in classical Sinology and textual traditions, the discipline gradually expanded into an interdisciplinary exploration of contemporary China, driven by geopolitical shifts and the demand for policy-relevant expertise. Cold War tensions, bilateral diplomatic developments, and most recently, the intensified authoritarian policies under Xi Jinping have recurrently shaped the institutional frameworks, research priorities, and conditions of scholarly access. Throughout these transformations, scholars continuously faced the challenge of balancing rigorous academic inquiry against practical constraints, political sensitivities, and the pressures of institutional affiliations.

The interplay between scholarly independence and political engagement emerges as a central, enduring tension throughout the field's history. In the postwar period, concerns about ideological contamination initially kept contemporary China studies at a distance, while later decades saw scholars navigating complex relationships with Chinese institutions, benefiting from open diplomatic channels but also confronting abrupt ruptures, such as the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown or the more recent tightening of research conditions under Xi Jinping. Individual researchers continue to wrestle with the practical implications of their scholarly positions, balancing the need for nuanced, first-hand insights against the risks of censorship, visa restrictions,

or accusations of complicity. Simultaneously, the expanding role of China experts as public intellectuals and policy advisors underscores how closely intertwined academic work has become with governmental interests and public discourse.

At this critical juncture, marked by escalating geopolitical rivalries and heightened scrutiny, German China studies faces increasingly intricate ethical and methodological dilemmas. Western policymakers now exercise greater caution regarding academic cooperation and intellectual property, while Chinese authorities impose tighter constraints on sensitive research topics. Media coverage, meanwhile, frequently amplifies suspicions of ideological complicity or self-censorship. Navigating such complexities requires scholars to consistently reflect on their positionality, transparency, and ethical responsibilities. Rather than proposing rigid prescriptions or uniform approaches, the scholarly community might benefit from cultivating clearer, collectively endorsed standards that articulate best practices in research transparency, data management, and protection of collaborators.

Such shared principles could help mitigate pressures stemming from external political constraints and public expectations, safeguarding researchers and their interlocutors without imposing undue limitations. Ensuring transparency regarding funding sources and clearly communicating standards for protecting collaborators in China, for example, could reduce ethical ambiguities. Emphasizing methodological rigor and academic autonomy as core values also supports the continued legitimacy and public trust in the discipline. However, these considerations must remain adaptable and context-sensitive, reflecting the inherent complexities and rapid geopolitical shifts that characterize contemporary Sino-German academic interactions.

Historically, nuanced and critical scholarship has been instrumental in enabling Germany's informed engagement with China – from navigating Mao-era transformations to addressing the strategic challenges posed by Xi Jinping's consolidation of power. Precisely because China studies have repeatedly proven their value to policy formation and public understanding, maintaining scholarly integrity and methodological transparency becomes increasingly vital amid rising political pressures. Preserving this delicate balance demands continued intellectual courage, self-awareness, and collective reflection within the scholarly community.

Ultimately, German China studies have consistently proven their resilience and adaptability by directly engaging with complex political realities. The field's ongoing relevance will significantly depend on scholars' sustained commitment to nuanced, critical, and ethically grounded inquiry. As geopolitical tensions grow and research conditions become increasingly constrained, preserving a tradition of reflective, independent scholarship is not merely an intellectual imperative but an essential basis for informed, balanced policymaking. Looking ahead, the development of transparent ethical standards will be indispensable for ensuring the continued integrity, credibility, and practical impact of German China studies in an era marked by intensifying geopolitical rivalry.

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**Forschungsbeitrag (nicht begutachtet)**

# **The Role of German Universities in Academic Engagement with China**

**Matthias Stepan, Ilker Gündoğan, Rosa Schmidt-Drewniok and Jörn-Carsten Gottwald**

## **Abstract**

This article examines how German universities engage in “science diplomacy” in their evolving relationship with the People’s Republic of China. Based on the Stiftung Mercator-funded project “Universities as Actors in Dialogue with China” (Hochschulen als Akteure im Dialog mit China), the study integrates interaction-oriented policy research, organizational actorhood, and science diplomacy scholarship to conceptualize universities as composite yet strategic actors. Empirically, it combines extensive document analysis with 49 semi-structured interviews with university-based researchers and administrators in the Ruhr and Frankfurt Rhine-Main regions. The findings reveal a broad, decentralized configuration of cooperation that includes student exchanges, joint curricula, research laboratories, and even a German campus in Hainan, yet provides limited institutional oversight of informal projects and scant internal coordination. Since the advent of Xi Jinping’s more intrusive science and security agenda, interviewees report increased politicization, securitization and regulatory complexity, heightening concerns about academic freedom, intellectual property leakage and dual-use research risks. Although many German universities identify primarily with “diplomacy for science” and “science for diplomacy,” few regard themselves as ‘diplomats’ proactively engaging in “science in diplomacy.” Capacity constraints, federal fragmentation, and ambiguous national policies further hinder systematic risk management, although due-diligence tools are increasingly being used. The study concludes that disengagement from China would undermine global problem-solving and that differentiated, transparency-oriented strategies — clarifying red lines, strengthening China competence and knowledge, and EU-level policy coordination — are essential if German universities are to remain credible bridge-builders while safeguarding academic integrity in an increasingly contested geopolitical environment.

**Keywords:** German-Chinese higher education cooperation; Science Diplomacy; Academic Freedom; International Research Collaboration

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## Introduction

In an era of increasing globalization and scientific interconnectedness, universities play a crucial role in fostering international cooperation. This is particularly true for academic relations between Germany and the People's Republic of China (PRC), two key players in global science, education and research. German universities have long been important participants in these exchanges, actively shaping collaborations ranging from student mobility and joint degree programs to large-scale research projects and institutional partnerships. However, these relationships exist within an increasingly complex (geo)political, economic and societal framework that has become more challenging in recent years (Fischer 2017).

Despite deep economic integration, German–Chinese relations have become strained, with changing political and economic interests and strategies affecting academic cooperation. The return of geopolitics to international relations is emphasizing security and redefining the framework for technological and scientific collaboration. In China, tighter political control in the Xi Jinping era has led to more restrictions on civil society engagement, limiting the space for open dialogue and international academic exchange (Lang and Holbig 2018). At the same time, growing concerns in Germany about academic freedom, the protection of intellectual property, and the potential military applications of civilian research conducted with Chinese partners have fueled debates about the future of these partnerships. As a result of these developments, many in German universities increasingly perceive the PRC as a “difficult” partner (DLF 2022a). The increasing politicization and securitization of international research cooperation and the political scrutiny of science diplomacy pose significant challenges for universities, researchers and policymakers alike (HRK 2020). How are German higher education institutions adapting to these fundamental changes?

The research project “Universities as Actors in Dialogue with China” (Hochschulen als Akteure im Dialog mit China, HADCh), funded by the Mercator Foundation, explored the dynamics, challenges, opportunities and possible paths for future German–Chinese academic cooperation. The project was based on extensive document analysis and expert interviews with university representatives in two major German metropolitan regions: the Ruhr area and the Frankfurt Rhine-Main region. By examining the structural conditions, interaction processes and outcomes of these collaborations, the study provides a nuanced understanding of the role of German universities in science diplomacy with China.

The findings highlight the broad spectrum of activities within German–Chinese academic partnerships. These range from student exchange programs and collaborative research projects to the establishment of joint research laboratories. While these initiatives offer significant potential for strengthening bilateral relations and promoting scientific excellence, they also underscore the need for clear guidelines and regulatory frameworks to address issues such as intellectual property protection, academic freedom, and ethical research standards. Universities

increasingly face the challenge of balancing the benefits of international cooperation with the need to mitigate risks in a rapidly evolving (geo)political environment.

Moreover, the study shows that German universities are not passive participants in international knowledge production, but active agents in shaping science diplomacy. As science diplomacy becomes a contested and highly politicized field, universities and researchers must increasingly navigate political expectations, institutional constraints and personal considerations. The project's findings underline the importance of diversifying international partnerships, developing best practice guidelines and enhancing China competence within academic institutions. At the same time, there is a growing need to promote structured dialogue and coordination between and within German universities to ensure a more strategic approach to cooperation with Chinese partners.

This paper presents the key findings of the HADCh project and provides a comprehensive analysis of the current state and future prospects of German–Chinese higher education cooperation. By providing empirical evidence, it aims to contribute to a more informed and balanced debate on the role of universities in international academic engagement with China. As global challenges such as pandemics, public health crises and climate change increasingly require cross-border scientific collaboration, the study underlines the need to maintain and strategically shape academic exchanges in a way that upholds fundamental research values while adapting to changing (geo)political conditions.

## **Theoretical Framework and the Method**

In order to do justice to the complexity of German–Chinese university cooperation, the project pursued an explorative research approach. It was guided by an interdisciplinary perspective that combines theoretical and conceptual approaches from interaction-oriented policy research (Mayntz and Scharpf 1995), organizational research (Braun 2001; Fumasoli et al. 2019) and international relations, more precisely science diplomacy (Flink 2019; Rungius and Flink 2020; Stepan and Schmidt-Drewniok 2022), which is becoming a priority for the European Union in a changing geopolitical and scientific–technological context (DGRI 2025). These combined views allow universities to be seen not only as educational and research establishments, but also as active agents of international dialogue.

The two central aspects of the study are “science diplomacy,” that is, the intended contribution of universities to dialogue with China, and “actorness,” meaning the capacity of universities to play an appropriate role in science diplomacy. Following the research on international “X-diplomacy,” science diplomacy is defined as the deliberate attempt by state and non-state actors to use science, scientists and non-academic staff at universities, as well as scientific events and meetings, to address foreign actors and publics with the aim of strengthening international relations and/or overcoming tensions that have arisen through dialogue, preferably with an outcome that corresponds to one's own normative judgements, or at least to create

and deepen an understanding of the other side's problem or position (Gündoğan 2023). "Actorness" or "organizational actorhood" refers to the ability of an organization, in this case higher education institutions, to be politically active or to be able to act strategically (Drieskens 2017; Elken and Røsdal 2017).

In the project we define this actor quality according to the criteria of structure, centrality, identity, competencies, orientation and capacity (Fumasoli et al. 2019; Bloch 2021). The extent to which universities possess such actor quality is controversial. Braun (2001: 249), for example, describes the German university as a "loose organizational cluster, but not a target-oriented organization." The external relations of researchers are seen as difficult to manage. Accordingly, HADCh follows Scharpf's (2000: 97) "double perspective on corporate actors": The external perspective sees universities as complex composite actors with specific resources and the ability to use these resources strategically. In this perspective, universities are scientific actors and important for diplomacy. The internal perspective defines universities as institutional structures in which actors interact with each other and carry out actions that are then attributed to the universities. Here, actors at different organizational levels of universities are involved in science diplomacy, including the rectorate, faculties, institutes, researchers and university administration.

The concept of science diplomacy highlights the role of universities not only as centers of research, teaching, knowledge exchange and education, but also as key actors in shaping international relations and cooperation (Flink and Ruffin 2019). In this capacity, higher education institutions act both as complex, composite actors and through their individual members within different sub-organizations, engaging in all three dimensions of science diplomacy. They contribute by generating and providing knowledge as a basis for diplomatic engagement (Dimension 1: Science for Diplomacy), they operate within frameworks established by diplomatic agreements that shape their opportunities for cooperation (Dimension 2: Diplomacy for Science), and they actively engage in diplomacy themselves by fostering international scientific cooperation and serving as platforms for dialogue and exchange (Dimension 3: Science in Diplomacy) (DGRI 2025).

Universities compete not only with each other, but also with other social groups with their own interests and normative underpinnings for access to policy-makers, who often favor scientists whose positions coincide with their own (Renn 2011). In addition, concepts and values such as rationality, evidence or freedom of research and science, which are often assumed to be universal, are interpreted and organized differently in different education systems (Marginson 2014; Anonymized Interviews). Particularly in autocratic political systems such as the PRC, the subordination of science to clear ideological and political objectives is a problem for representatives of German universities and policy-makers, and is not compatible with the idea of free science (Perry 2020; Pringle and Woodman 2022). The separation between military and civilian research, which in Germany, for example, is reflected in different laws, internal university guidelines and ethical codes, as well

as in the structures of research funding for example, the German Research Foundation—Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG—does not fund projects that explicitly serve military purposes), has been formally abolished in China since 2017 to allow for greater integration and use of resources between the two spheres (SC 2017). These different interests, logics and values pose major challenges for science diplomacy and increase demands on the actorness or organizational actorhood of German universities in dialogue with China.

This brings the internal perspectives of universities to the fore. The work of Braun (2001) or Fumasoli et al. (2019) offers insights into the institutional logic and organizational behavior of universities, which in particular shed light on internal dynamics, decision-making processes and their impact on cooperation relations. This perspective makes it possible to understand the peculiarities and challenges that German higher education institutions face in developing and maintaining international partnerships in the federally organized German education system, and to illuminate the tension between national problem-solving approaches and organizational realities on the ground.

The project relied on a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods, using the project and funding databases of the DFG-GEPRIS, the German Academic Exchange Service, the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the German federal government and the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, BMBF) to identify and evaluate official cooperation agreements. Interviews were conducted with key figures in the case regions and accompanied by complementary in-depth interviews in other regions of Germany, workshops with focus groups and document analysis. At the beginning of the project, the research team developed a catalogue of guiding questions, which included questions addressed at the university level as well as at the level of the individual researcher. Depending on the context or category of respondent, questions were selected accordingly.

A categorical distinction was made between research and administration respondents. The research group consisted mainly of professors, but also included a small number of research associates (Wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiter). The group of administration respondents consisted of heads and staff of international offices, coordinators of international affairs at universities, and deans and vice-deans of faculties at German universities. Non-documented background interviews were conducted with a number of respondents on request.

A total of 49 semi-structured interviews were conducted in two case regions—the Ruhr area and the Frankfurt Rhine-Main Region (see Table 1). The structure of the interviews allowed for a flexible response to new developments or changes in the context of cooperation. Examples include the lifting of pandemic travel restrictions and the provision of new information and advice.

**Table 1:** Interviews with University Staff from Research and Administration

| Case region                    | Number of interview partners TOTAL | Number of interview partners RESEARCH | Number of interview partners ADMINISTRATION | Number of interviews | Number of universities |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| Ruhr area                      | 28                                 | 19                                    | 9                                           | 26                   | 8                      |
| Frankfurt Rhine-Main           | 21                                 | 11                                    | 10                                          | 19                   | 9                      |
| Complemented by: other regions | 4                                  | 3                                     | 1                                           | 4                    | 3                      |

Source: Authors’ illustration

## German–Chinese University Cooperation: The Macro Perspective

German–Chinese higher education cooperation is characterized by a broad and diverse range of partnerships covering numerous disciplines and fields, from the humanities and social sciences to engineering at technical universities and universities of applied sciences. With more than 1,300 formal partnerships, as well as informal networks and initiatives, forms of cooperation range from promoting the exchange and mobility of students, researchers and lecturers, to the development of joint curricula and degree programs, joint research projects and long-term joint laboratories or even entire institutes (HRK 2020). The Chinese–German University of Applied Sciences (Chinesisch–Deutsche Hochschule für Angewandte Wissenschaften, CDHAW) and the Chinese–German University College (Chinesisch–Deutsches Hochschulkolleg, CDHK) are examples of long-term, structured cooperation between German university consortia and Chinese university partners. In 2023, Bielefeld University of Applied Sciences became the first German university to open a campus in China without a Chinese partner (HSBI 2023). The idea of outsourcing standard ideology courses to foreign partners could not be realized at Hainan Bielefeld University of Applied Sciences. Chinese students seeking a degree in China are required by the Chinese higher education law to take compulsory courses in China Studies—political–ideological education—which are currently provided by Chinese partner institutions (Bundestag 2025; Anonymized Interviews). Despite many initial challenges for this university project, the presence of a German higher education institution in Hainan, as part of a drive to further internationalize higher education, opens an important new channel for EU–China cooperation (Gottwald and Taube 2024).

The impetus for such cooperation is generated by a number of factors. They are often part of universities' internationalization strategies and benefit from the excellence of Chinese and German universities in the international context. In addition, economic interdependencies or joint efforts to tackle (global) challenges, such as climate change, play an important role in deepening bilateral relations in the higher education sector. International research cooperation can form the basis for the joint development of solutions. Collaboration between scientists from both countries also helps to strengthen the economic and technological capacities of the two countries. In this context, interviewees in both case regions pointed to the catalytic role of Chinese politics, whose industrial and innovation policies have both contributed to the expansion of cooperation and increasingly caused friction under changing (geo)political conditions (Anonymized Interviews).

Many interviewees stressed the need to teach students about internationalism and interculturalism. One interviewee said that he “does not believe in ‘change through trade,’ but in ‘change through exchange’” (Anonymized Interview). Accordingly, the mobility of students and academics is seen as important. While the number of Chinese students in Germany increased steadily until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of German students in China increased moderately but steadily (see Figure 1). In its 2024 report, the DAAD referred to around 39,000 students from China in Germany (DAAD 2024). It also pointed to the significant contribution of Chinese PhD researchers, scientists and visiting scientists from China to German higher education institutions. According to an analysis by the OECD and the Federal Statistical Office, about 29% of Chinese students who started studying in Germany between 2006 and 2011 were still in Germany ten years later (Destatis 2022). The number of Chinese visiting scholars in Germany and German visiting scholars in China was uneven but at a high level until the outbreak of the pandemic (see Figure 2). These figures demonstrate the attractiveness of both higher education systems for international talent and the willingness of researchers in both countries to cooperate. This mobility not only promotes scientific and cultural exchange between the two countries, but also strengthens mutual understanding and bilateral relations at both personal and institutional levels.

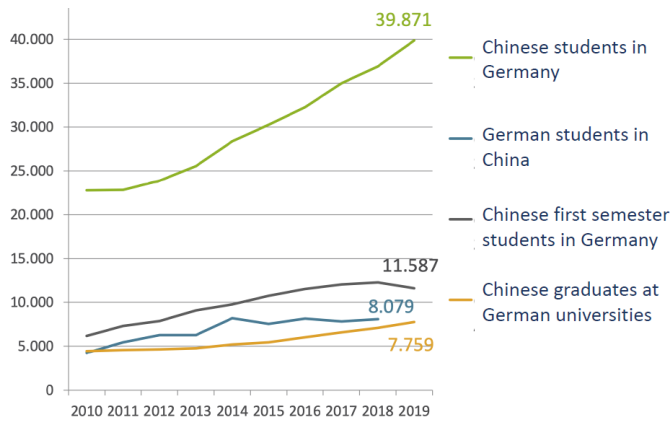
However, despite these exchanges, German–Chinese university cooperation also faces a number of challenges, particularly with regard to the protection of intellectual property and the associated undesirable transfer of knowledge and technology, the dual-use problem in joint research projects, the safeguarding of academic freedom as understood and protected by the German constitution (Basic Law), and navigating an increasingly complex geopolitical context (DLF 2022b). Interviewees described an increase in political pressure from both sides:

Chinese colleagues reported “political training courses.” Until a few years ago, Germany was a very popular premium partner. Skepticism affects everyone, including Germany. There is also a lot of pressure on the German side. The German side has become more reserved and cautious. Politically this is

understandable, but scientifically I think this is a lose-lose situation. (Anonymized Interview)

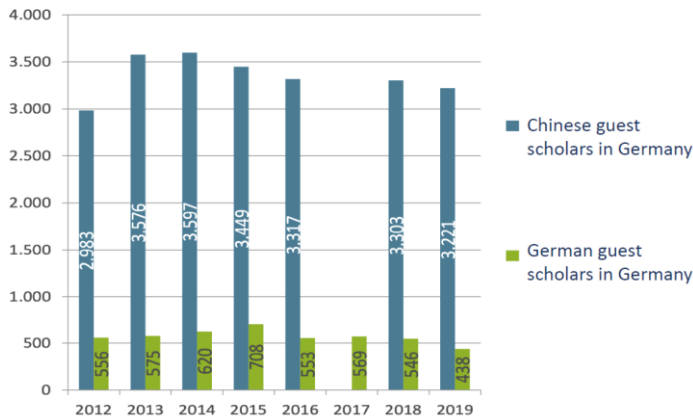
This situation calls for a balanced approach that safeguards academic integrity while fostering productive and mutually beneficial partnerships.

Figure 1: Mobility of Students before the COVID Pandemic



Source: DZHW (2021)

Figure 2: Mobility of Scholars before the COVID Pandemic



Source: DZHW (2021)

In addition, German–Chinese scientific cooperation is increasingly hampered by different and sometimes conflicting legal frameworks, such as data export laws in China (CAC 2022). These challenges require careful consideration and strategic planning by the participating universities in order to maximize the benefits of cooperation while minimizing the risks. The development of clear legal requirements, criteria and guidelines for cooperation can help to overcome these challenges and promote long-term and productive cooperation between German and Chinese universities.

From this macro perspective, German–Chinese higher education cooperation offers a picture of diversity, heterogeneity and change. Contrary to a public debate dominated by security considerations and de-risking, the interviews paint a picture of researchers and administrators who continue to see academic cooperation as an important bridge for the exchange of knowledge, cultural understanding and scientific innovation (Anonymized Interviews). However, in order to ensure the integrity and success of these international education and research partnerships, cooperation structures need to be continuously reflected upon and adapted to changing (geo)political and societal circumstances. Corresponding initiatives and measures at the national level in Germany are reflected in efforts within the universities to improve their processes and strategies (Anonymized Interview). However, the analysis of the two case regions reveals considerable deficits when it comes to doing justice to the importance of universities for science diplomacy in the face of limited resources and lacking organizational procedures (Anonymized Interview).

### **German–Chinese University Cooperation in the Ruhr Area and the Frankfurt Rhine-Main Region**

The HADCh project has focused on universities in two major metropolitan regions in Germany: the Ruhr area and the Frankfurt Rhine-Main region. Both regions are characterized by a high density and diversity of universities and research institutions with a wide range of forms of international university cooperation with China. Cooperation and agreements can be found at different levels. The degree of formalization, intensity and duration of higher education cooperation between German and Chinese actors varies. Often it is committed individuals such as university presidents and individual academics who drive forward German–Chinese higher education cooperation. In this project, only those agreements that are clearly linked to an organizational unit of the higher education institution and are set down in writing have been taken into account. Visiting professorships, research stays or fellowships, guest lectures and joint publications were not included (see Table 2).

Furthermore, these regions represent different characteristics within Germany: the Ruhr area with its industrial transformation into a knowledge and research region and the Frankfurt Rhine-Main region as an important financial and educational center. Both regions are home to BMBF-funded projects for the regional networking

of China expertise as well as BMBF-funded projects for the promotion of independent expertise on China (BMBF 2020; 2021). The analysis of the case regions thus provided an opportunity to complement developments at the macro level with an illustrative examination of actors, capacities, processes and cooperation patterns at the organizational and individual levels.

**Table 2:** Agreements at Different Levels

| Level                   | Form of the agreement and content of the exchange                                                                                                      |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| University              | University partnership, agreements or memoranda of understanding on cooperation in exchange, teaching and research, membership of university consortia |
| Faculty                 | Agreements or memoranda of understanding on cooperation in exchange, teaching and research                                                             |
| Chair/section/institute | Agreements or memoranda of understanding on cooperation in teaching and research                                                                       |
| Individual researcher   | Visiting professorships, research stays or fellowships, guest lectures, co-publications                                                                |

Source: Authors' Illustration

### Case Region 1: Ruhr Area

In the Ruhr area, universities have developed strong networks and partnerships with Chinese counterparts based on their long experience in international cooperation (see Table 3). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, cooperation between German universities in the Ruhr area and their Chinese university partners enabled several hundred people to visit each other's countries each year to deepen their knowledge and understanding of the host country and its society. Researchers and administrators alike emphasized that exchanges between the two sides have reached such a scale that it is almost impossible to keep track of the full range of participants. In addition to official programs supported by research collaborations or scholarships, there are many forms of individual mobility that are difficult or impossible for universities to monitor. In the words of one respondent, "anything that has to do with money can be found," but in the words of another respondent, many activities resemble a "private pleasure" to which university administrations have little or no access (Anonymized Interviews).

According to the experts interviewed, cooperation with China has contributed to the internationalization of universities. However, China is only one important—but by no means the most important—partner for the participating universities. In the light of the COVID-19 pandemic and changing political conditions, many interviewees pointed out that countries and regions other than East Asia and/or within East Asia, such as Japan, South Korea or Taiwan, had become more important. For example, one interviewee said he had noticed a shift away from the PRC towards Taiwan. Collaboration with Taiwan is easier because there are fewer uncertainties and fewer internal university regulations to consider. In addition, Taiwanese universities are very advanced in many fields of research. The prospects for increased collaboration with the PRC after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated travel restrictions were assessed as skeptical to negative (Anonymized Interviews).

**Table 3:** Cooperation between Universities in the Ruhr Area and China

| Name of the university                                                  | Number of collaborations |     | Consortia |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----|-----------|
|                                                                         | HADCh                    | HRK |           |
| Ruhr University Bochum                                                  | 24                       | 9   | CDHK      |
| University of Duisburg-Essen                                            | 15                       | 15  |           |
| International School of Management                                      | 10                       | 5   |           |
| TU Dortmund University                                                  | 9                        | 3   |           |
| Fachhochschule Dortmund -<br>University of Applied Sciences and<br>Arts | 7                        | 6   |           |
| FOM University of Applied Sciences<br>for Economics and Management      | 7                        | 4   |           |
| Folkwang University of the Arts                                         | 3                        | 2   |           |

|                                                      |   |   |       |
|------------------------------------------------------|---|---|-------|
| <b>Ruhr West University of Applied Sciences</b>      | 3 | 3 |       |
| <b>Georg Agricola University of Applied Sciences</b> | 2 | 2 |       |
| <b>Westphalian University of Applied Sciences</b>    | 2 | 1 | CDHAW |
| <b>Bochum University of Applied Sciences</b>         | 1 | 1 | CDHAW |

Source: Authors' Illustration

The role of universities as bridge builders, promoting not only academic exchange but also cultural dialogue and mutual understanding between Germany and China, deserves special mention. In personal discussions with university administrators and scholars, however, it became clear that there is only a low level of identification with the term science diplomacy and that the universities in the Ruhr area are generally rather passive, reserved or even absent in the public debate on the organization of exchanges with China. Only a few experts with many years of experience in university cooperation with China on the basis of official agreements see a clear role here that goes beyond the individual level of researchers. In the past, China knowledge or competence and cooperation with China at German higher education institutions tended to be personal, uncoordinated and non-institutionalized (Stepan et al. 2018). They were also characterized by strong, long-standing personal contacts with Chinese individuals, some of whom had or still have very successful careers in the Chinese national science and innovation system and in state-owned enterprises (Anonymized Interviews). Overall, there is a strong fragmentation of university cooperation with China and China expertise in the Ruhr area, characterized by decentralized federal structures and individual experiences of cooperation.

No evidence of financial dependence on cooperation with China could be found. China's contribution to raising third-party funding and as a source of financing for research projects and positions was assessed as low to non-existent. Rather, positive effects on the demand for study places were mentioned, which, however, do not have direct positive financial effects as in the Anglo-Saxon system (Anonymized Interviews).

For most of the university administrators interviewed in the Ruhr area, China is part of a broader debate about how to deal with illiberal states. In this context, there are awareness-raising efforts, references to the due diligence of science and research, and an assessment of risk management in exchanges with China. Concrete organizational implementation seems to be more crisis-driven and less institutionalized. Only one university administration had set up an explicit China group at the time of data collection, but its further activities remained open after an

acute crisis situation had been overcome. Many university leadership units stated that they had no overview of activities with China (or other international partners), and within faculties there was often little exchange of information or internal coordination. In the interviews conducted, researchers in STEM disciplines in particular indicated that they would like to avoid political issues as far as possible and only discuss “factual issues” related to research with Chinese partners. This suggests that the political implications of exchanges and joint research projects are largely ignored, although German researchers are aware of the political dependencies and instructions that Chinese scientists are subject to in the Chinese science and innovation system (Anonymized Interviews).

Some university administrators and researchers feel overwhelmed by the situation. They stated that there is “simply too much information” to get a comprehensive picture. The majority of interviewees expressed a wish for greater coordination and concentration of resources within Germany and the EU in the context of cooperation with China (Anonymized Interviews). At the same time, a “saturation” of offers and discussions on the subject is perceived. There is therefore a need for a more structured and coordinated China competence in Germany with visible points of contact for all stakeholders, including those who do not belong to the “usual suspects” who make use of such offers. In the meantime, there are China competence centers dedicated to strengthening China competence in Germany, such as the BMBF-funded measure Regio China. Nevertheless, there is a feeling that much has been missed in recent years (Anonymized Interviews).

For our interviewees, exchange with colleagues outside the university who work in the same field (research) or in the same function (administration) is more relevant than exchange within university management or the faculty. However, measures to improve the level of information and internal coordination are being pursued by almost all universities in the Ruhr area, albeit with varying degrees of intensity and depth (Anonymized Interviews).

## **Case Region 2: Frankfurt Rhine-Main**

The interviews and data collection in the Frankfurt Rhine-Main region, an important and highly interlinked financial and educational center spanning the three federal states of Hesse, Rhineland-Palatinate and Bavaria (see Table 4), largely confirm the findings of the interviews in the Ruhr area. The interviews with university researchers and administrators at various levels underlined individuality and personal commitment as the driving forces behind cooperation with Chinese partners. In most cases, the central and sometimes pivotal role traditionally played by professors in the German university system determines the intensity and scope of cooperation with China (Anonymized Interviews).

It is only in the context of the emerging security policy debate on cooperation with China that university administrators are assuming a more active role, in most cases in the sense of limiting cooperation. Risk assessment and management are becoming

increasingly important parts of university procedures in the region. However, very few universities have a sophisticated system for recording, monitoring and controlling cooperation partnerships with Chinese actors. Again, many measures seem to depend on the situation and the priorities of the university administration (Anonymized Interviews).

**Table 4:** Cooperation between Universities in the Frankfurt Rhine-Main Region and China

| Name of the university                          | Number of collaborations | Consortia  |
|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|------------|
| Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz             | 15                       |            |
| Goethe University Frankfurt                     | 12                       |            |
| Technical University of Darmstadt               | 10                       | CDHK       |
| Frankfurt School of Finance and Management      | 8                        |            |
| Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences        | 5                        |            |
| Justus Liebig University Giessen                | 5                        |            |
| Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences        | 4                        |            |
| RheinMain University of Applied Sciences        | 3                        | CDHW       |
| Fulda University of Applied Sciences            | 2                        |            |
| Aschaffenburg University of Applied Sciences    | 1                        | CDHW       |
| Bingen Technical University of Applied Sciences | 1                        | CDHK, CDHW |
| Fresenius University of Applied Sciences        | 1                        |            |

Source: Authors' Illustration

The central importance of personal contacts, which could only be partially maintained during the COVID-19 pandemic, was often pointed out. The changed political conditions in China were also seen as a challenge for future cooperation. As in the Ruhr area, a very positive picture of the development of the quality of

scientific research in China in recent years prevailed among the interviewees (Anonymized Interviews).

However, generalizations about “the Chinese,” “Chinese culture” and “the way science is organized in China” were quite common (Anonymized Interviews). Experienced researchers often tended to romanticize their own networks and overestimate their own skills in dealing with external and internal advice and training services. Not in all cases does a deeply rooted culturalist perspective on Chinese colleagues and their research ethics seem to have led to a critical reflection on one’s own competences and ways of working in the face of rapid technological, political and social change in China and on China as an important actor in global science (Anonymized Interviews).

Risk awareness and the protection of one’s own research results are central aspects of cooperation with Chinese partners in order to avoid an unwanted transfer of knowledge and technology to China. Nevertheless, there are still researchers who, despite a “queasy feeling,” do not use a separate laptop in China or do accept USB sticks as gifts because they believe that “everything important” is “stored” in their minds (Anonymized Interview). This attitude suggests a sense of superiority on the part of these individuals, who are convinced that only they are capable of accurately interpreting and understanding their research findings.

As one administrator explained: “Some professors have been doing this for years and they think they know better and the International Office has no idea. But the International Office has an interest in preventing harm” (Anonymized Interview). Overall, however, these are the exceptions. The safe handling of data and raising awareness of how to deal with politically sensitive issues was an important issue for most interviewees.

In particular, respondents from universities of applied sciences in Germany were more sensitive when Chinese delegations visited and individual Chinese students and researchers involved in military research applied for positions. In this context, it was mentioned that access to security-related research projects and information was not granted (Anonymized Interviews). Regarding the application of a Chinese PhD student, it was noted that he had applied for a PhD position in mathematics despite having “no experience in mathematics.” His thesis was on attack drones. The university reported this to the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution. The applicant then applied to five other universities in Germany and failed the screening process. He was denied a visa (Anonymized Interview).

It is striking, however, that many of the researchers interviewed often see the concrete consequences as a challenge for others: “The others have problems, I do not.” Clear rules to protect Chinese colleagues, staff and students tended to play a subordinate role in the perceptions of the interviewees. Negative incidents were perceived as a series of “individual cases”—and often externalized as a challenge (Anonymized Interviews).

Here too, as in the Ruhr area, university representatives reported being overburdened, with “extremely little time and a lot of information to process” in order to “deal with the issue in a decisive manner” (Anonymized Interview). One university has therefore decided to conclude a service contract with an external provider “who takes care of the risk analysis, the preliminary examination and the visa problem” (Anonymized Interview). However, most universities do not have the financial resources to purchase external advice and services.

In addition, interviewees consistently reflected changing demand for exchanges with China, in particular reduced student demand for China-related programs and content, and pointed to growing interest in cooperation with other East Asian countries such as South Korea and Japan, as well as neighboring EU countries (Anonymized Interviews).

## **Key Findings of the Case Studies**

The case studies of the Ruhr area and the Frankfurt Rhine-Main region provided important insights into the many facets and the potential of German–Chinese university cooperation. Overall, and especially among the group of professors, there is little awareness of being part of science diplomacy through the often individual activities of cooperation with China. The university administration is perceived as an obstructive actor that at best supports these activities and provides legal backing, but at worst makes cooperation more difficult or, according to one explicit accusation, monopolizes it. Given the politicization and, to some extent, securitization of German–Chinese scientific relations in recent years, there is a degree of skepticism among both researchers and administrators as to how the generally recognized need for further cooperation with China in the field of science can and should be put into practice. The dimension of science engaging in diplomacy itself is supported by very few respondents (Science in Diplomacy), while the dimensions of science as a (potential) bridge to diplomacy (Science for Diplomacy) and that diplomatic relations affect their opportunities for cooperation (Diplomacy for Science) are both strongly supported.

However, interviews in both regions reinforced doubts about the quality of universities as actors (actorness). Coordination within universities, between researchers and administrators, but also within faculties and among colleagues, was in almost all cases not yet fully developed and institutionalized. Discussion forums and committees were generally little used, especially by researchers who had been working in and with China for some time.

In addition, the steering capacity of university administrators is very limited where there are no funds flowing through university accounts and no formal cooperation agreements in place. This situation was identified as a challenge by a number of interviewees, as it makes it difficult to systematically record a university’s China-related activities. The extent to which such non-formalized cooperation between university professors and other researchers is covered by the freedom of research

and teaching seems questionable. Some state university laws, such as that of North Rhine-Westphalia, contain a paragraph explicitly stating that freedom of research and teaching “does not exempt from loyalty to the constitution” (NRW 2025: § 4). In North Rhine-Westphalia, the state government can “prohibit or impose conditions on university cooperation [between German universities located in North Rhine-Westphalia and Chinese partners] if the cooperation between the educational institution and the cooperating university represents a danger to public safety or order, in particular if it conflicts with the foreign interests of the state” (NRW 2025: § 75).

Nevertheless, the institutional context of universities seems to create a field in which many individual behaviors are difficult to register and rule violations difficult to punish. As one university administrator explained: “We in the administration cannot prohibit university cooperation with China or other countries, even if we wanted to, we can only raise awareness. Freedom of research is upheld by the university’s legal department. External control laws would have to be demonstrably and specifically violated in order to be able to intervene, which is not usually the case. The ethics of the individual scientist is the bottom line” (Anonymized Interview). Exchanges and collaborations between German researchers and Chinese industrial companies seem to encounter similar difficulties and are rarely recorded systematically (Anonymized Interviews).

Despite doubts about the consistent actor quality of German universities, the results underline their role as composite actors actively participating in international dialogue and as key actors in shaping bilateral science, education and research relations between Germany and China. The case studies illustrate the importance of careful planning and implementation of higher education cooperation with China. They also illustrate the need to establish clear frameworks, criteria and guidelines that take into account the interests of both sides and ensure meaningful and mutually beneficial cooperation.

It is noticeable that, compared to other European Union member states such as the Netherlands, there is hardly any interdisciplinary exchange or even joint research cooperation with or about China in the case regions between the STEM disciplines and social and humanities research on China in Germany. This may be due to the fact that there are certain reservations between these groups of researchers within Germany, as one interviewee expressed, for example, that “natural scientists are certainly a bit naïve when it comes to dealing with China” and that they have “sometimes stumbled into cooperation with China” (Anonymized Interview). On the other hand, many researchers in the natural sciences are aware that their colleagues in the social sciences and humanities tend to deal with political issues related to China, which could jeopardize their own cooperation. Others complained that China scholars in Germany are often “more historically and culturally oriented” and rarely deal with the economy and politics of modern or global China (Anonymized Interviews).

## Challenges and Opportunities at Different Levels in Germany

### The Federal and State Politics Levels

University cooperation between Germany and China opens up many opportunities that go far beyond traditional academic exchange. It provides a platform for dialogue and targeted knowledge transfer in times of global challenges such as climate change, sustainable development and public health. The opportunities offered by German–Chinese university cooperation therefore lie above all in the possibility of contributing to the global common good through education and research. Through joint research projects and initiatives, German and Chinese scientists can develop innovative solutions that have a positive impact on societies worldwide. Moreover, the mobility of students and researchers between the two countries strengthens intercultural competence and prepares the next generation for a highly networked and globalized workplace, despite growing (geo)political frictions in recent years.

According to the analysis of the interviews and documents, the greatest risks at the national level include a growing black-and-white approach to relations with China and the resulting polarization, as well as a growing demand for easy solutions, such as the termination of all cooperation, as in the case of Russia. “For many who have no relationship with China, cooperation is too risky. I cannot deal with these fears alone,” said one interviewee (Anonymized Interview). At the other extreme, freedom of research and science is used to justify any university cooperation with China until a crisis situation arises (Anonymized Interviews).

The generally welcomed increased consideration of security policy aspects in national politics threatens to make it increasingly difficult to take a differentiated view of university cooperation with China in Germany. As one interviewee explained, it is difficult to “draw clear ‘red lines’ because there are usually ‘grey zones.’ It is important to be aware of these ‘grey zones’” (Anonymized Interview). Although there are some very different perceptions at the university level, there are no clear red lines in dealing with China at the political and legal levels. However, some researchers indicated that they would personally define red lines for themselves, for example “if China supports the Russian side [in the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine],” even when, as in this case, such red lines are not clear (Anonymized Interview).

In addition, some university administrators criticized the lack of legal certainty provided by the legislature and advocated “a decision from Berlin or Brussels” to set the framework for cooperation with China (Anonymized Interview). This is compounded by the traditional difficulties of coordinating central policies and services in Germany’s federal system, where responsibility for higher education is devolved to the Länder, severely limiting the scope for national solutions.

## The University Level

Chinese universities have been and will continue to be important partners for German universities in research and teaching. The rapid development of Chinese science and research will make cooperation even more attractive. Without direct access to research in mainland China, many disciplines will miss out on cutting-edge international research. Despite very restrictive policies in the PRC, there is still great interest in access to international research and international academic education (Anonymized Interviews).

However, many universities face significant capacity problems in implementing existing collaborations and establishing new ones. Legal and political issues are complex, require intensive preparation and follow-up, and usually require external involvement. The merging of military and civilian research in China is hardly reflected in the processes and, above all, in the communications of German universities. There is a considerable risk that, contrary to the statements of many interviewees, a retreat into “unproblematic research” with China will become increasingly difficult, if not impossible (Anonymized Interviews).

Many German universities lack documentation on cooperation with China (Anonymized Interviews). This information gap should be closed by university management and administration in order to gain a better overview within the university and to be able to make well-founded higher education policy decisions. Greater internal transparency and information exchange between German university administrations and researchers on cooperation with China is therefore desirable, especially to protect security-related research.

However, a “completely transparent” university should not be created in order to preserve the integrity of science (Anonymized Interviews). Certain data, for example those provided voluntarily or obtained through due diligence, could lead some university administrators to limit cooperation with China as much as possible in order to avoid risks. Not every risk should be used as an opportunity to restrict cooperation between German and Chinese higher education institutions.

Not all universities are willing or able to invest in new skills and know-how. One of the greatest risks at university level therefore seems to be capacity overload in dealing with China, which is also not a priority challenge for many university rectors. This increases the risk of viewing China as a “difficult country” and of putting new initiatives under a general reservation (Anonymized Interviews).

## The Researcher Level

For researchers, cooperation with China continues to provide access to world-leading science in some fields, to a large number of often highly motivated students, and to a high-performance science, technology and innovation system. The Chinese party-state continues to invest heavily in the expansion and internationalization of its research. In particular, the easing of visa regulations for foreigners in China,

including researchers, is currently creating opportunities to strengthen cooperation between Germany and China (CVASC 2024).

In addition to the well-known risks of data security and intellectual property protection, many interviewees perceive increased internal or external pressure to justify engagement in and with China (Anonymized Interviews). Many are also aware of the relatively high costs of carrying out projects with Chinese partners, which threaten to exceed the capacities of individual researchers (Anonymized Interviews). The increased personal risks for Chinese colleagues in China and abroad as a result of the deteriorating political environment is also cited by some as a negative factor against further engagement with China (Anonymized Interviews). However, personal risks still play a minor role.

## Conclusion

German universities continue to play a key role in shaping academic cooperation with China. They have to navigate an increasingly complex (geo)political and regulatory environment. Over the past decades, German–Chinese collaboration has contributed significantly to scientific progress, student mobility and institutional partnerships. However, the deteriorating political climate, concerns about academic freedom, intellectual property protection and the securitization of research cooperation are forcing universities to reassess and refine their strategies for engagement with China.

A key finding of this study is that a one-size-fits-all approach to university engagement with China is neither feasible nor desirable. Instead, universities, policymakers and researchers need to develop differentiated strategies that balance the opportunities and risks of these partnerships. Establishing clear institutional policies and guidelines, implementing due diligence measures and strengthening internal risk assessment mechanisms are essential steps in ensuring responsible engagement. At the same time, increased transparency within universities about their international collaborations—without creating an overly restrictive environment—is necessary to facilitate informed decision-making at all levels.

This study underlines the importance of science diplomacy as a tool for promoting dialogue and maintaining academic exchange. German universities should not see themselves as passive actors, but as strategic participants in international academic relations. To this end, strengthening the China competence of university staff, improving inter-institutional coordination and sharing best practices across academic and administrative levels can help higher education institutions to manage their cooperation with China more effectively. Initiatives such as interdisciplinary research partnerships, enhanced coordination at the European level and structured academic dialogue with Chinese counterparts can provide avenues for ongoing engagement.

While the challenges associated with German–Chinese academic cooperation have intensified, this study emphasizes that disengagement is not a viable solution. Scientific cooperation remains essential to address global challenges such as climate change, public health crises and technological innovation. However, partnerships must be carefully structured to ensure academic integrity and security. Universities should proactively define red lines regarding research areas with potential dual-use concerns, while ensuring that Chinese students and researchers in Germany are supported in an academic environment that upholds ethical and professional standards.

At the policy level, greater coordination between German and European actors is needed to provide a clearer framework for higher education cooperation with China. This includes developing common standards for risk assessment, ensuring compliance with international academic standards, and promoting exchange programs that are consistent with democratic values and scientific openness. Supporting initiatives that enhance knowledge sharing and policy advice between universities and policymakers will be crucial in navigating the evolving (geo)political context.

Finally, German universities need to move towards a more structured, transparent and strategically informed approach to engagement with China. The findings of this report suggest that, despite growing political and ethical challenges, well-managed academic engagement can continue to serve as a bridge between Germany and China. With the right institutional settings, risk mitigation strategies and coordinated policies, universities can maintain their roles as key actors in international science diplomacy while adapting to changing global conditions.

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## Essay

# Zugang unter Vorbehalt: Kooperationen bei der Digitalisierung ostasiatischer Kulturgüter

Reinhard Zöllner

### Abstract

Premodern East Asian cultures—particularly China, Japan, and Korea—have long traditions of encyclopedic, archival, and museological practices shaped by state institutions. In Confucian bureaucracies, written knowledge was central to political order, with large-scale compilations and collections commissioned by court and government. Projects like China's *Yongle Dadian* or Korea's court archives exemplify state-directed control over historical and normative records, with access restricted to select insiders. With the rise of modern universities in the late 19th century, knowledge organization became more professionalized, yet access remained limited due to institutional hierarchies and bureaucratic hurdles. Japan's Historiographical Institute and National Diet Library spearheaded gradual reforms, introducing online databases and digital archives. Still, full openness is hindered by administrative gatekeeping and fragile project continuity. Private and semi-public collections often remain inaccessible, reinforcing asymmetric structures. The National Institutes for the Humanities have improved coordination and interoperability, promoting linked data standards and international collaboration. However, digital sustainability remains precarious, as many initiatives lack stable funding and personnel. My own recent projects, such as those on the Trautz papers and Kataoka shellac records, highlight both challenges and opportunities in global cooperation. These cases underscore the need for long-term strategies, institutional commitment, and reciprocal engagement to preserve and democratize access to East Asia's cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** knowledge governance, archival practices, digital humanities, cultural heritage, East Asian studies

**Reinhard Zöllner**, geboren 1961, ist ein deutscher Historiker und Japanologe mit Schwerpunkt auf der Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte Japans und Ostasiens. Er studierte Geschichte, Japanologie und Philosophie in Kiel, Hamburg und Tōkyō. Nach Professuren in Halle–Wittenberg und Erfurt ist er seit 2008 Professor für Japanologie an der Universität Bonn. Er hat zahlreiche Publikationen zur japanischen und ostasiatischen Geschichte verfasst und sich an der digitalen Sicherung historischer japanischer Quellen beteiligt.

Die vormodernen Kulturen Ostasiens – insbesondere China, Japan und Korea – verfügen über eine lange Tradition enzyklopädischen, archivalischen und musealen Arbeitens, die maßgeblich von staatlichen Institutionen geprägt war. In konfuzianisch geprägten Verwaltungssystemen galt die schriftliche Fixierung von Wissen, Normen und Geschichte als zentrales Element politischer Ordnung und kultureller Autorität. Die Produktion und Sammlung von Texten, Bildern und Objekten erfolgte deshalb überwiegend im Auftrag der Regierung oder des Hofes – sei es in Form von Dynastiegeschichten, umfangreichen Enzyklopädien, Kartenwerken, genealogischen Registern oder zeremoniellen Handbüchern. Besonders in China lassen sich monumentale Projekte wie die *Yongle Dadian* oder die *Siku Quanshu* als Ausdruck einer staatlich gelenkten Wissensarchivierung lesen, bei der das Ziel weniger in öffentlicher Zugänglichkeit als in umfassender Kontrolle und Kanonisierung bestand. In Korea und Japan spiegeln sich vergleichbare Tendenzen etwa in den Hofarchiven, konfuzianischen Schulen oder buddhistischen Klöstern, die als Hüter umfangreicher Handschriftenbestände fungierten. Dabei waren das Sammeln und Systematisieren stets von großer Gründlichkeit und Fleiß geprägt – eine Haltung, die sich in der Sorgfalt beim Kopieren, Kommentieren und Bebildern von Texten ebenso zeigt wie in der Erhaltung zeremonieller Objekte. Gleichzeitig führten die Größe und organisatorische Geschlossenheit vieler dieser Sammlungen dazu, dass ihr Inhalt lange Zeit nur wenigen zugänglich war. Die Verwaltung von Wissen diente primär der Stärkung institutioneller Ordnung, weniger der freien Zirkulation von Information. Diese historische Prägung hat bis heute Auswirkungen auf die Art und Weise, wie sich Digitalisierungsprojekte in Ostasien ihren Quellen nähern – mit starkem Sinn für Vollständigkeit, Texttreue und Hierarchie, zugleich aber oft auch mit Hürden in Bezug auf offene Zugänglichkeit und Nutzerfreundlichkeit.

Mit der Gründung moderner Universitäten in Ostasien, insbesondere seit dem späten 19. Jahrhundert, wurde die Praxis der Datenerhebung, -sammlung und -archivierung zunehmend professionalisiert. Universitäten richteten eigene, gut ausgestattete Bibliotheken, Archive und Museen ein, in denen historische Materialien nicht nur bewahrt, sondern auch systematisch erschlossen und wissenschaftlich erforscht wurden. Forschungsergebnisse fanden fortan Eingang in Fachzeitschriften, Monographien und kritischen Editionen, womit eine neue Phase der Wissenszirkulation anbrach. Gleichwohl blieb der Zugang zu den zugrundeliegenden Materialien vielfach beschränkt: Archive und museale Einrichtungen waren meist primär auf den eigenen akademischen Betrieb ausgerichtet. Zwar wurden Lesesäle eingerichtet und Besucherregelungen geschaffen, doch vollständige Einsicht in Bestände blieb oft nur Angehörigen der Institution vorbehalten. Für die breite Öffentlichkeit – einschließlich unabhängiger Forscher – war der Zugang häufig erschwert, teils durch bürokratische Hürden, teils durch fehlende oder interne Kataloge.

Ein weiteres Hemmnis bestand in der institutionellen Eifersucht zwischen verschiedenen Einrichtungen, die sich nicht selten aus konkurrierenden Deutungsansprüchen oder aus privater bzw. halbprivater Finanzierung ergab. Dies führte dazu, dass Standards der Archivierung und Katalogisierung sich teils stark unterschieden und vielfach nicht öffentlich kommuniziert wurden. Erst seit den 1980er Jahren lässt sich ein langsamer Wandel hin zu mehr Offenheit, Kooperation und Digitalisierung beobachten. Meine nachfolgenden Bemerkungen beziehen sich auf Japan, das ich aus eigener Tätigkeit am besten beurteilen kann.

Ein prägnantes Beispiel für diese Entwicklung ist das Historiographical Institute (*Shiryō Hensanjo*, 史料編纂所) der Universität Tōkyō, das 1929 gegründet wurde, aber auf eine institutionelle Vorgeschichte bis ins Jahr 1869 zurückgeht. Ziel der Einrichtung ist die Sammlung, Bearbeitung und Veröffentlichung historischer Quellen zur japanischen Geschichte, insbesondere aus der vormodernen Zeit. Die bedeutendsten Projekte umfassen die *Dai Nihon Shiryō* (大日本史料), eine fortlaufende chronologische Quellensammlung seit dem 8. Jahrhundert, sowie die *Dai Nihon Komonjo* (大日本古文書), eine systematische Edition alter Urkunden. Das Institut verfügt über eine der umfangreichsten Sammlungen an Manuskripten, Reproduktionen und Mikrofiches zur japanischen Geschichte. Bis in die späten 1980er Jahre war die Nutzung dieser Bestände stark reglementiert und die Einsichtnahme in Kataloge nur auf Anfrage möglich. Erst mit der Einrichtung digitaler Datenbanken und einem wachsenden Bewusstsein für internationale Zusammenarbeit wurden ab den 1990er Jahren schrittweise Online-Angebote geschaffen, die mittlerweile einen gewissen Grad an Transparenz und Öffentlichkeit ermöglichen – allerdings weiterhin mit Vorbehalten gegenüber vollständiger Freigabe sensibler oder exklusiver Materialien.

Aus eigener Erfahrung lässt sich ergänzen, dass der Zugang zu japanischen Universitätsbibliotheken und Archiven – selbst wenn es sich um staatlich finanzierte Einrichtungen handelt – für Außenstehende mit erheblichen Hürden verbunden ist. In der Regel ist ein offizielles Empfehlungsschreiben einer anerkannten wissenschaftlichen Institution erforderlich, um überhaupt eine Benutzungsgenehmigung zu erhalten. Selbst dann ist der Aufenthalt meist zeitlich begrenzt und von strengen Auflagen begleitet. Das Anfertigen von Kopien – sei es in Papierform oder durch eigene Digitalisate wie Abfotografieren – unterliegt einer individuellen Genehmigungspflicht und ist fast immer mit Gebühren verbunden, deren Höhe variieren kann. Wird eine Veröffentlichung der aufgenommenen Materialien beabsichtigt, ist oft ein zusätzlicher Antrag erforderlich, der wiederum mit eigenen Gebühren, in manchen Fällen auch mit Nutzungsauflagen oder inhaltlichen Einschränkungen verbunden ist.

Diese Praxis betrifft nicht nur universitäre Einrichtungen, sondern auch staatliche Museen, historische Archive und selbst private Sammlungen, die sich durch

die Tradierung vormoderner Besitzvorstellungen legitimiert sehen. Viele dieser Institutionen beharren auf Eigentums- oder Verwertungsrechte an historischen Materialien, selbst wenn ihnen solche Ansprüche nach geltendem Urheber- oder Archivrecht gar nicht zustehen. Die faktische Macht liegt dabei weniger im Recht als in der Kontrolle über den Zugang: Forscher, Autoren und Verlage sind sich bewusst, dass offene Kritik oder eigenmächtiges Publizieren zum Ausschluss von zukünftiger Nutzung führen kann. In der Folge entsteht ein stillschweigendes System wechselseitiger Rücksichtnahme, in dem wissenschaftliche Freiheit immer wieder der Sorge um zukünftige Arbeitsmöglichkeiten untergeordnet wird. Diese strukturelle Asymmetrie brems nicht nur die Digitalisierung, sondern auch die öffentliche Verfügbarkeit und internationale Rezeption ostasiatischer Quellenbestände erheblich.

In Japan lässt sich seit einigen Jahrzehnten ein langsames, aber deutlich wahrnehmbares Umdenken beobachten – insbesondere durch das Engagement der National Diet Library (NDL, *Kokkai Toshokan*, 国会図書館), die eine zentrale Rolle in der Digitalisierung von Publikationen und historischen Quellen übernommen hat. Als Nationalbibliothek Japans wurde sie 1948 nach amerikanischem Vorbild gegründet, mit dem erklärten Ziel, die parlamentarische Arbeit zu unterstützen, aber auch dem breiteren Zweck, allen Bürgern gleichberechtigten Zugang zu Wissen und Information zu ermöglichen. Ihre Aufgaben umfassen die Sammlung aller in Japan veröffentlichten Bücher, Zeitschriften, Zeitungen, Karten, Noten, Tonträger und zunehmend auch digitaler Medien – gemäß der Pflichtexemplarregelung. Parallel zur eigentlichen Nationalbibliothek betreibt sie einen zweiten Standort in Kansai, der insbesondere für Langzeitarchivierung und Digitalisierung zuständig ist.

In den letzten Jahrzehnten hat die National Diet Library ihr Profil stark erweitert und sich zur treibenden Kraft bei der systematischen Digitalisierung des schriftlichen Kulturerbes Japans entwickelt. Dabei geht es nicht nur um moderne Publikationen, sondern zunehmend auch um vormoderne Werke – darunter Holzblockdrucke, Handschriften, Kunstdrucke und historische Karten. Ergänzt wird dies durch die Digitalisierung von Tonaufnahmen, Radioarchiven und Bildmaterial. Die NDL unterhält eine Vielzahl frei zugänglicher Online-Datenbanken, darunter die *NDL Digital Collections* (国立国会図書館デジタルコレクション), die *Kindai Digital Library* für Meiji- und Taishō-Zeitungen, sowie das *NDL Sound Archives*.

Auch das japanische Nationalarchiv (*Kokuritsu Kōbunshokan*, 国立公文書館) spielt eine zentrale Rolle in der öffentlichen Bereitstellung historischer Quellen und Verwaltungsdokumente. Es wurde 1971 gegründet, um die dauerhaft aufzubewahrenden Unterlagen der zentralen Regierungsstellen Japans zu sammeln, zu konservieren und der Öffentlichkeit zugänglich zu machen. Seitdem ist das Archiv zu einer unverzichtbaren Institution für die historische und politikgeschichtliche Forschung geworden.

Ein wesentlicher Fortschritt in Bezug auf Zugänglichkeit wurde mit dem Aufbau des Digitalarchivs des Nationalarchivs<sup>1</sup> erzielt. Diese Plattform bietet freien Zugang zu einer großen Auswahl digitalisierter Dokumente aus der Meiji-Zeit bis in die Nachkriegszeit. Dazu gehören unter anderem kaiserliche Edikte, Regierungserlasse, Kabinettsprotokolle, Verwaltungsberichte, Landkarten, Rechtsquellen sowie illustrierte Druckwerke und handschriftliche Amtsdokumente.

Die Plattform ist zweisprachig (Japanisch/Englisch) strukturiert und erlaubt die Suche nach Titeln, Zeiträumen, Produzenten und Themen. Viele der digitalisierten Bestände werden in hoher Auflösung bereitgestellt und sind mit bibliographischen Metadaten versehen. Besonders hervorzuheben ist die Sammlung wichtiger Kulturgüter (*Jūyō Bunkazai*, 重要文化財), die hochwertig digitalisierte Einzelstücke enthält, darunter frühe Verfassungsdokumente, Zeitungen aus der Meiji-Zeit und Bildquellen.

Allerdings bleibt der digitale Zugang selektiv: Nicht alle Materialien des Nationalarchivs sind online einsehbar, und in vielen Fällen ist die Benutzung der physischen Archivräume in Tōkyō notwendig, um vollständige Akten einzusehen. Hierfür gelten Zugangsbeschränkungen, und das Anfertigen von Reproduktionen ist – ähnlich wie bei Universitätsarchiven – an Genehmigungen und Gebühren gebunden. Dennoch stellt das Digitalarchiv einen bedeutenden Schritt dar, um historisch-politische Quellen breiter zugänglich zu machen und den digitalen Wandel in der staatlichen Archivpraxis Japans voranzutreiben.

Diese Programme haben nicht nur den Zugang zu Quellen erleichtert, sondern auch neue Standards in Bezug auf Metadaten, Rechtemanagement und öffentliche Nachnutzung gesetzt. Sie strahlen auf andere Einrichtungen aus, die sich zunehmend an der Nationalbibliothek orientieren. Gleichwohl bleibt der Wandel zäh, denn viele Museen, Archive und private Bestände verweigern weiterhin die vollständige Integration in offene Systeme. Dennoch ist durch die NDL ein erster institutioneller Rahmen geschaffen worden, der langfristig eine Demokratisierung des Wissens im japanischen Raum fördern kann.

Ein weiterer bedeutender Impuls für die Öffnung und Digitalisierung historischer Materialien in Japan ging von den National Institutes for the Humanities (NIHU, *Kokuritsu Ningen Bunka Kenkyū Kikō* 国立人間文化研究機構) aus, die 2004 als Verbund staatlich finanzierter geisteswissenschaftlicher Forschungseinrichtungen gegründet wurden. Ziel war es, die bislang stark fragmentierte geisteswissenschaftliche Forschungslandschaft Japans zu koordinieren, Synergien zu schaffen und digitale Infrastrukturprojekte voranzutreiben.

Dem NIHU-Verbund gehören derzeit sechs zentrale Institute an: das National Museum of Japanese History (国立歴史民俗博物館), das National Institute of

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1 <https://www.digital.archives.go.jp/>

Japanese Literature (国文学研究資料館), das International Research Center for Japanese Studies (国際日本文化研究センター), das Research Institute for Humanity and Nature (総合地球環境学研究所), das National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics (国立国語研究所) sowie das National Museum of Ethnology (国立民族学博物館). Diese Einrichtungen decken gemeinsam ein breites Spektrum an historischen, literarischen, ethnologischen und sprachwissenschaftlichen Materialien ab – von vormodernen Handschriften über audiovisuelle Quellen bis hin zu Alltagsobjekten und Sprachdaten.

Durch die institutionelle Bündelung unter dem Dach von NIHU wurden nicht nur Ressourcen effizienter genutzt, sondern auch datenbezogene Standards harmonisiert. Der Zugang zu digitalen Beständen ist dadurch transparenter und nutzerfreundlicher geworden. Viele der beteiligten Institute haben in den letzten Jahren Online-Portale aufgebaut, die öffentlich zugänglich sind und sowohl strukturierte Metadaten als auch hochauflösende Digitalisate bereitstellen. Besonders hervorzuheben ist die enge Verknüpfung von Forschungsdaten mit laufenden Projekten, was Nutzern die Möglichkeit gibt, die Herkunft, Erschließung und wissenschaftliche Kontextualisierung der Materialien nachzuvollziehen. Darüber hinaus ist die NIHU-Struktur offen für internationale Kooperationen, etwa im Bereich Linked Open Data oder der multilingualen Aufbereitung von Metadaten.

Der Zusammenschluss unter NIHU hat somit nicht nur die interne Zusammenarbeit verbessert, sondern auch die Nutzungsmöglichkeiten für externe Forscher erheblich erweitert – ein wesentlicher Schritt auf dem Weg zu einem offeneren und zeitgemäßen Umgang mit Japans historischem Kulturerbe.

Trotz vieler Fortschritte bleiben die langfristige Sicherung und Nutzbarmachung digitaler Bestände in Japan eine zentrale Herausforderung. Ein zentrales Problem liegt in der mangelnden institutionellen Nachhaltigkeit: Viele Digitalisierungs- und Erschließungsprojekte werden temporär finanziert, oft durch Drittmittel oder befristete Förderprogramme. Die eigentliche Pflege und Bereitstellung der Daten erfolgt dabei häufig durch Projektmitarbeiter – nicht durch dauerhaft angestelltes Fachpersonal. Sobald ein Projekt ausläuft, fehlen sowohl finanzielle Mittel als auch personelle Strukturen, um die Ergebnisse weiterzuführen. Infolgedessen bleiben Erfassungen oft unvollständig, Interfaces veralten, und vormals zugängliche Daten werden wieder unsichtbar.

Gleichzeitig sind viele historische Bestände außerhalb staatlicher Institutionen durch äußere Faktoren gefährdet. Private Sammlungen – oft in Familienbesitz oder kleineren Religionsgemeinschaften – sind nicht nur durch Erdbeben, Überschwemmungen und Brände bedroht, sondern zunehmend auch durch den demographischen Wandel: Die Nachfolge ist ungeklärt, das Wissen über Herkunft und Bedeutung der Bestände geht verloren. Ohne geeignete Strategien für Übertragung und Digitalisierung droht ein irreversibler Verlust kulturellen Erbes.

Ein eindrückliches Beispiel für die Problematik mangelnder Nachhaltigkeit bietet das Digitalisierungsprojekt der Ryūkoku-Universität in Kyoto zur visuellen Rekonstruktion buddhistischer Höhlenmalereien entlang der Seidenstraße. Im Rahmen eines interdisziplinären Forschungsprojekts wurden dort bis 2007 über mehrere Jahre hinweg hochauflösende Bilder, 3D-Scans und Animationen erstellt, die die farbliche und räumliche Wirkung der Malereien aus Orten wie Dunhuang digital nachbilden. Die Ergebnisse wurden unter anderem als Video-Installationen auf Ausstellungen gezeigt und auf der Universitätsseite präsentiert.

Trotz der beeindruckenden Resultate ist das Projekt inzwischen weitgehend zum Stillstand gekommen: Die verantwortlichen Mitarbeiter sind nicht mehr an der Universität tätig, die institutionelle Zuständigkeit ist unklar, und konkrete Anfragen zu Materialzugang, Nutzungsmöglichkeiten oder Fortsetzung des Projekts bleiben unbeantwortet. Die digitale Sammlung selbst – in technischer Hinsicht aufwendig und wissenschaftlich wertvoll – wird dadurch zum toten Bestand, der öffentlich nicht mehr nutzbar ist. Der Fall Ryūkoku zeigt exemplarisch, wie eng die Nachhaltigkeit digitaler Kulturgüter mit dauerhaften Strukturen, Zuständigkeiten und personeller Verankerung verbunden ist. Ohne sie besteht die Gefahr, dass digitalisiertes Wissen ebenso schnell wieder verschwindet, wie es erschlossen wurde.

Auch an deutschen Universitäten werden mittlerweile bedeutende Digitalisierungsprojekte durchgeführt, die sich mit der Erschließung und Bewahrung japanischer Kulturgüter befassen. Die Abteilung für Japanologie und Koreanistik der Universität Bonn verfügt über zwei herausragende Sammlungen, die exemplarisch für die Herausforderungen und Chancen der digitalen Archivierung stehen.

Friedrich Max Trautz (1877–1952) war ein Pionier der deutschen Japanforschung. Sein umfangreicher Nachlass umfasst eine Vielzahl von Materialien, darunter Fotografien, Postkarten, Filme, Glasdias, Landkarten und persönliche Korrespondenzen, die einen einzigartigen Einblick in das Japan der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts bieten. Ein von der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) gefördertes Forschungsprojekt mit dem Titel „F. M. Trautz (1877–1952) und die deutsch-japanischen Beziehungen vom Kaiserreich bis zur NS-Zeit“ widmet sich der systematischen Erschließung und Analyse dieser Sammlung. Ziel ist es, Trautzens Beitrag zur deutsch-japanischen Kulturvermittlung zu untersuchen und seine Aktivitäten im wissenschafts- und politikgeschichtlichen Kontext zu bewerten. Die besondere Herausforderung liegt in diesem Fall darin, dass der Nachlass auf eine Vielzahl von Archiven und Sammlungen in Deutschland verteilt ist, die im Rahmen dieses Projektes virtuell zusammengeführt werden. Eine erste Bestandsaufnahme wurde 2019 veröffentlicht (Meyer und Zöllner 2019), ein weiterer Band, welcher die Ergebnisse des DFG-Projektes vorstellen wird, ist in Vorbereitung. Für dieses Projekt war die

Zusammenarbeit mit japanischen Einrichtungen wie dem Japanischen Nationalarchiv vor Ort erforderlich, da die betreffenden Bestände bislang nicht digitalisiert wurden.

Ein weiteres, mittlerweile abgeschlossenes Projekt ist die Digitalisierung der sogenannten Kataoka-Sammlung. Diese umfasst knapp 3.900 japanische Schellackplatten aus den Jahren 1915 bis 1950, die mehr als 500 Stunden Tonaufnahmen enthalten. Die Sammlung wurde vom japanischen Filmerzähler Ichirō Kataoka zusammengetragen und 2012 der Universität Bonn übergeben. Sie bietet einzigartige Einblicke in die japanische Film- und Unterhaltungskultur der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts, darunter Filmerzählungen (Benshi), Volkslieder, Schlagermusik sowie Nachrichten und Vorträge. Das Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF) förderte ein dreijähriges Projekt zur Digitalisierung und systematischen Erfassung dieser Sammlung. Dabei wurden auch die zugehörigen Plattenhüllen und Begleittexte berücksichtigt. Ziel ist es, diese bislang schwer zugänglichen Materialien weltweit für die Forschung verfügbar zu machen.

Tonträger als historische Quellen stellen (ähnliche wie Filme) nicht nur in Japan eine wunde Stelle sowohl in der Forschung als auch in der Archivierung dar. Eine systematische Erfassung fand nicht statt. Lange Zeit wurde ihre Sammlung ausschließlich Firmenarchiven oder Privatleuten überlassen. Im Rahmen des Kataoka-Projektes ist es uns gelungen, führende japanische Akteure sowohl auf Seiten der den NIHU angehörigen Forschungsinstitute, der wenigen großen universitären Sammlungen als auch wichtiger privater Liebhaber und Sammler zusammenzubringen. Ein Hauptthema ist dabei, die unterschiedlichen Praktiken in der Digitalisierung, digitalen Verwaltung (Metadaten) und Bereitstellung dieser für die Geschichte der Neuzeit wichtigen Quellen nachzuvollziehen und kompatibel zu machen. Inzwischen trifft sich ein fester, international zusammengesetzter Arbeitskreis zu regelmäßigen Online-Tagungen. Erste Ergebnisse dieser Kooperation wurden in einem Sammelband veröffentlicht (Tomohide et al. 2023).

Beide Projekte verdeutlichen die Bedeutung nachhaltiger Digitalisierungsstrategien für die Bewahrung und Zugänglichmachung kultureller Bestände. Sie zeigen auch, wie wichtig institutionelle Unterstützung und langfristige Planung sind, um den Fortbestand solcher Sammlungen zu sichern und ihre wissenschaftliche Nutzung zu gewährleisten. Zugleich unterstreichen sie die Möglichkeit westlicher Japanforschung, mit eigenen Fragestellungen und Anfragen in Japan selbst Forschungs- und Kooperationsdynamiken zu erzeugen, von denen beide Seiten profitieren können. Der Stellenwert westlicher Sammlungen für die Forschung in Ostasien selbst ist ein altbekanntes Phänomen; die Digitalisierung dieser Bestände eröffnet neue Chancen für eine vertiefte und hoffentlich nachhaltige Zusammenarbeit über die Grenzen hinweg.

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## Research Note

# Focus Group Interviews with Japanese University Students: Reflections on the Joys and Challenges of Fieldwork

Antonia Vesting, Stefanie Schwarte, Anne-Sophie L. König and Gabriele Vogt

### Abstract

Focus groups are being used as a qualitative method of data collection in several of the social science disciplines. In fall 2024, we conducted 14 focus group interviews with Japanese university students for our research project on demography and democracy in Japan. We set out to inquire how the aging of Japanese society affects youth attitudes and interest in politics. We also asked which strategies the youth employ to make their voices heard in the political arena. In this paper we introduce focus group interviews as a method in social science research on Japan. We offer insights into the processes of designing and conducting focus group interviews with university students, while highlighting methodological considerations specific to research in Japan. We aim for this paper to serve as a resource for researchers who are considering related research approaches.

**Keywords:** qualitative research methods, focus group interviews, Japan, political participation, political interest, youth, university students

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## Introduction

During fieldwork, a researcher can derive ample joy from her work, but multiple challenges might await just around the corner. From unexpected occurrences such as a nearing typhoon, a snap election, lack of sufficient Wi-Fi, or applying a research method for the first time, there are always challenges awaiting in the field. It is very likely that something does not go as planned. Field reports by other researchers can serve as valuable resources for developing one's own fieldwork and providing reassurance that we are not alone in dealing with its complexities. Bearing this in mind, we contribute to the expanding body of methodological literature in social science research on Japan by recounting our own experiences of designing and conducting focus group interviews as one of the methods applied in the DFG-funded research project *Demography and Democracy: How Population Aging Alters Democracy—The Case of Japan*. This research project explores the political implications of population aging and the potential responses to this demographic shift with regard to youth participation and representation in politics and policymaking. Within the bigger framework of this project, focus group interviews, next to the more standard one-on-one semi-structured interviews and an online survey, are one element of a multi-method approach designed to explore Japanese university students' engagement with politics amidst an aging population. Focus group interviews as a qualitative interview method are often used to study how a group of people—in our case Japanese university students—engage in an open or moderated discussion on a given topic. Rather than hearing solely individual responses to a set of interview questions, focus group interviews allow for insights into how participants react to and engage with other group members' perspectives, potentially sharing their opinions more freely.

The focus group interviews discussed in this paper were conducted during a three-week fieldwork phase in Japan in October and November 2024. Within these three weeks, we conducted 14 focus groups with Japanese university students and a total of 96 participants. At the time of scheduling our trip, we had no way of knowing that in our first week in the field, a parliamentary election would be held.<sup>1</sup> This unforeseen timing and the media coverage of election campaigns might have resulted in a somewhat heightened awareness of policy issues among our participants. Our research team comprised the PI (principal investigator), three doctoral students and one student assistant; the PI and two of the doctoral students were present in Japan during that timeframe, while the other team members provided support remotely from Germany. Conducting focus group interviews was a novel experience for all of us. Here we offer insights into the processes of designing and conducting focus group interviews with Japanese university students, while highlighting methodological considerations specific to research in Japan. We aim for this paper

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1 Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba dissolved the lower house on October 9, 2024, and called for a snap election, which was then scheduled to be held on October 27, 2024 (The Asahi Shimbun, "Ishiba dissolves").

to serve as a resource for researchers who are considering related research approaches.

This paper is organized as follows: In the next section, we discuss relevant literature for social science research in Japan and methodological considerations for preparing focus group interviews. The main part of this paper outlines our research design, beginning with a discussion of the rationale for selecting focus groups as our method of data collection and showcasing the necessary preparations for conducting successful interviews. This most importantly includes recruiting participants, securing locations, acquiring technical equipment, obtaining ethical clearance, and conducting a pilot study. We furthermore provide an overview of the structure and flow of our focus groups and add reflections on conducting research as a team, as well as subsequently on the discrepancies between our expectations and the reality of conducting focus groups with university students in Japan. Finally, we summarize our findings and provide an outlook on open questions and further contemplations.

## **Literature Review**

This paper aims at contributing to the emerging literature on qualitative fieldwork within Japanese Studies and to discussions of focus group interviews as a research method. In the following, let us briefly sketch out both fields.

### **Qualitative Fieldwork in Japanese Studies**

Japanese Studies, as part of Area Studies, encompasses a broad variety of disciplinary perspectives (Basedau and Köllner 2007). Consequently, scholars of Japanese Studies adopt the methodological approaches of the respective discipline(s) they situate themselves in. Oftentimes we face uncertainties as to how the methods of these disciplines can be applied to the Japanese context. The lack of scholarly debate on this topic has previously been criticized (Aldrich 2009: 299) and so has the fact that some of the emerging literature on the more general question of how to do fieldwork in Japan has been compiled solely by non-Japanese scholars and presumably remains limited to an outsider's perspective on Japan (Ben-Ari 2020). An early example of collecting various experiences by non-Japanese scholars doing fieldwork in Japan is an edited volume by Bestor, Steinhoff and Bestor (2003). Similarly, edited volumes by Furukawa (2007) and by Linhart, Pilz and Sieder (1994) on methods, fieldwork and ethnography dive into a discussion on the role of the researcher and the relationship of researcher and research participant. The ethics of ethnography and the new trends and challenges of fieldwork in Japan have been laid out in a comprehensive manner in Robertson (2007), Reiher (2018), and Gmeinbauer, Polak-Rottmann and Purkarthofer (2020). Other publications give advice on ethnography and ethical conduct in the field in Japan (Aldrich 2009; McLaughlin 2010). Probably the most comprehensive recent addition to the literature on research methods in Japanese Studies is the edited volume by Kottmann and Reiher (2020), which addresses each step of the research process—from

formulating a research question to publishing one's findings—while including real-world examples as experienced in the field.

Lastly, we want to stress the importance of cultural sensitivity in conducting fieldwork in Japan and other regional settings. Adapting to the cultural norms of our fieldwork site counts as a basic research skill, and awareness of our own positionality cannot be over-emphasized, as Yamaguchi (2020: 202) explains: “[...] qualitative interviews are carried out in a conversational style; inevitably they are entangled with cultural norms [...]” Yet, as non-Japanese and white scholars, it is clear that we would stick out in any fieldwork setting in Japan. Several colleagues in their writings emphasize this context dependency (Alexy and Cook 2019; Yamaguchi 2020; Holthus and Manzenreiter 2020: 152; Roberts 2003). Sometimes, being a foreign researcher in the field can be advantageous (Aldrich 2009), as being an outsider may open doors to us that remain closed to insiders and accidental rudeness may be more readily excused when committed by a foreign researcher (Yamaguchi 2020). This outsider status might, however, also pose challenges, potentially limiting access or shaping interactions in ways that negatively influence the data collection process. Furthermore, in the Japanese academic context, with its pronounced authority structures, students may feel pressured to comply with a request (such as for participation in an interview) from their teachers (Takeda 2022). For the above listed reasons, sharing, openness, respect, and trust—along with an awareness of gender roles and linked expectations—are important factors for researchers during fieldwork in Japan (Alexy and Cook 2019: 246–247).

### **Focus Groups as a Method**

Focus group interviews have been established as a research method since the early 1960s, foremost in market research (Barbour 2018; Glesne 2011: 130). Since the 1980s, this method has experienced a boom and has been employed in many research fields, such as public health, communication, education, psychology, sociology, and political science. Given the multidisciplinary rootedness of this method, definitions of focus group interviews tend to be broad, as exemplified in this definition by Kitzinger and Barbour (1999: 20): “Any group discussion may be called a focus group as long as the researcher is actively encouraging of, and attentive to, the group interaction.”

Focus groups as a flexible methodological tool are often used in multi-method designs in combination with other qualitative or quantitative methods (Bergmann 2020: 439–440). They can also serve as an exploratory tool to refine concepts and language for further research (Tonkiss 2018). The interactional context of focus groups generates a certain type of data: focus groups best capture the dynamics of group interactions and discussions. The method assumes that opinions, attitudes, and accounts are socially constructed, making it particularly useful for studying how individuals negotiate topics through social interaction. Rather than aiming for generalizable findings, focus groups generate qualitative data that reveal diverse

perspectives on a given issue (Barbour 2018; Tonkiss 2018). These perspectives are not fixed; on the contrary, participants may build their opinions throughout the discussion, so contradictions and inconsistencies or changes in their opinions may emerge as the discussion progresses. The strength of focus group interviews lies in revealing these dynamics (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015: 202–203).

Focus groups can provide access to people or groups that may be difficult to reach otherwise (Glesne 2011: 130). By engaging the vulnerable and addressing sensitive or difficult topics, *security in numbers* encourages conversation (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999). The method is especially useful in investigating “why participants think as they do” (Morgan 1997: 20), i.e. through focus groups we can capture attitude formation (Barbour 2018). For this process to function smoothly, advanced decision-making is crucial and needs to encompass the place, demographics and number of participants and overall number of focus groups, interview duration, and questions or prompts encouraging the topic of the group discussion (Glesne 2011: 131). Also, Tonkiss (2018) and Barbour (2018) outline various approaches to structuring focus group discussions, ranging from the appropriate group composition to including the use of fixed questions, thematic topic guides, group exercises, and visual cues. Managing group dynamics on-site poses another challenge for researchers that includes setting discussion rules, ensuring balanced participation, maintaining focus, and fostering a comfortable environment; for all this moderator skills are relevant. Dividing responsibilities during the focus group setting is a good idea as several tasks need to be looked after simultaneously: taking notes, facilitating the session, checking the video and audio recording, and time management (Glesne 2011: 131–133).

Focus group participants should be selected according to the research question and hypotheses. As Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read (2025: 201) point out, “familiarity among focus group participants [can] increase or decrease their willingness to communicate and divulge information. While in some contexts it would be impossible or undesirable to assemble a group of total strangers, in other contexts [...] [it] would generate better data and enhance the prospects of maintaining collective confidentiality.” Some individuals might express more extreme opinions in a group setting than they normally would (Glesne 2011: 134). In cases where participants are drawn from the same institution or organization—such as from the same university or even the same seminar—they are likely to be familiar with one another, which may also affect group dynamics in one way or another (Tonkiss 2018: 251). By paying attention to group interaction, we can gain insights into the process rather than the outcome of discussions (Barbour 2018: 23–25). In fact, compared to (semi-)structured interviews, the dynamics of a group discussion offer a more suitable context for observing opinions and attitudes as they are communicated in everyday life (Flick 2009). As discussion dynamics can vary significantly between focus groups and the flow of discussions is not predictable, comparisons between focus groups are difficult. As moderators, researchers must often make decisions in

real time, for example, when certain participants dominate the discussion while others remain mostly silent, or when the conversation does not develop naturally.

Two focus group studies were of great help in developing our research design because they closely thematically connected to our specific research interests. Goerres and Prinzen (2013) employed focus group interviews to investigate citizens' attitudes toward intergenerational justice in the context of demographic change and its impact on the German welfare state. Their study analyzed 12 focus groups, each consisting of four to eight participants ranging in age from 17 to 89 years. Here, focus groups with mixed-age participants were used to explore the influence of generational diversity on group discussions and compared to control groups. The findings suggest that the composition of focus groups directly affected the dynamics of the conversations: mixed-age groups demonstrated greater consideration for the needs of other generations, whereas homogenous groups, particularly those consisting of younger participants, approached issues related to older age groups, such as healthcare costs for the elderly, in a predominantly utilitarian manner. In a Japanese setting, Taniguchi (2019) conducted experimental focus groups with Japanese high school students aged 16 and 17 on citizenship education and active learning. Taniguchi tested the effectiveness of different instruction styles for teaching the content of citizenship education. Her findings suggest that for students who are used to lecture-style instruction, discussion can be encouraged by well-prepared prompts.

Above we elaborated on some of the literature that was particularly useful in building our knowledge on qualitative research and especially focus groups. However, our list is not exhaustive and there are many more guides and accounts on focus groups, such as, for example, Acocella and Cataldi (2021), Cyr (2019), Morgan (1993), Morgan and Hoffmann (2018), Puchta and Potter (2004), and Schulz, Mack and Renn (2012), to mention just a few. Crucially, Sultana (2007) underlines the importance of researchers having a high level of awareness regarding the specific cultural context or target group within which an interview is to be conducted, and of incorporating this into the methodological planning from the onset.

## **Focus Group Interviews with Japanese University Students**

In this section, we elaborate on our reasons for choosing focus groups as a method and specifically on how we designed and prepared for the focus group interviews; this includes practical and formal elements. We furthermore highlight some technical aspects to take into consideration when conducting focus groups and discuss the importance of testing the research design before the actual data collection phase. Following an in-depth explanation of the structure of our focus group interviews, we reflect on how to conduct research as a team. Concluding this section, we then juxtapose our initial expectations with how the focus groups actually proceeded.

## Why we Chose Focus Groups

In our research project we are interested in how demographic change affects the fundamental workings of democracy in Japan. We analyze the effects of population aging on political participation, political representation and policymaking, as well as the responses to these effects emerging from within societal groups and institutions. As one part of this larger research project, we aim to understand two aspects of Japan's youth as the societal group that is most likely to be alienated from the world of politics given their comparatively small size and thus weak lobbying position. We first ask, how does the aging of Japanese society affect youth attitudes and interest in politics? Second, what strategies do young people employ to make their voices heard in Japan's political arena? Among a multitude of possible research designs, none of the research methods alone produce data to cover the scope of these two aspects, making a multi-method approach necessary. We decided on a large-n online survey for findings that are more generalizable. Through the survey, we also obtained context to interpret findings from our two qualitative methods: semi-structured single interviews and focus group interviews. While semi-structured interviews are influenced directly by the persona of the interviewer, their relationship with and impression on the interviewee, focus groups imitate a more natural setting and thus the persona of the researcher takes the figurative backseat in the interview setting, and participants concentrate on the discussion with their peer group (Glesne 2011: 131–133). Hence focus group interviews presented us with the opportunity to find out how the Japanese youth negotiate usage and significance of different forms of political participation within a peer group. We were able to gain insights into their thoughts on how population aging influences their avenues and means of political participation. In line with the research literature (c.f. Kitzinger and Barbour 1999), we found that interviewing students in a group setting took the pressure off the individual and made it relatively easy for them to voice their opinions *vis-à-vis* their peers.

## Preparations

Conducting focus group interviews requires thorough preparation, particularly when working in a different cultural context. One key consideration in our research was the difference in discussion culture between our own academic background and the Japanese university setting. While we were personally accustomed to open discussions in seminar settings within Area Studies and the social sciences in Germany, Japanese university students often experience more teacher-centered instruction and may be less familiar with openly exchanging opinions in group discussions. Acknowledging this, we carefully designed the materials we aimed to use during the focus groups, following the goal of creating a setting that would encourage participation without much prior knowledge about the discussion topics on the part of the student participants (c.f. Taniguchi 2019).

To facilitate the beginning of the discussion, we prepared an introductory presentation and several prompts to guide participants. This material will be introduced in more detail in the subsection *Flow of the Focus Group Interviews*. All the input was provided in Japanese for accessibility and ease of understanding for the participants. A central element of the discussion prompts was a set of 30 photographs depicting various political activities.<sup>2</sup> Participants were asked to sort and discuss these images through several exercises. To foster a sense of familiarity, we selected only photographs featuring Japanese individuals in a Japanese setting, ensuring that the content resonated with the students' lived experiences. This was acknowledged by several participants who not only noticed and mentioned the presence of Japanese people in the photographs, but also voiced their surprise about the broad variety of activism that is part of Japan's political culture. To guarantee linguistic and cultural accuracy, all materials underwent multiple rounds of proof-reading by Japanese colleagues at our home university. Additionally, we sought feedback from professors based in Japan who had experience with teaching at Japanese universities or even with conducting focus groups in Japan. All these steps helped us to confirm the feasibility of our research design in a Japanese university setting. We aimed to create an environment where students felt comfortable engaging in discussion, minimizing potential cultural barriers to open dialogue and reducing any potential pressure due to social desirability.<sup>3</sup>

Alongside designing the discussion materials, we developed consent sheets for the participants. The primary consideration in designing these documents was determining what information to include while ensuring transparency and ethical research practices. We needed to clarify what type of data would be collected and how it would be used. While the transcripts of the discussions could potentially be included in publications, video recordings and photographs would be used strictly for analytical purposes and not be made publicly available. The consent sheet also provided a detailed explanation of data usage and anonymization specifying who would have access to the material and how video and audio recordings would exclusively be used for the transcription process. To ensure that the consent sheets were clear and appropriate for the context, they were shared in advance with

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- 2 The set of 30 photographs depicted various political activities, including: *running as a candidate, small demonstration, demo camp, newspaper reading, campaign helper, post sharing on social media (SNS), Pride Parade event, voting, hunger strike, mass demonstration, SDGs event, organization of a matsuri (local festival), student self-administration, volunteering, setsumeikai (informational meetings), chōnaikai (neighborhood association) activities, collecting signatures for petitions/referenda, machizukuri (community building), joining a political party, collecting donations/donating, boycotting products/companies, sit-ins, circle activities, International Women's Day March, political conversations with family, political conversations with friends, kenmin taikai/jūmin taikai (regional and citizens' rally), second-hand markets, neighborhood/beach clean-up activities, and joining a politician's Instagram live event.*
  - 3 The social-desirability bias in research is at play when a respondent participant chooses their response to an interview question along the lines of what they assume the interviewee deems to be the preferable response (Bergen and Labonté 2020).

professors and facilitators in Japan, giving them the opportunity to suggest modifications or raise concerns before the documents were finalized. This added to the trust between us, the researchers, and the professors recruiting their students as participants. Participants were informed about their rights regarding their own data not only through the consent sheet but also during the introductory presentation before the focus group started. Through this careful review process, we aimed to create a consent form that was both ethically sound and comprehensible to all participants.

### **How to Organize Focus Groups: Recruiting Participants, Facilities, and More**

A key challenge in organizing focus groups is participant recruitment. There are different sampling methods for focus groups (Tonkiss 2018; Flick 2009). One major consideration for us was whether to invite students voluntarily or to integrate the interviews into class sessions. Since students have a right to their education and, in Japan, pay considerable tuition fees, using class time for research raises ethical concerns. Eventually, we conducted focus group interviews both during class time and during off time and left the decision about the setting to the discretion of our Japanese colleagues who recruited students for our project. We primarily recruited students from political science and related fields, ensuring that the discussion would be engaging and relevant to their studies.

In the early stages of designing the research project, we aimed to include a broader sample of young Japanese, not limited to university students. However, we quickly realized that recruiting participants outside institutional settings such as universities would be difficult as a research team based abroad and without the leeway of conducting multiple field visits ahead of the interview wave to build relationships and trust with individuals. As a result, we mainly relied on our personal connections with professors at Japanese universities: They introduced us to their students and provided us with the facilities to conduct the focus group interviews by booking suitable rooms at their universities. This recruitment strategy resulted in a sample that is primarily composed of students from high-ranking universities studying political science, law, education, and economics. This limitation must be considered during the analysis phase. Established relationships with faculty at educational institutions who acted as facilitators hence proved essential to our recruitment process. Understanding their interests and negotiating our own research needs required careful communication. This included deliberating over what specific information to disclose regarding our other contacts when asked and whether adjustments to our research design were necessary to align with certain universities' requirements.

Participant compensation is another important consideration. Due to budget and administrative constraints, we were unable to offer financial compensation. However, this decision also involved ethical considerations, as paying students could have influenced their willingness to participate in the interviews or the nature of their

responses. Instead, we followed Japanese gift-giving customs to express our gratitude.<sup>4</sup> We provided water, tea, and snacks during the interview sessions to create a friendly atmosphere and, after the session was closed, we handed out small packages with sweets brought from Germany to every student.

One factor that significantly influenced our focus group interviews was the extent to which participants already knew each other. In most cases this was unavoidable since we recruited students from the same universities and, oftentimes, the same seminar groups. The impact on discussion dynamics varied: In most groups, prior acquaintance made students more open and willing to engage in discussion, particularly in settings where a strong sense of camaraderie already existed within the seminar and the relationship between the students and the professor was very friendly. On some occasions, familiarity had the opposite effect. One student expressed discomfort discussing political interest and participation in front of peers whom he knew but was not particularly close with. This may have influenced the depth of his contributions to the discussion.

### **Ethical Clearance**

In our case, the topic of ethical clearance arose in the later phase of planning our focus group interviews. While ethical clearance is a common practice at Anglo-American universities and life science faculties globally, in Area Studies, including Japanese Studies, in Germany it is yet to be established. Our funding agency did not require an ethical clearance for our project and the ethics committee at our home institution initially claimed that they processed applications only if conditioned by the funder. This points to a problem other researchers in Area Studies might also face at their home institutions, especially in Germany. Then, about a month before the actual fieldwork, a request by one of the Japanese universities that we had approached was conveyed to us through the corresponding professor in Japan: the university needed to know that our project had received ethical clearance at our home university and furthermore wanted our research project to be cleared in their in-house committee again. This put us under significant time pressure and moreover had us worried not only that this university would threaten to pull out of hosting us for focus group interviews, but potentially that other universities would communicate similar requests to us shortly before we were scheduled to depart for Japan.

On the bright side, we now had a valid reason to ask our home institute's ethics committee to review our case. To be more precise, for a lack of a committee within the Department of Asian Studies, we had to ask for help from another department and two different committees were close enough to be considered; these were the

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4 In Japan, it is customary to bring local specialties as souvenirs for family, friends, and colleagues when traveling (Aldrich 2009, McLaughlin 2010). These souvenirs are called *omiyage*. By following this practice, we honored local customs while showing appreciation for the students' time and engagement.

ones in the political science department and in the anthropology department, and both had their fixed schedules for submitting applications. These schedules are important to consider early on when recruitment is done via institutional actors. Additionally, the content and demands of the application differ depending on the discipline. In the end, we chose to work with the ethics committee in the anthropology department because of two reasons: the submission deadline for applications was impending, and anthropology and Japanese Studies at our home university are part of the same School for the Study of Cultures. Applications submitted to the anthropology committee have to adhere to the “*Frankfurt Declaration*” of *Ethics in Social and Cultural Anthropology* (GASCA 2008) by the German Association of Social and Cultural Anthropology (GASCA).

Eventually, the ethics clearance at our home institution and at the Japanese partner institution went relatively smoothly. This was thanks to members of our home institution’s committee who processed our application quickly, the professor at the Japanese university, who mediated and advised, and the staff from the partner universities’ research support team who rigorously checked our application and gave valuable feedback before it was submitted to their in-house committee. One minor difficulty was that in our case, the committee at our home university processed an application with a mixed method design including the focus group interviews, semi-structured interviews, and online survey. Our partner in Japan required different applications for qualitative and quantitative methods, so we prioritized and only applied for the qualitative methods because of time constraints. For readers who are faced with an ethical clearance application at a Japanese university, we would like to add that the wording of our consent sheet in terms of clarification about how the participants’ data would be used and the exact method of anonymization of the university name and participant data were of particular importance to the Japanese ethics committee.

## Technical Aspects

Before getting started, careful planning of technical requirements is essential for ensuring success in focus group interviews. It is important to keep in mind that different phases of the research process demand different types of equipment and software. The necessary equipment naturally depends on the specific research setup and the budget at one’s disposal. For data collection, a camera, an audio recorder, and a laptop are typically required. Additionally, external storage devices or cloud-based solutions may be needed to securely store and backup recorded data. For data analysis, appropriate software for transcribing, coding, and analyzing qualitative data—such as MAXQDA<sup>5</sup>—should be considered.

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5 MAXQDA is qualitative data analysis software used for systematically coding, organizing, and analyzing textual, visual, and multimedia data in research.

Budgeting for technical equipment should comprise hardware and potential costs for software licenses, data storage solutions, and transcription tools.

The technical setup for focus group sessions depends on factors such as room availability, the number of discussions running simultaneously, and the overall duration of each session. In our case, we required a camera capable of recording continuously for at least 60 minutes. We encountered an unexpected challenge due to an EU regulation imposing higher import taxes on professional video recording equipment capable of recording videos of that length. As a result, many standard cameras on the market were limited to a maximum recording time of 30 minutes, which complicated our search for suitable equipment and increased costs. This issue highlights the importance of thoroughly researching technical requirements in advance. Some universities or faculties may provide equipment rental services for students and researchers, which can be a substantial help once you plan the acquisition of equipment and reduces costs.

Despite careful preparation, unforeseen technical issues can arise, requiring researchers to remain flexible. Equipment malfunctions, insufficient battery life, or compatibility issues between devices can disrupt data collection. Therefore, it is advisable to test all equipment before the actual interviewing phase, have at least one backup recording option (such as a smartphone or another recording device), and bring spare batteries for the camera and audio recorders as well as data storage devices.

Once data has been collected, researchers must consider storage capacity and data security. Large video and audio files require substantial storage space. This raises questions about whether university servers can accommodate the data and, if so, how long the uploading and downloading of files will take. Depending on institutional infrastructure, additional external hard drives, or cloud storage solutions may be necessary. In our case, the hotel Wi-Fi during our fieldwork trip was too slow for university servers to function as a reliable backup solution for our interview data; this required us to use an external hard drive instead. Furthermore, researchers should ensure they have suitable software for processing and transcribing recordings, as well as for anonymizing sensitive data before analysis and publication. Such software might also be provided by your own institution. It is worth checking which licenses are already available to researchers without any additional costs.

By anticipating technical requirements early in the research process, researchers can avoid logistical complications, ensure smooth data collection, and facilitate efficient data management and analysis.

### **Test Run: Conducting a Pilot Study**

We decided to conduct a pilot study to test our focus group design well ahead of the planned fieldwork phase to ensure the smooth handling of the interview flow. One member of our research team conducted a test run with three university students in Japan to assess the quality of the research design. Beforehand, the same research

member also presented the research design and the prompts we had prepared to an online research colloquium led by a political science professor at a Japanese university. Our research design provoked a lively discussion. In addition, we received comments and advice on Japanese language expressions.

The first hurdle in conducting the test group proved to be the acquisition of participants. Participants were mobilized through a professor based at a Japanese university, who invited his seminar students to voluntarily participate in this experiment. In this way, we were able to organize one test group with three students. Similar inquiries to professors at other institutions proved difficult. While they kindly collected email addresses of students who had voiced interest in our project, upon contacting these students via email, hardly anyone responded to our request to indicate their availability via an online scheduling platform to arrange a suitable date. The experience of trying to set up test groups taught us how important and efficient it was to have the backing of a facilitator—here the professor who would provide a concrete date and time as well as the meeting room and would directly communicate the specifics with the volunteering students. On the other hand, trying to establish contact through email or arranging dates online in our case came to no avail and generally needs to be considered as more difficult due to the lack of personal connection to the outsiders and a subsequent lack of commitment.

The test run was arranged in mid-July. The procedure was the same as described in the following subchapter. Since only one team member was in Japan at the time, two other project members joined online via video call. They were introduced to the participants beforehand and their cameras remained switched off during the test run so as not to disturb the participants. Having two more team members joining online helped with measuring the timing of the successive activities and taking notes. This gave the test leader onsite more leeway to observe the participants' reactions to the diverse activities and to take photos of the materials that emerged during the focus group setting. Upon finishing the test run, each participant was handed a feedback sheet. Their feedback was mostly positive and encouraging. Based on the results of the test run and participants' feedback, we once again decided to make slight adjustments to our research design and time plan.

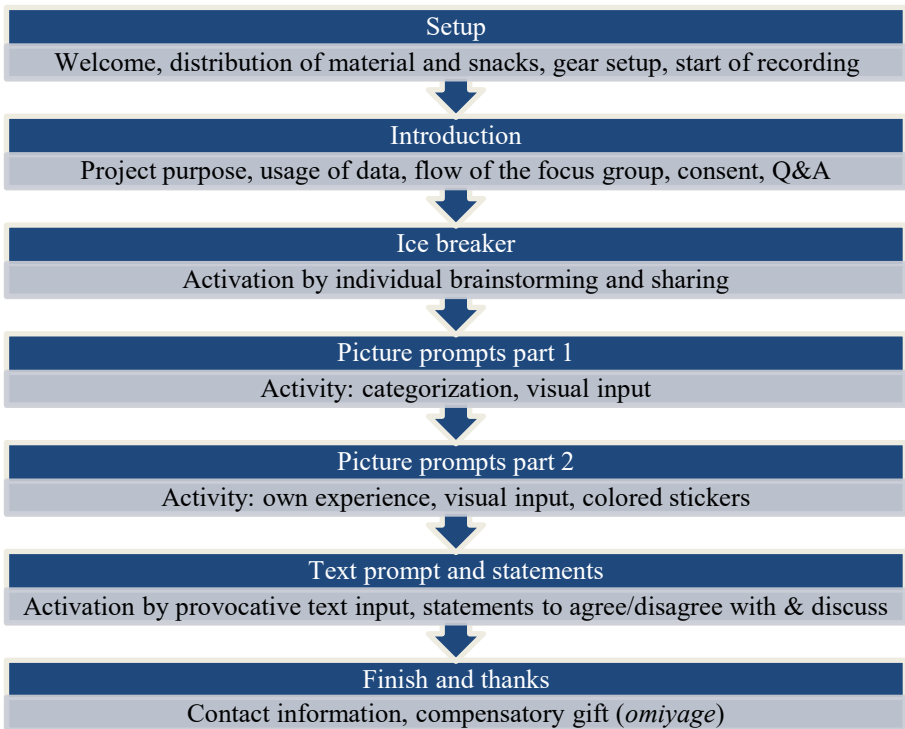
## **Flow of the Focus Group Interview**

We designed the flow of the focus group with the main objective being to foster a positive atmosphere, inviting and encouraging discussions among participants. Figure 1 shows the schematized structure of our focus group interviews. During the setup of our focus group interviews, we prepared the technical equipment as well as drinks and snacks, welcomed the arriving participants, and handed out materials such as consent sheets and demographic questionnaires. To kick off the group interview, we introduced the research team and project, and provided clear instructions for the discussion using a PowerPoint presentation. These instructions included an overview of the timeframe and structure of the focus group, an oral confirmation of consent to

be recorded on video and audio, as well as some discussion rules. Before diving into the discussion, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions.

Throughout the interview, we prepared several prompts to facilitate discussion and guide participants. The main part was designed to generate a variety of data via tools such as a short demographics survey, notes and stickers indicating experiences and opinions. These tasks resulted in not only a recording, but visual, textual, and numerical results.

**Figure 1:** Schematized flow of the focus group interview including purpose of each part. Design by authors.



The content-based elements of the focus group interview started with an individual brainstorming task, followed by sharing and group activities. We asked the participants to think about their own definitions of political participation while taking notes. This icebreaker gave all participants a chance to produce and structure some thoughts before engaging in a group exchange. The purpose of this step was to give shy or more observant participants time to adjust to the situation—a step more

extrovert participants might not have needed as much. Having all participants present their definitions placed each of them in the position of contributing to the discussion in the focus group setting right from the start.

To keep the momentum, we then kept everyone engaged with our first activity. The participants were tasked with categorizing thirty picture prompts of different activities that could be deemed political (cf. “Picture prompts part 1” in table 1). We opted for a large number of photographs and a short time to complete the task to ensure that the participants remained focused and responsive. The pictured activities were meant to inspire and make them rethink their definitions of political participation. We deliberately chose a variety of activities, some of which could be labeled controversial like *hunger strike* or *demo camp*. The large number of photographs ensured that all participants had to help with the sorting and categorizing, and that they had to do so while being engaged in conversation with one another. This approach helped to prevent the group from splitting into active and passive participants. Having a pre-decided set of activities allowed us to narrow down the direction of the discussion and to some degree to visualize the result of this part of the discussion. Through the categorization process, we aimed to detangle the common impressions that the participants shared regarding the sample activities.

The following prompt was meant to get an individual account of how politically active the participants have been in their lives (cf. “Picture prompts part 2” in table 1). Here we engaged everyone by giving them stickers of two different colors. One color was to mark the activities that they had done before and the other to mark activities they would like to do in the future. With all the participants distributing their stickers at the same time, it was not possible to track any given sticker to the person who placed it. This made the results semi-anonymous. After applying their stickers, we encouraged a group discussion assessing which activities had many stickers and which had few to none, and what the reasons for the popularity of certain activities versus the unpopularity of others might be. The result of the stickers was recorded in an Excel chart after each focus group to make them comparable with other focus groups.

In the final step, participants received a text prompt on the aging of Japanese democracy and youth participation in politics (cf. “Text prompt and statements” in table 1). In each focus group, one volunteer read the prompt to the group. Subsequently the group was shown three statements on youth participation and representation in the aging society and were asked to discuss whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements and why. Through the text prompt and the statements, we ensured that the topic of demographic change was prominently included in the discussion. The statements were part of a battery of statements in our large-n survey on the political interest, participation, and representation of young Japanese, which we conducted online at the same time. We designed this part as well as the picture prompts of political activities in line with the survey to make a mixed method analysis of these two sections of each research design possible. Closing the session,

we expressed our thanks by distributing *omiyage* from Germany. Finally, while some participants started to eat the sweets, we had time to stop the recording devices, check the return of consent sheets and demographic questionnaires, and organize all other materials.

## **Conducting Research as a Team**

Teamwork is essential in focus group interview research, as different stages of the process require the coordination of multiple tasks. The responsibilities within the research team are distributed across three key phases: preparation, data collection, and data analysis. Firstly, during the preparation phase, all team members should develop a thorough understanding of the research method and collaboratively design an approach that aligns with the research question(s). This strengthens the research design and fosters effective collaboration during data collection.

Secondly, during the data collection phase, tasks should be clearly divided to ensure efficiency. Ideally, at least two to three researchers should facilitate a focus group interview; in our case, we conducted sessions with two team members. Just before heading into the actual interview, one researcher should set up the technical equipment while the other should prepare the discussion materials and welcome participants. The introductory presentation can be conducted jointly. During the discussion itself, one team member should take notes and intervene when the conversation slows, while the other should monitor time and regularly check the technical equipment. If multiple focus groups take place simultaneously, having an additional researcher present is helpful. To create a comfortable discussion environment for student participants, we deemed it important that only peers were present during the focus group interviews. To this end, the junior research members acted as moderators. Prior to the focus group, we politely asked professors to leave the room or (at least) to refrain from engaging with their students during the discussion and observe from the background.

Thirdly, analyzing the collected data as a team presents both opportunities and challenges. In our study, we applied qualitative content analysis using MAXQDA, which required the development of a coding manual to ensure consistency in data interpretation. While a team-based approach enhances research quality through discussion and reflection, it is also time-consuming, requiring frequent meetings and alignment on methodological decisions. This aspect should be considered when planning research projects that involve multiple researchers.

Beyond data collection and analysis, careful documentation is crucial for ensuring the usability of research data beyond the initial project team. This includes systematically saving and explaining data, as well as detailing the research design in a way that allows for future accessibility. Such considerations should already be integrated into the early stages of research planning to facilitate later use by both the original team and other researchers. Many universities offer services to support researchers in data management by promoting FAIR data principles (Findability,

Accessibility, Interoperability, and Reusability). They also provide data management planning tools, such as the Research Data Management Organizer (RDMO), which is in place at many German institutions, and offer repositories for publishing datasets to enhance their reusability beyond the original research team (e.g. Open Data LMU at LMU Munich).

### Conducting Focus Groups in Japan: Expectations vs. Reality

When choosing focus group interviews as a method of data collection, our research team was confronted with a black box of assumptions on the feasibility of this method. Probably the biggest black box concerned the willingness of students to actively participate in the group discussion. Several of our contacts voiced their concern that even if students chose to take part in the focus group interviews, they would be silent observers. At first, we thought this to be a polite verbiage of Japanese communication, but as the instances and repetitions of this concern increased, we started to worry. We decided to consult with Naoko Taniguchi who had done focus group research with Japanese youths before (Taniguchi 2019) and she emphasized that activating the group with prompts is key to getting them talking. We aimed to follow this advice as closely as we could. Eventually, almost all groups proceeded in a very lively manner and the students' Japanese professors were pleasantly surprised.

In retrospect, we think that five strategies that we employed contributed to the sessions' overall successful flow. Firstly, we placed great emphasis on students feeling comfortable with taking part in our focus group interviews and being able to refuse without fearing negative consequences from their professors, which involved thorough consultations with the Japanese facilitators.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, to further reduce any potential discomfort, the researchers conducting the focus groups dressed casually rather than formally, thereby avoiding any visual showcasing of a certain academic status. They also, thirdly, refrained from overly formal or polite speech to avoid reproducing any teacher–student dynamics. Fourthly, we think it was explicitly our foreignness that positioned us as outsiders which prompted participants to adopt a pedagogical stance—explaining not only political participation, but specifically the Japanese context to us. Also, after the interview sessions, we invited students to ask questions and offer feedback, which allowed us to refine our interview setting and overall research design, and which helped to create an eye-to-eye-level atmosphere throughout our interactions with interviewees.

In addition, fifthly, we would advise *not* having any educators in the room when conducting the focus group interviews as their presence could influence the content of discussion. At times, when the professor remained in the room, the atmosphere depended on the relationship and teaching persona of the respective professor.

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6 In one instance, when our focus group interview was scheduled during a regular seminar slot, the Japanese professor in charge provided an opportunity for students to swap to a different room and use the slot as a quiet study time.

Though we had worried about possible communication problems with the students if no native speaker were there to assist, we in fact never encountered any language issues. The several rounds of proofreading and testing of the wording paid off. We recommend an open dialog on the benefits and downsides of the presence of a teacher with the respective contact person when deciding on the presence of an educator.

In our experience, however, two factors made it difficult to engage the students: Firstly, the Friday afternoon timeslot (naturally) had less vibrant discussions, probably a result of the exhaustion of the week. Secondly, a larger group resulted in less speaking time for each participant and ideas could not be formulated as elaborately as in smaller groups. We recommend anything between four and seven people for a focus group interview of approx. one hour. Anything above seven persons also results in restless and distracting behavior among the participants, especially when doing activities like categorizing the picture prompts. Sporadically, there were still quiet students who engaged in the discussion only when directly asked to like when presenting their definition of “political participation.”

Generally, we feared that it would be difficult to recruit participants with the quite controversial topic of political participation even when focusing on students of law, political science and economics. We started the recruitment of student participants some three months prior to fieldwork, which in Japan marked the time between teaching periods. This made recruitment very unpredictable. However, contrary to our expectations, on six occasions we eventually had to split the group into two because so many students showed up to participate. On some occasions when there was time left to chat with the participants after the session, many mentioned what a unique experience the group discussion on political participation had been for them and shared that the fact that there are not many spaces for them to have exchanges on this topic with their classmates, which was what drew them to the focus group interview.

## **Self-Reflection and Outlook**

In this paper we introduced focus group interviews as a research method in social science research on Japan. We offered an insight into the processes of designing and conducting focus group interviews with Japanese university students, highlighting methodological considerations specific to research in Japan. Overall, we found focus group interviews to be a challenging—in respect to planning and preparation—but also rewarding method, which enriched our experience of conducting fieldwork in Japan and significantly contributed to our mixed method approach and collection of data in our research project. Especially when conducting focus groups in another cultural context and language, solid language skills and knowledge of the cultural context are required. In our case, we were told that it would be difficult to engage Japanese students in discussions about Japanese politics and political participation. However, apart from a few outliers, students were eager to engage in the activities

and discuss their experiences. This might also be due to the fact that our sample mostly consisted of students with backgrounds in political science or related fields and the coincidental timely overlap with parliamentary elections in our fieldwork phase. Generally, we did not find interviewing young people in Japan, who are said to be politically apathetic and reluctant to talk about politics, frustrating at all. The most important factors for successful focus group interviews in our case were thorough preparation, close interaction with the Japanese professors (facilitators), having the advantage of offering the students something new to experience, and giving them a space to discuss a topic which they might otherwise seldom get the chance to talk about. When asked by students about the political engagement of their German counterparts we always happily engaged in an eye-to-eye-level exchange with them.

However, how might the outcomes have differed had we conducted the focus groups in a different cultural setting? The extent to which certain topics can be discussed openly may vary considerably across cultures. Additionally, the content of focus group discussions is likely to be shaped by the prevailing political context and current events. Access to student participants may also differ significantly, requiring sensitivity to local customs. We deem it important that researchers remain aware of cultural stereotypes (e.g. the assumption that Japanese students avoid political discussions) and that they not allow such preconceptions to hinder inquiry. Regarding researcher positionality, it is worth considering whether the interviews might have unfolded differently had we been of a different ethnicity, gender, or professional status. This is certainly plausible, particularly with respect to gaining access to the target group. Our positionality as young, white, female researchers may have reduced social distance, thereby facilitating smoother focus group interactions, and the joint socialization of interviewees and interviewers in liberal democracies created an overall context supportive of political engagement and open discourse.

Concerning our research, we now have a vast pool of focus group interview data that at the time of writing still needs to be thoroughly analyzed. We are fully aware that as our sampling method relied on facilitators at Japanese universities, the sample has some bias. Thus, future research could aim at conducting focus group interviews with young adults outside the elite university context. This could include students from vocational schools and junior colleges, but also university dropouts, NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), or those who transitioned into the labor market after graduating from high school, etc. It would be exciting to see how different life courses are reflected in different experiences of political participation and representation. The question of how to gain access to these other groups, however, remains. Having a facilitator introducing you can foster trust and access and still seems to be essential in Japan. In conclusion, we want to encourage anyone interested in enlarging their methodological repertoire to give this method a try if suited to the research aim and question—not solely, but surely also within social science research on Japan.

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## Essay

# Motivation and Meaning in Regional Studies: The Case of Indian Studies in Israel

Carmen Brandt and Marina Rimscha

### Abstract

This essay explores the motivations, experiences, and aspirations of scholars and students engaged in Indian studies in Israel, presenting a case study that speaks to broader global debates about the history, relevance, and future of regional studies. Drawing on interviews with three generations of Israeli scholars and current students from three major Israeli universities, it traces the diverse paths that lead individuals to engage deeply with Indian languages, philosophy, and culture, and thus also the history of Indian studies in Israel. Against the backdrop of postcolonial criticism that casts regional studies as complicit in Orientalist or neo-imperialist agendas, this essay offers a more nuanced perspective—one rooted in personal stories, intellectual curiosity, cross-cultural encounters, and a desire for international collaboration. It highlights both the challenges and the enduring appeal of the field in an age of declining regional studies enrolments and increasing pressure to pursue market-driven higher education. In doing so, the essay calls for renewed attention to the transformative potential of regional studies and suggests that the Israeli experience may offer insights into how such disciplines continue to matter in a globalized world.

**Keywords:** Indian studies, Indology, South Asian studies, Israel, regional studies, area studies, history of science

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## Introduction

When one of the many young Israelis checked into a hostel in India, the receptionist asked her, “How many Israelis are there?”  
 The Israeli tourist replied, “About 10 million.”  
 Confused, the receptionist said,  
 “No, I mean in total—not just in India at the moment.”  
 (A joke circulating in Israel.)

Travelling through India, especially in the north, leads not only to encounters with the local population but also with tourists from many different countries. Among those, surprisingly, are a great number of young Israelis whom I often met on trains, in hostels, or at prominent sightseeing spots. Notices and signs in Hebrew in places such as Paharganj in Delhi or Sudder Street in Calcutta, where backpackers find affordable accommodation, drew my attention during my many travels to India. And when I had the opportunity to go to Israel this year for a research stay funded by the Humboldt Foundation, I wanted to find out not only why so many young Israelis are travelling to and through India but also the reasons for studying and teaching Indian studies<sup>1</sup> in Israel. As a current professor of contemporary South Asian studies at the University of Bonn—the German university often credited with the official inception of German Indology, as August Wilhelm Schlegel became a professor there in 1818 (Brandt and Hackenbroch 2017: 42)—this trip was naturally linked to my own search for why I have been studying the past and present of India for the last two and a half decades. Now more than ever, the urge to reflect on one’s own motives to study another culture is also provoked by discourses put forward primarily by scholars of postcolonial studies.<sup>2</sup> During my studies and teaching in Germany, my research in South Asia and at conferences, I have been repeatedly confronted with the accusation that by studying another culture I am continuing the infamous legacy of Orientalists and their construction of the ‘other’ and that I am serving a neo-imperialist agenda. These accusations are not infrequently combined with demands to abolish disciplines such as Indology, South Asian studies, and regional studies<sup>3</sup> in general once and for all.

Obviously, this article is a plea to maintain regional studies. It provides insights into the reasons why Israeli scholars and students study India, its neighbouring

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- 1 While there is a clearly defined difference between the disciplines “Indology” and “South Asian studies” in Germany, in Israel, the name of the discipline depends on universities’ internal factors. Since the names vary across Israeli universities, we use the neutral and descriptive term “Indian studies” throughout this essay. For differences between “Indology” and “South Asian studies” in Germany, see Brandt and Hackenbroch 2017.
  - 2 These discourses were undoubtedly sparked by Edward Said’s book *Orientalism*, published for the first time in 1978 (Said 2001).
  - 3 Another common term for “regional studies” is “area studies”.

countries,<sup>4</sup> their languages, literatures, cultures, and religions. By portraying three established Israeli scholars and their paths to becoming the scholars they are today, the first part of this article will also provide an overview of the history of Indian studies in Israel. While the first part is written by Carmen Brandt, who conducted interviews with the three scholars Sivan Goren Arzony, David Shulman, and Yohanan Friedmann, the second part is written by Marina Rimscha, who has studied Indology at the University of Bonn and has been teaching Hindi for more than ten years at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Having conducted interviews mainly with current students, she delves into their motives for studying this region and discusses their job prospects. She also provides an overview of the status quo of Indian studies in Israel. And instead of addressing in detail the often generalising accusations levelled against regional studies, especially against Indian studies, and attempting to refute them, it is left to the reader to judge whether we scholars of Indian studies have a hidden agenda or what kind of agents we are.

### **Sivan Goren Arzony: From Hindi, Tibetan, Sanskrit, and Malayalam to Maṇipravāḷam**

When I met Sivan Goren Arzony, a lecturer at the Bar-Ilan University in Ramat Gan, a city close to Tel Aviv, her kind and open personality impressed me straightaway. After lunch together, we sat in a wooden seating area under some of the many trees on the huge campus of the Bar-Ilan University and talked about her journey to studying India, in particular premodern South Indian literary cultures. Sivan Goren Arzony has been teaching at the Department of Asian Studies of the Bar-Ilan University since 2024. She was surprised but very happy when she got this tenure-track position—one of only very few in Israel for scholars working on India. She grew up in a kibbutz and still lives with her husband and their four children in a kibbutz about an hour south of Tel Aviv. She is convinced that her research stay at Harvard University in particular, for which she received a prestigious post-doc fellowship and became a member of the Harvard Society of Fellows, contributed to her current position. And now Sivan Goren Arzony teaches at Bar-Ilan University, the second largest university in Israel, well-known for its excellent research in engineering, computer science, and medicine—and for the rule that all Jewish students must complete at least five courses in Jewish or Torah studies. Non-Jewish students can instead choose general courses. And sometimes these students end up in the Department of Asian Studies—as is the case this semester, when Sivan Goren Arzony is giving an introduction to premodern India—a period that can be reconstructed through the rich Sanskrit literature. Sanskrit is one of the many languages she has learned and reads, but until now there have been no courses for

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4 One reason why India's two largest neighbours, Pakistan and Bangladesh, are less studied by Israeli scholars is that these predominantly Muslim countries forbid entry to Israeli passport holders. And although many Israelis have dual citizenship, most of them do not take the risk of conducting field studies there with their other passport.

Indian languages at Bar-Ilan. Thus, she cannot read original texts with her students. That there is a Department of Asian Studies at the Bar-Ilan University at all is already a big step forward, approved only a few months ago after a long process. However, there is no MA programme yet and students in the BA programme “Asian Studies” can still only study Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. It might take many more steps before Indian language courses are offered there as well.

Her love of languages was Sivan Goren Arzony’s entry point to studying Indian languages at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. And this love evolved while travelling for one year—like so many young Israelis before her—through India and Nepal in 2003 and 2004. However, after her mandatory service in the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) as a kind of social worker for soldiers, she did not go abroad straightaway but worked for one year as a machine operator at the printing factory in Kibbutz Be’eri to earn and save money. This kibbutz was established in 1946 and is well-known for its printing house Be’eri Printers. In contrast to other kibbutzim, it has not been privatised yet and retains the old cooperative model. Its inhabitants are therefore in most cases politically left-wing and many among them are peace activists. And many of them were killed or taken hostage during the Hamas-led October 7 attacks in 2023—more than one hundred. Sivan Goren Arzony mentions her stay at Kibbutz Be’eri only very briefly and I dared not ask whether she had lost friends or colleagues—people she met there every day. But if one considers the length of time she lived and worked there and the population of this kibbutz—around 1,000—the answer is obvious.

Why she chose India for her stay abroad is not so obvious but rather surprising. Laughing, she told me, “And if you ask me why India, it’s a funny question because I knew I would go somewhere, but I think I had some issues with my body. And I remember my sister went to South America, and she sent me this picture of her in a bikini in the rainforest with a machete. And I said, ‘No chances that I will go to a place where I am expected to wear a bikini in public!’” With a smile, she added, “I was a kid. It’s only one explanation.” The other reasons were that she wanted to go somewhere where she could afford to stay for one year, where there was beautiful landscape but also rich culture. However, after some time, she grew tired of being a passive tourist and started learning Hindi in Varanasi. And after six months in India, she went to Nepal. There, her attention was drawn to the Kopan Monastery that regularly offers courses on meditation and Tibetan Buddhism to foreigners. It was during one of these courses that she developed a fascination with Tibetan Buddhism. This and her love of languages led to her decision to learn Tibetan and become a translator for a lama, a spiritual master of Tibetan Buddhism. Today, she laughs about it: “It was like a fantasy. I realised it’s not going to happen.”

Back in Israel, she continued to participate in Tibetan Buddhist retreats organised by Dharma Friends of Israel and began her studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In addition to pursuing a BA in psychology, she also studied at the Department of Indian, Iranian and Armenian Studies, where she started learning

Tibetan and Sanskrit, and later also Hindi. With a huge smile, she told me, “I really loved Sanskrit from day one.” And by the second year, she “really was swept away from philosophy to *kāvya*—Sanskrit poetry.” One of the main reasons for this was that she enjoyed David Shulman’s classes, with whom she read Sanskrit literature beginning from her second year onwards. Sivan Goren Arzony completed her studies with a master’s thesis on Sanskrit messenger poems from Kerala—poems that belong to the literary genre *Sandeśakāvya*, a form of poetry that revolves around separated lovers and a message of longing sent to the beloved through a third person or, in most cases, elements of nature such as a bird, a cloud, or the wind. However, her interest was also drawn to Malayalam, the official language of the Indian state of Kerala, during her bachelor’s studies. In the third year of her BA, she took the chance to join a subsidised excursion to Kerala to study the traditional Sanskrit theatre *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*,<sup>5</sup> although she had to learn Malayalam as a precondition: “Again, I loved language. I always loved it. So, I said, ‘I don’t mind learning Malayalam. Good idea! I just want to go back to India.’” She seized the opportunity and began studying Malayalam with Ophira Gamliel. Those classes opened a new world for her, and five years after travelling to India for the first time, she was back in India—this time in the south where her journey to becoming one of the very few Maṇipravāḷam scholars started. Maṇipravāḷam (literally: “rubies and coral”) is a combination of Sanskrit and Malayalam, a linguistic variety used, for instance, for premodern poetry often “dedicated to the praise and description of wealthy, local courtesans” (Hebrew University of Jerusalem 2025). For many years, Sivan Goren Arzony studied Maṇipravāḷam and Sanskrit texts from Kerala with Malayali teachers and especially with Venugopala Panicker (1945–2025), who was professor for linguistics at the University of Calicut. He passed away unexpectedly in early April this year, which is a great loss to the community of Kerala scholars. She told me, “I am grateful for the time, the energy, the wisdom, and the kindness I received from my Malayali teachers, and from my many friends and hosts in Kerala throughout the years.” Thanks to her Malayali teachers, Sivan Goren Arzony was able to learn Maṇipravāḷam in depth and finally wrote her PhD dissertation, titled “Eighteen Poets and a Half: A Literary Renaissance in Medieval Kerala”, on Maṇipravāḷam and Sanskrit from Kerala. Since then, she has edited the dissertation into a book, which is now under review.

Besides her fascination with languages and local literary cultures, Sivan Goren Arzony’s research interest also lies in the representation of women in literature and women in premodern South Asia in general, and today, she is one of the few Israeli female scholars to have a permanent position working on India. There was no plan to become the scholar she is today when she was heading to India for the first time: “I really remember that I told myself, ‘I don’t want to change in India. I just want to

5 Later, Sivan Goren Arzony also wrote a chapter about this theatre form for a volume edited by the two heads of the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* research project, Heike Oberlin and David Shulman (Goren Arzony 2019).

have experiences.’ But you know, it’s never like this: you change through your experiences.” Once she started studying, these experiences were also highly provoked by David Shulman. She talks about him with great respect—with the respect she received from him when she was still a bachelor’s student in his Sanskrit class during her second year, when she joined the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* excursion to Kerala in 2008, and when she worked in one of his research projects while still a master’s student. Naturally, he became her doctoral supervisor, and he continued to be supportive—also when she became pregnant for the second time while doing her PhD. When she found out that she was pregnant again, she wrote him a long email. But instead of expressing concern that a second child might hamper the progress of her doctoral thesis, David Shulman replied, “I am sure this added personnel will help with the dissertation.” Today, Sivan Goren Arzony has four children, is an established scholar herself and one of the many academic children of David Shulman. And almost every Israeli colleague I talked to referred to him as the scholar who laid the foundation for Indian studies in Israel.

## The Beginning of Indian Studies in Israel

I met David Shulman at the end of my stay in Israel, even though he was the first I had contacted for an interview before flying to Israel. Now 76 years old, he is officially retired but in fact busier than ever—academically and politically. By coincidence, I had met him two days earlier during one of the many protests by Israeli citizens who are critical of the politics of their government. His Wikipedia entry states that David Shulman is “an Israeli Indologist, poet and peace activist” (Wikipedia 2025). Indeed, he was and is active in these three fields: He is a veteran activist in Ta’ayush, a non-violent volunteer movement that was founded in 2000 by Jewish Israelis and Palestinians and is committed to the reconciliation process between Israelis and Palestinians. Its members are mainly active in the West Bank, where they support in non-violent ways Palestinians facing eviction and violence from Israeli settlers and the Israeli army. David Shulman has also written three books on his experiences in the West Bank: *Dark Hope: Working for Peace in Israel and Palestine* (2007), *Freedom and Despair: Notes from the South Hebron Hills* (2016), and with Margaret Olin *The Bitter Landscapes of Palestine* (2024). And when he received the Israel Prize for his scholarship on South India in 2016, he donated the prize money of \$20,000 to Ta’ayush. The importance of poetry in his life, having himself published poems in Hebrew, should not be underestimated, as it was his starting point for becoming the most prominent scholar working on India in Israel today. When I met David Shulman in one of his favourite cafés in Jerusalem and talked to him about the praise I had heard about him, he was very humble—as humble as everyone told me. He hesitates to talk about himself, but I am glad that in the end I gained an idea about what led him to study India and Indian languages. Before tracing his path to becoming the scholar he is today, it is therefore only fair

to tell the stories of three people who made a deep impression on him and thus also paved the way for Indian studies in Israel.

### **Moshe Spitzer (1900–1982)**

The first scholar David Shulman mentioned is Moshe Spitzer. Born in a small town in what is now the Czech Republic, Spitzer studied Indology, especially Sanskrit under Otto Schrader (1855–1919) in Kiel, where he also obtained his doctorate. Apparently, his family was not happy with his choice of discipline. Smilingly, David Shulman said, “His uncle made him swear an oath on his grandfather’s grave that he would not go to India. They were afraid that he was going to leave Europe.” But Spitzer did leave Europe—like many other Jews—but not for India. After he had moved to what was then Mandatory Palestine in 1939, he founded Tarshish, a printing press dedicated to the translation of classic literature into Hebrew, for instance, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. These literary works naturally also included Sanskrit literature such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, translated by Immanuel Olsvanger (1888–1961). David Shulman laughs, “Today it is barely readable.” Modern Hebrew was still in the making and many people at that time still used forms of archaic Hebrew. To this day, Hebrew is the only liturgical and literary language that has been successfully revived as a vibrant modern language, and Moshe Spitzer was one of many who contributed to this success.<sup>6</sup> Besides Spitzer’s printing publications in Hebrew and keeping interest in Sanskrit literature and philosophy alive among the many Jewish intellectuals who emigrated from Europe, David Shulman told me that “there were people who wanted to learn Sanskrit and knew about him. So, he taught it, you could say, in the underground—actually, literally in the underground. There were people in the Haganah, the pre-state army, who wanted to study Sanskrit. And so, when they were not actually fighting somewhere, they would come to him and learn Sanskrit.” Spitzer himself also made translations. Being a brilliant Indologist, his translations were beautiful, for instance, the Rig Vedic poems he translated into Hebrew. However, Spitzer was never able to secure a position at a university, but for Indian studies in Israel, David Shulman is certain, “He was the beginning.”

### **Tuvia Gelblum (1928–2007)**

Unlike Spitzer, Tuvia Gelblum was born in what is now Israel, in Tel Aviv. And unlike Spitzer, Gelblum made it to India. But before discovering India as a subject of his studies, Gelblum developed a deep interest in Biblical studies and Arabic. The latter interest was fuelled by the unusual opportunity to learn Arabic when, as a soldier during the 1948 Arab–Israeli War, he was a prisoner of war of the Arab Legion in Jordan for several months, close to the border with Iraq. After completing his studies in Arabic and Biblical studies at the Hebrew University in 1952, Gelblum received a scholarship from the Indian government, about 400 rupees a year, to study

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6 See also Spitzer’s contribution to the modern design of Hebrew fonts (Wardi 2016).

Indian languages and cultures, even though there were no diplomatic relations between India and Israel at that time. Tuvia Gelblum's obituary reads (White 2008: 555):

As such he was treated by Jawaharlal Nehru and Ben Gurion as an unofficial ambassador between the two recently independent countries, befriended by leading Indian writers as a fellow-enthusiast, and adopted as neophyte by ascetics to whose cave-dwelling lifestyle he could equally readily adapt himself.

Gelblum's first place of study was Santiniketan, a small and, literally, "peaceful place" (Bengali: *Śāntiniketan*; Engl.: "peaceful abode") in the eastern state of West Bengal. Santiniketan is famous for the Visva-Bharati University, established by the Bengali intellectual and Nobel Prize laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). Maybe it was too peaceful for Gelblum. He did not stay there for long, travelled to many other places in India, and continued his studies in Delhi. Between 1957 and 1960, Gelblum studied Sanskrit at the University of London, where he received his doctorate with a thesis on "Perception and Inference in the *Nyāyasiddhāntamañjarī*". After returning to Israel, he was appointed as lecturer and then senior lecturer at the Hebrew University, where he taught Indian studies and Sanskrit between 1962 and 1966 and thus laid the official foundation for today's vibrant Indian studies in Israel.<sup>7</sup> However, when his doctoral supervisor John Brough (1917–1984) fell ill and asked Gelblum to take over his Sanskrit teaching for a while, he did not receive the necessary leave and therefore resigned from his position at the Hebrew University and left Israel for good. Tuvia Gelblum lived in the United Kingdom for the rest of his life, became a Sanskrit lecturer in 1968 and Reader in Indian Philosophy in 1972, both at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), where David Shulman also studied Sanskrit with him. Thus, the links between Gelblum and Israeli scholarship on India were never completely abandoned. This is most evident in Gelblum's long-standing collaboration with another Israeli scholar of whom David Shulman also speaks with great respect: Shlomo Pines.

### **Shlomo Pines (1908–1990)**

Shlomo Pines was appointed as lecturer in the Department of Hebrew Philosophy and Kabbalah and the Department of Philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1952 and promoted to a full professor in 1961 (Harvey 2022). He was mainly an Arabist but knew all the important modern and classical languages, among them Sanskrit. Born in Charenton-le-Pont near Paris, he spent his childhood in different European cities—Riga, Arkhangelsk, London, Berlin—where he naturally also learnt the local languages. His studies then brought him to Heidelberg, where he studied philosophy and Arabic; to Geneva, studying linguistics and French literature; and finally, again to Berlin. There he continued his Arabic and philosophy studies, learned Persian, Turkish, and Sanskrit, and obtained his doctorate on

<sup>7</sup> For an overview of the diversity of Indian studies in Israel, see, for example, Shulman and Weil 2008.

medieval Islamic atomism in 1934. He returned to the country of his birth, where he taught history of science in Islamic countries at the Institute of the History of Science at the Sorbonne in Paris between 1937 and 1939. Like many other Jewish scholars, Pines had to flee Europe to Mandatory Palestine—with his family on the last ship leaving from Marseille in 1940, just before the German invasion of France (Harvey 2022). He also became one of the refugees who laid the foundations for Oriental studies at the Hebrew University, which was founded in 1918 by Albert Einstein and Chaim Weizmann and opened in 1925. But before Pines secured a position at the Hebrew University in 1952, he had to earn his living in different ways. Among other things, he worked in the office of the British imperial censor in Jerusalem during the Second World War. Knowing many languages, he was able to read and censor almost all letters that came in and out of Mandatory Palestine—regardless of whether they were written in Arabic, English, French, German, Persian, or Russian. David Shulman refers to him as “a genius—by any standard” and seemingly his genius was highly appreciated by the British authorities too. It is an irony of fate that he used his language skills as a censor during that time, as his main scholarly interest was the search for connections between different cultural spheres and philosophical influences that transcend time and space. In this regard, he studied Jewish philosophy as part of many cultural and regional spheres, in different languages and during different times. As a professor at the Department of Jewish Thought and the Department of Philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem from 1961 onwards, Pines did not teach Indian studies or Sanskrit, but Indian philosophy remained one of his main areas of interest. For example, Shlomo Pines collaborated with Tuvia Gelblum for 25 years on al-Bīrūnī’s Arabic version of Patañjali’s *Yogasūtra*. David Shulman commented on Pines’ interests in Indian philosophy:

You can see that even though there was no one teaching Sanskrit in a steady way, there was a kind of atmosphere, a milieu in which Sanskrit was not out of the picture—Sanskrit, Indian studies. That German-speaking intellectual humanistic world was, after all, the foundation of the humanistic studies of the Hebrew University. That kind of philological, historical, philosophical humanism is still alive here. Amazing. It’s fighting for its life, but it’s still alive.

And one person who has been contributing to this philological, historical, philosophical humanism for decades is undoubtedly David Shulman himself.

### **David Shulman: From Flat Iowa to Spicy Israel, Turkey, Iran, and India**

David Shulman was born neither in Europe nor in Israel. He was born into a Jewish family in Waterloo, Iowa, USA, in 1949. He does not see himself as a traditional Zionist, even though his mother was one. Nevertheless, he felt a strong bond to the Hebrew language and therefore twice visited Israel before he moved there for good in 1967. He told me, “I came because of the Hebrew language. I fell in love with the language as a young boy when I was 13 or 14.” Besides teaching himself Hebrew autodidactically, of course, there were also other reasons. He laughed:

Climate, the food, and the human warmth. It's a very warm country in this respect. Iowa, where I grew up, is as flat as this tabletop. And it's flat also in other ways. I wanted to come to some place where there was a little spice, and life, and warmth. I liked all of that, but the language was really the critical thing for me. And even now, today, I've been here for 50 some years, I think the strongest bond I have is to the Hebrew language.

He talks enthusiastically about Hebrew, the different forms of Hebrew—the Hebrew he hears on the street, the Hebrew spoken by soldiers in the army, the Hebrew used by young people—the Hebrew others look down on and consider to be a “barbaric slang”. How then did he end up becoming a professor of Indian studies?

When I told him that I had never planned to have an academic career, David Shulman nodded and said, “I have the same story. I never intended to do a higher degree. I finished my BA a long time ago, in 1971. I hadn't thought even for a single second that I would do an MA or a PhD. And then, through a series of coincidences...look what happened.” He laughed while looking back. When he came to Israel, David Shulman enrolled at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem with the intention of obtaining a BA degree in Semitic linguistics due to his love of Hebrew. He started learning Arabic, Aramaic, Amharic, and Syriac. But after he went to Greece and Turkey for two weeks with friends during his first year, he switched to Islamic studies: “Turkey changed my life. I was totally charmed by Istanbul.” For Islamic studies, he also had to learn Persian, and he fell in love with the language: “I was drunk on Persian poetry.” And of course, he then also visited Iran.

His Persian teacher, Yohanan Friedmann, appreciated his enthusiasm and talent for learning languages and one day suggested that he do a degree in Indian studies. After all, the Hebrew University was very strong in Islamic studies—maybe the best in the world at that time. For Iranian studies alone there were five positions in the early 1970s. And there were already the beginnings of Chinese and Japanese studies, but there was no one teaching Indian studies after Tuvia Gelblum had left. Yohanan Friedmann offered David Shulman the prospect of doing a doctorate in Indian studies abroad with a scholarship from the Hebrew University and perhaps getting a job after his return to Israel. David Shulman told me, “I thought this was a ridiculous idea. Truly, honestly, I didn't know where India was—except that it is somewhere beyond Iran.” And he had other plans. But then he told his friend Daniel Sperber, professor of Talmudic-period economic history at Bar-Ilan University, about this offer and Sperber told him, “You're making a mistake—a huge mistake.” Being a religious Jew and a scholar of Jewish theology, Daniel Sperber also has an interest in other cultures: Seven times he walked by foot from Istanbul to India in the 1960s. He took a boat for almost no money to Istanbul and started walking—all the way to India. David Shulman remembers, “In those days that route, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, was the most quiet and peaceful place in the world.” Daniel Sperber liked India a lot and he tried to convince his friend to think seriously about Yohanan Friedmann's offer: “He started bringing me books about India that he would leave on my doorstep. I would come home at night and there would be

another book or two that Danny had left about India.” And since David Shulman has had a fondness for books since his childhood in Iowa, where the library was his favourite place, he read them. He fell in love with Eileen Lendman in those days, and soon she became Eileen Shulman. She, too, liked the idea of going to India. Finally, it was again poetry that was the deciding factor. After talking to Chaim Rabin (1915–1996), a professor of Hebrew and Semitic languages who had studied Tamil because of his interest in Tamil loanwords in the Hebrew Bible, David Shulman went to the library and found a book of beautiful translations of old love poetry in Tamil by A. K. Ramanujan (1929–1993). With a smile, he said, “And that was enough. It was language again that brought me to India.”

After visiting Tamil Nadu with his wife in 1972, the decision was easy: David Shulman went to London in the same year, where he studied Sanskrit and Tamil and obtained a doctorate for his dissertation on “The Mythology of the Tamil Śaiva Talapurāṇam” at SOAS in 1976.<sup>8</sup> Back in Israel, he was appointed as instructor, then lecturer, and then full professor at the Hebrew University in 1985. When he was appointed in 1976, Yohanan Friedmann, a man with a subtle kind of humour, told him, “You will be teaching the empty walls. You will have no students. And it makes no difference. Nobody cares about that.” But students started coming, started learning: Sanskrit and Tamil, and later also Hindi, Malayalam, Pali, Telugu, and Tibetan. As the number of students grew, more faculty members for Indian studies were appointed, and Indian studies became a vibrant discipline in Israel. Once India and Israel established diplomatic relations in 1992, the numbers started increasing even more. David Shulman recalled:

There was a huge emigration of Israelis, usually young Israelis after the army. There were tens of thousands. And some of them would come to us. There were different categories in these people going to India: some were like lemmings, following the mass on a well-defined route—Rajasthan, Benares, Nepal. But the more adventurous ones, the ones who were truly moved by India, would come to us to study languages. There were quite a lot of Sanskrit students—most years 10 to 15 students, for quite a long time. And there were also students for Hindi.

Sivan Goren Arzony was one among those tens of thousands and one of the more adventurous ones—like many of the younger scholars who teach Indian studies at Israeli universities today. David Shulman is a very modest person, but when he talks about these young scholars to whom he taught Sanskrit, Tamil, and Indian philosophy, who completed their doctorates under his supervision, who were employed as post-docs in his many research projects, and who were then able to secure permanent academic positions, he looks very proud. However, he doesn’t seem to be proud of himself but rather of them. After he told me about his journey to becoming the scholar he is today, I can easily relate, and I imagine many others who have built careers in regional studies can as well. Laughing again, he concluded,

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<sup>8</sup> For example, the book *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition* (Shulman 1980) is based on David Shulman’s PhD research.

“It’s a kind of strange story, very strange, zigzag, oblique. But most important things in life are like that.”

### Yohanan Friedmann: A Long Series of Coincidences

“Zigzag”—that’s what I thought as well when I was listening to Yohanan Friedmann’s path to becoming the distinguished scholar of Islamic studies he is today. Yohanan Friedmann has been working on various aspects of Islamic thought and interfaith relations for more than 60 years. He has published several books, for example, *Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindī: An Outline of his Thought and a Study of his Image in the Eyes of Posterity* (1971), *Prophecy Continuous: Aspects of Ahmadi Religious Thought and its Medieval Background* (1989), *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (2003), and *Messianic Ideas and Movements in Sunnī Islam* (2022). And although he is now 89 years old, he does not think of leading the life of a retired person. Instead, he goes into his office or the national library every day to work on his latest project that has brought him back to South Asia. He told me with passion about his current research:

And now I am doing an odd thing. You know that the Ahmadis were excommunicated by the [Pakistani] parliament in 1974. Forty years later, the minutes of the meetings were opened to the public. The website, which includes 3082 pages of minutes in which the Pakistani parliament discusses the most subtle things in Islamic theology—the nature of prophecy, the nature of jihad, what kind of prophets there are—from morning till night. For more than one month, the parliament was closed as a committee, and the attorney general, whose name was Yahya Bakhtiar, questioned Nasir Ahmad, the third successor of the founder of the Ahmadi movement. This is unique: a parliament discussing theology for a month. By now, I have read around one third of the minutes—about 1300 pages. At some place, around page 600, one of the members of parliament stands up and says, “Sir, we don’t know anything. We don’t understand anything.” They really didn’t understand. These are most subtle things, and in his questioning, Mr Attorney General was guided by some ulama who were members of parliament. This is very odd: In a parliament, somebody stands up and says, “I don’t understand anything”, but then the parliament votes unanimously to excommunicate the Ahmadis. This is odd, but it is also a unique document in which a modern parliament discusses theology. So, I am fascinated by it and hope to complete my analysis in the near future.

And Yohanan Friedmann is determined to finish this research, even though he is concerned that he might not be able to do so:

I am beyond 89. Most of my peers are not with us anymore. I myself am about six or seven years beyond the life expectancy. I always thought that I would not live long because I was born in Slovakia in 1936 and was robbed of my childhood. You can imagine what happened to me there. But apparently, if you survive the Holocaust, you must have been very strong.

Before he told me about his journey from what is now Slovakia to Israel, Canada, and finally India, he added:

My whole life is a long series of coincidences. You know, here we have every year an initiative called Zikaron BaSalon on Holocaust Memorial Day, which means “memory in the living room”. Now there are few survivors who can participate in this initiative. There is almost nobody now who is alive. So, I am frequently invited to some place to tell my story. And about four years ago, I was invited to speak to a group of girls. When I finished, one girl came and said, “Wasn’t it that you survived because of Hashgaha Pratit?” Hashgaha Pratit is divine providence for a specific person. People like to have the world in good order—that things are organized, that there is some justice in historical events. But one and a half million children, victims of the Holocaust, were not less entitled to Hashgaha Pratit than myself ...

He didn’t finish his sentence and instead took a deep breath and said, “So, now I start telling you about the importance of accidents in my life.” Yohanan Friedmann was born in Zákamenné, a village in what is now Slovakia. His mother ran a pharmacy—the only one in the whole region. Since most medicine was not ready-made and often had to be prepared by the pharmacist herself, his parents, grandparents (his mother’s parents), and him were granted an exception from deportation as “Jews essential to the economy”, while most of the other Jewish families in Slovakia and all the other Jewish families from Zákamenné were deported and murdered in concentration camps. The Slovak Republic was ruled by clerical fascists collaborating with Nazi Germany and his family lived in constant fear. The situation worsened when the German army and the SS occupied the region in autumn 1944. In the middle of December 1944, SS men arrested Yohanan Friedmann and his family and brought them to Námestovo, where upon arrival they were separated from his grandparents. Only later did he learn that his grandparents had been killed on the same day in a nearby forest, while Yohanan Friedmann and his parents were held in prison for around three weeks. From Námestovo they were then taken to the transit camp in Sered in southern Slovakia, where he and his mother were separated from his father and brought to the Theresienstadt Ghetto. Only after the end of the war did they find out that his father had survived in a forced labour camp in Oranienburg, near Berlin. In hindsight, it was his mother’s profession that had saved his and his parents’ lives.

The fact that he was born at all can be seen as another coincidence. Yohanan Friedmann smilingly said, “I wouldn’t even have come into the world without the silent movies—without my father’s love of silent movies, possibly by Charlie Chaplin.” Before his father studied medicine in Prague and later became the village doctor in Zákamenné, where he married Yohanan Friedmann’s mother in 1933, he had studied at the Neolog Rabbinate Seminary in Budapest.<sup>9</sup> There, his Arabic teacher was Ignác Goldziher (1850–1921), one of the founders of Islamic studies

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9 The founding of this seminary in 1877 can be traced back to liberal and modernist Jews, known as Neologs, who favoured secularly trained rabbis to serve their communities.

and one of the few Orientalists spared Edward Said's famous criticism.<sup>10</sup> However, Yohanan Friedmann's father was more interested in silent films than in learning Arabic and often missed his Arabic class, which is why Goldziher refused to sign his study records. Ultimately, his father gave up his rabbinical studies due to his poor performance in Arabic. Had he been a diligent student in Goldziher's classes, he would have become a rabbi in Hungary or in Slovakia and in all probability, he would not have survived the Holocaust. As it happened, he studied medicine and met Yohanan Friedmann's mother. Yohanan Friedmann joked, "Now I have been atoning for his sins for more than 60 years." And this atonement started when his family moved to Israel, close to Haifa, in 1949. At the Hebrew Reali Secondary School of Haifa, his Arabic teacher happened to be Meir Jacob Kister (1914–2010). Yohanan Friedmann remembers him:

He was convinced, and convinced many of his students, that the only real subject meriting study was Arabic. I had big quarrels with my parents. They were Europeans. They barely knew that Arabs existed, and it was quite clear to them that I should be a medical doctor like my father. There were no other possibilities in their minds at all. But this charismatic gentleman prevailed over my parents, and I never regretted this.

Meir Jacob Kister studied Arabic at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, completed his master's degree in 1949, obtained his PhD in 1964, and became a professor there in 1970. Yohanan Friedmann followed his path, albeit that his was a little more zigzag. He confirmed what David Shulman told me about the role of Germans and German-speaking scholars in the founding of the Hebrew University:

Our institute, when it was established in 1927, consisted mainly of Jewish Germans. I mean, everybody was German, for example, David Zvi Hartwig Baneth [1893–1973], who was chair of the Department when I was a student in the late 1950s. And we joked in the 1960s that this was the last German university, because German academia was still recuperating from Hitler, and our university was the last German university on the face of the earth. So we used to joke. In the Department of Arabic, the second foreign language which we had to study was German, because of German writing scholars like Ignác Goldziher and Theodor Nöldeke.<sup>11</sup>

After Yohanan Friedmann had finished his master's studies on the Arab poet Al-Ma'arri in 1962, he had a conversation with Uriel Heyd (also an immigrant from Germany), a historian of Turkey and chairman of the institute at that time. Heyd suggested that he obtain a PhD from McGill University in Montreal and specialize in Indian Islam. Yohanan Friedmann agreed, soon took a boat to Venice, travelled through Europe for some time and then took another boat to Montreal, from where his journey to Indian Islam began. In Montreal, he studied Indian Islam and Urdu

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10 One reason for this lies in the fact that Said did not analyse in detail the works of German-speaking Orientalists (Said 2001: 18).

11 For further details about the history of the foundation of Oriental studies in Israel by German Jews, see Levy 2020.

and did his PhD on the Indian Islamic mystic Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624) in 1966. However, during his PhD studies at McGill, it was compulsory to spend a year in the region of one's specialization, but when he applied for an Indian visa:

No answer—one month, two months, four months. Nothing. Because relations between India and Israel were very bad in those days. So, I consulted my teachers at McGill. One of them knew Zakir Husain, who was at that time the president of India, and he approached him. In no time I got a “presidential” visa. Isn't it wonderful? A presidential visa from Zakir Husain? Fantastic! So, I spent a year at Aligarh University, south of New Delhi.

Yohanan Friedmann laughed about this coincidence, which made possible his stay in Aligarh, where he also studied Urdu intensively and realized the importance of Indian studies for the Hebrew University. He came back to Israel in 1966—one year before David Shulman moved there. As his Persian teacher, he recognized his talent and enabled him to pursue a doctorate at SOAS, as mentioned above. He is sure, “When Shulman came, Indian studies mushroomed.” However, many colleagues I talked to referred to Yohanan Friedmann as the person who made the official establishment of Indian studies possible when he was chair of the institute between 1975 and 1978. During this period, the Department of Iranian and Armenian Studies became the Department of Indian, Iranian and Armenian Studies. He is too modest to take the credit for that: “I was the chairman of the institute when this happened. And I was active in that, but it is a slight exaggeration. I supported it—strongly. But it doesn't work like that, somebody doesn't just establish a department. It is always a collaborative issue.”

Today, Yohanan Friedmann hardly teaches any courses on Indian Islam or Urdu anymore, although he continues to teach other subjects on a voluntary basis. However, there is no question about the contribution he has made to Indian studies in Israel. Ultimately, he, Sivan Goren Arzony, and David Shulman are aware that the circumstances that made them the scholars they are today were a series of coincidences. And it seems that this also applies to most current students of Indian studies in Israel.

## **From Yoga to the University: Mapping the India Learning Landscape in Israel**

As someone who has taught Hindi at an Israeli university for over a decade, I did not expect that writing this essay would reveal just how wide and diverse the India learning and teaching community in Israel truly is. Beyond the university classroom, India, its cultures, languages, philosophies, and religions are actively studied and taught in a variety of non-academic spaces. Yoga and Buddhism are gaining popularity worldwide, but in Tel Aviv, as one interviewee put it, “everyone is doing

yoga.”<sup>12</sup> For many years now, the city of Tel Aviv, together with the Indian Embassy and the Israeli Yoga Teachers Association, has celebrated International Yoga Day on July 21 with public events. Striking images of hundreds of people practising yoga in the middle of city streets circulate widely online. What I hadn’t realized before conducting interviews for this essay is that today, nearly every reputable yoga teacher training programme in Israel includes at least one course on Indian philosophy—and sometimes even Indian history and Sanskrit. As a result, in these increasingly popular spaces—sometimes labelled as part of the “public humanities”—there is a clear and growing demand for knowledge about Indian philosophy. Many of those teaching yoga and Buddhist philosophy in Israel are graduates of university departments of Asian studies. One interviewee, a PhD student with no intention of pursuing an academic career, explained that she continues her studies out of a deep personal desire to learn and was surprised to find that she could actually make a living teaching courses in non-academic frameworks.

University departments play a dual role in this ecosystem. On the one hand, they produce trained graduates who go on to teach in public humanities spaces. On the other hand, students who ultimately pursue formal Indian studies at the university level often come to it through earlier encounters with yoga and Indian philosophy outside academia. For this essay, I interviewed 17 students from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv University and University of Haifa. Quite a few of them trace their journeys back to this world. Many are certified yoga teachers. For them, their interest in yoga goes far beyond the physical practice. It often begins with a personal transformation—several interviewees described going through a personal crisis, which they were able to navigate with the help of yoga practice—and this, in turn, sparks curiosity about Sanskrit and yoga philosophy. Yoga, they say, is not merely a form of exercise but a way of life, a coping mechanism, or even a spiritual path. Some already teach yoga philosophy alongside physical practice. Though interviewees seldom referred to specific philosophical schools, they consistently used the term “philosophy” or spoke of “Indian thought” more broadly—as a way of looking at the soul and the body. One former student and yoga teacher emphasized the personal and ethical dimension of philosophy in her life:

I’m deeply interested in Indian philosophy and, along with it, Indian culture. Just as our own spiritual history profoundly shapes us as Jewish people, Indian culture is also deeply rooted in its spiritual tradition. As a yoga teacher, I wanted to make philosophy practical—not to be just another instructor offering a workout class at a studio, but to truly understand how I could apply it in my own life. I wanted to channel this knowledge and use it to have an impact on others. And I believe I succeeded—I could really see how it helped me grow.

The same person also shared a touching anecdote about when a student who came to her for advice and she found herself quoting Krishna’s counsel to Arjuna. Yoga

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12 All quotes come from interviews conducted in March and April 2025 with students and teachers connected to India-related studies in Israel.

and yoga philosophy are especially prominent among students from Tel Aviv University, where a charismatic and talented Sanskrit teacher, Rafi Peled, has developed a strong following. Several of his yoga-focused Sanskrit students have since enrolled in university-level Indian studies programmes. They mention the study trips to India that he organizes for his students, where they get the opportunity to study with an Indian teacher. “And we do respect traditions: the teacher becomes my guru, and I become his shishya”<sup>13</sup>, one interviewee said.

Many of the students motivated by a desire to teach also express interest in related fields such as psychology, special education, or school-level instruction. For them, what might initially seem like esoteric or highly theoretical material—such as mantras, the *Upaniṣads*, or the *Mahābhārata*—often acquires direct and practical relevance to their future work. From personal experience—having studied at the University of Bonn and taught Hindi in Germany (2007–2008) and Sweden (2010) before starting to teach in Israel—I know first-hand that Israeli students tend to be exceptionally practical. Often older and more mature by the time they begin their studies, most have completed compulsory military service in the IDF and have taken time to travel before deciding on a direction for their academic and professional lives. One might assume that this pragmatism would steer them toward more conventionally career-oriented fields, rather than disciplines like Indian studies. Indeed, many do opt for more conventionally ‘practical’ fields. Yet, those who do choose to study India are often remarkably skilled at making their academic interests work for them—finding creative, real-world applications for what they learn. One student shared that after years of working in Israel’s high-tech sector—a field known for its high salaries and fast-paced lifestyle—she realized that professional success alone was not bringing her happiness. She left her job and enrolled in the Indian studies programme at the Hebrew University. Looking ahead, she hopes to combine her previous experience in international business with her current studies: while she once facilitated partnerships with European firms, she now envisions building professional bridges with South Asian counterparts. For her, Indian philosophy and Sanskrit are not a break from her earlier career, but a way to align her skills with what brings her meaning.

Another interviewee, Sarel, shared that after completing his BA in philosophy, he found Western philosophy “too abstract to be of relevance for the human experience” and felt drawn to explore other intellectual traditions. This curiosity led him to Indian philosophy—an area he hadn’t been deeply familiar with before beginning his MA in Indian studies at the Hebrew University. Discovering the rich diversity of Indian philosophical thought, including Vedānta, sparked a strong personal interest and a desire to pursue it further. When asked whether his current

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13 The Sanskrit terms *guru* (Engl.: “teacher”) and *śiṣya* (Engl.: “disciple”) refer to a traditional model of knowledge transmission (*paramparā*; literally: “lineage”), which may be spiritual or practical in nature—encompassing fields such as art, architecture, and more. In this model, knowledge is conveyed through the evolving relationship between guru and disciple.

programme meets his expectations, he noted that while the curriculum does not include many courses specifically focused on Vedānta—his area of greatest interest—it has nonetheless provided him with valuable cultural and historical context. He emphasized that the department has been supportive and flexible, allowing him to pursue relevant topics through elective courses and independent work. “The lack of courses on Vedānta is something I feel”, he acknowledged, “but the programme gave me the tools to begin discovering it.” Sarel envisions continuing on to a PhD but also imagines teaching, whether Indian philosophy or spoken Sanskrit. “If we want to preserve this culture”, he says, “we need to keep it alive beyond academia. I see myself spreading and maybe even teaching Sanskrit—even as a volunteer.” He told me about an organisation offering online spoken Sanskrit courses, in which he is currently enrolled. As a serious and thoughtful student, he has his critiques but, true to character, he doesn’t dismiss the initiative. Instead, he reflects on how it could be improved. Thinking ahead, he imagines Sanskrit not only surviving but flourishing. “Think of it this way”, he says, “if everyone in Israel were speaking German, who would learn Hebrew from scratch? Hardly anyone! And I’m afraid Sanskrit might one day be heading in that direction.” While less drawn to translation, he is intrigued by the possibilities of using Sanskrit in contemporary settings. He imagines writing in the language and even integrating it into everyday life. At the same time, he is interested in digital tools for Sanskrit learning and research. “Right now, digital editions are still a major challenge”, he explained, referring to machine-readable texts that enable computational analysis. “Lemmatization, for instance—breaking down words to their root forms—is something that’s still developing. I’d love to contribute, maybe even by helping develop learning apps that are more practical than what’s currently out there.”

India-related programmes can currently be studied at three Israeli universities: the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv University, and the University of Haifa. At the Hebrew University, the India–Indonesia section offers full BA and MA programmes in Indian studies. BA students are required to take introductory courses on both India and Indonesia but may choose to focus their electives on one of the two. The programme encourages students to develop a regional perspective, exploring India–Indonesia connections through Indian Ocean trade, religious exchange, and migration. At the MA level, students may focus on South Asia, Indonesia, or their interconnections. BA students pursue a double major, combining Indian studies with another department such as business administration, psychology, comparative religion, or history. MA students specialize in one field only. The section offers three main languages—Sanskrit, Hindi, and Indonesian—from which students choose one. In addition, Tibetan, Pali (in the Buddhist studies track), and Tamil are offered, though not necessarily every year. At the University of Haifa, students enrol in Asian Studies programmes at BA, MA, and PhD levels, while at Tel Aviv University, the corresponding programmes are offered within the Department of East Asian Studies. In both cases, students may choose to focus on a specific region or language—for example, India and one of the several Indian

languages taught at these institutions. Among these three universities, at the University of Haifa, the study programmes and scholars have been focussing in particular on modern Asia for more than 20 years. As mentioned in the first part of this essay, a newer programme at Bar-Ilan University now also offers some India-related courses.

About half of the students I interviewed come from yoga or Buddhist backgrounds and seek deeper engagement with Indian philosophy. Many now teach yoga philosophy themselves. Others are drawn through curiosity about language, history, or intercultural experience. Their interests may include diplomacy, business, or linguistics. These students tend to follow traditional academic paths, sometimes sparked by travel or cultural encounters. Overall satisfaction with the programmes is high—most of the students I interviewed expressed genuine appreciation for their studies. At the same time and perhaps unsurprisingly, those with a clearer sense of their future path often voiced frustration over the lack of specialized courses that would support their goals. A common concern was the limited number of offerings on modern India. These general patterns take on distinct shape in the personal journeys of individual students.

Yoav's story, for example, begins with the classic allure of travel but evolves into a deeper academic commitment. Yoav's journey started as that of a 'typical Israeli tourist'—young, adventurous, and seeking a laid-back, affordable destination. He travelled to India and quickly fell in love with the country and its people. He began learning Hindi and described himself as "feeling at home in India". A pivotal moment came when he met a woman from the Netherlands studying South Asian studies at university. Realizing that India could be studied academically changed everything. Inspired by her knowledge of scripts, languages, and cultures, he decided to pursue a similar path. Yoav's passion is language. He studied Hindi for a year and returned to India with a new perspective, which he describes as life-changing. While he initially wanted to study medicine, he now combines Indian studies with psychology. He is preparing to go on a semester-long student exchange to Heidelberg University, which offers one of the most comprehensive South Asia programmes in Germany.

Unlike North America or Europe, Israel has few BA or MA students of Indian origin. However, as a country of repatriates, it is home to Indian Jewish communities such as the Cochin Jews, Bene Israel, and Bnei Menashe. Roughly 5 percent of my students at the Hebrew University since 2011 have had Indian Jewish heritage. Nitzan, who combines Indian studies with linguistics, is one such student. Her interest began during a family vacation to China, where cultural unfamiliarity sparked a fascination with the wider world. She light heartedly told me, "I remember when I returned home, I couldn't stop telling people that there is a world outside. We need to meet it! It is so strange that we don't know anything about it." When her sister later travelled to India, Nitzan decided to do the same. Though she travelled more extensively in East Asia, India left a stronger personal impression. Her

maternal grandparents were from Cochin, making the journey feel like a homecoming. She regrets not listening more attentively to her grandmother's stories. When deciding what to study, she consulted her uncle (not of Indian origin), who encouraged her: "It's your roots, and it's also a developing economy." She was drawn to linguistics and wanted to study a language completely unfamiliar to her. She is also interested in business and international exchange. Over time, she developed a deep appreciation for yoga—not as sport, but as a philosophy. She told me, "I like that in India the soul comes before the body. I used to think it was just me who felt this way. I'm glad to know that many others do too—it means I'm not that bizarre or ridiculous." Nitzan's grandmother used to tell her that, when she returned to Cochin many years after emigrating to Israel, her old friends and neighbours were still puzzled: Why had they left? They used to live so well together. Her grandmother spoke of a life that was not rich in money, but rich in nature, community, and connection. Only now, as Nitzan studies India, does she realize that the Cochin Jewish community she grew up in was a little piece of India in Israel. On her last trip to India, she found the synagogue her grandmother had described. It was still intact. A Jewish man was tending to it. Is he the only one left? Is the synagogue the reason he stays? She hopes to find answers on future trips.

In addition to spiritual and philosophical motivations, some students are drawn to Indian studies with a forward-looking view of India as an emerging global partner. With India's growing economic influence, students express interest in combining cultural understanding with practical fields such as business, diplomacy, and development work. One such student is Noam, who sees his Hindi studies as a strategic step toward becoming a cultural and economic intermediary:

Studying a language helps you understand how its speakers think. That's why I believe learning Hindi is a way for me to better understand the mindset and behaviour of Hindi-speaking people. Why India? Because it's fertile ground—not just for Israel, but for the world—to engage with and learn from. After India closed itself off from much of the world in the mid-twentieth century, collaboration with other countries was limited. But I feel that in recent years, things have started to shift. Israel is developing stronger ties with India, and India itself is working to transition from a passive presence in the global market to a more active player. This transformation enables the growth of industries like high-tech, especially in areas like chip design and software development. India is now one of the world's leading destinations for tech outsourcing, particularly in healthcare. In Israel, however, India is still not fully appreciated for what it is. People don't realize the extent of its global significance. There are so many opportunities, and I often feel I'd like to serve as a kind of bridge or middleman between the two countries. In Israel, people know very little about India—and in India, too, Israel is a small and distant country that many know little about, especially in terms of business. Our government is investing heavily in building this relationship—through the Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—but the private sector hasn't yet caught up. I'd say it hasn't even reached 30 percent of its potential. There's a lot of room for growth, and I see this as a

great opportunity for me personally. And beyond all that, I really am deeply interested in India—I genuinely love this country.

Other students speak of the need for “conscious travel”—encounters that are respectful, informed, and reciprocal. There is also interest in contributing to mutual cultural education—through translation, curriculum development, or educational tourism. The pathways may begin with yoga mats or Bollywood films, but they often lead to classrooms, libraries, and field sites. In tracing these trajectories, we gain insight not only into how Israelis engage with India but also into the evolving nature of cultural learning in a globalized world.

## Conclusion

The stories and perspectives presented in this essay reveal a rich and varied landscape of engagement with India—shaped by a love of languages, personal quests for meaning, intellectual curiosity, and cross-cultural connection. From the scholars who built the foundations of the discipline under the shadows of exile and postwar reconstruction to today’s students who seek to combine their academic interests with future careers in teaching, counselling, or international cooperation, the motivations for studying India in Israel are as diverse as they are compelling. Importantly, the exchange of knowledge between cultures has often preceded the formal establishment of diplomatic relations or state-sponsored partnerships. As the cases discussed here illustrate, Indian studies in Israel emerged and thrived even before India and Israel existed in their present forms as modern states, and well before official diplomatic ties were established. Regional studies have long served as channels for informal diplomacy—fostering cultural understanding, academic exchange, and shared intellectual exploration. In this sense, global travel and transnational curiosity generate knowledge, while regional studies offer the tools to contextualize and translate that knowledge across borders.

In recent years, academic programmes in Indian studies—like those focused on China, Japan, and other regions—have witnessed a decline in student enrolment. This is not a uniquely Israeli phenomenon, nor one limited to regional studies. It reflects a broader transformation in the global academic environment. The COVID-19 pandemic has only accelerated these shifts, further disrupting academic continuity, international mobility, and long-term educational planning. At the same time, disciplines within the humanities—and especially those that require long-term linguistic and cultural investment—face mounting pressure from both ideological critiques and economic rationalizations. Yet precisely because of these pressures, the perspective offered by such studies may be more essential than ever. Regional studies provide historical depth, contextual understanding, and the capacity to engage seriously with ways of thinking and living different from one’s own. They encourage looking at others not as ‘the other’, but in a differentiated and balanced way that resists stereotypes and simplifications. Indian studies in Israel, as explored here, exemplify how such engagement remains not only relevant but potentially

transformative—for individuals and for the academic and cultural institutions they inhabit. Far from being relics of a colonial past, regional studies today function as spaces of dialogue, critical reflection, and intercultural learning. As global interest in the humanities continues to wane, these spaces become increasingly vital. It is our hope that the experiences shared in this essay contribute to a more nuanced appreciation of the field—and of those who choose, often against the current, to dedicate themselves to it.

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## FREIE BEITRÄGE

### Research Note

# Ueki Emori und die japanische Freiheits- und Bürgerrechtsbewegung (jiyū minken undō) – zugleich ein Beitrag zur japanischen Verfassungsgeschichte

Klaus Schlichtmann

### Abstract

This study examines the international relations between Japan and the West, particularly with regards to the development of international and constitutional law, peace and statehood. During the Age of Discovery in the 15th and 16th centuries, international relations had intensified and reached a peak in the 18th century. The idea of a peaceful organisation of the world as a political union evolved with the Enlightenment, which thus laid the philosophical foundation for concepts such as international law, human rights and international cooperation. With the Hague Peace Conferences 1899 and 1907, an international legal community was constituted for the first time in the 20th century, the forerunner of the League of Nations and the United Nations. In this context, Japan was ideally destined to play a leading role. Japan wanted to give itself a new constitution and become a liberal democracy.

**Keywords:** Japan, Enlightenment, peace, military establishment, imperialism, national development, state formation, opening Japan to the world, Bismarck, Meiji Restoration, Franco-Prussian War, German militarism, Japan's 1947 Peace Constitution, world government, rule of law, world parliament, Hague Peace Conferences, Meiji Constitution, Fukuzawa Yukichi, Nakae Chomin, Iwakura-Mission

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## Die Aufklärung (Vorgeschichte)

Die historischen Ereignisse und Entwicklungen, die mit der Aufklärung begannen und dann auch Japan entscheidend beeinflussten, stehen hier im Mittelpunkt und sollen am Anfang dieser Untersuchung zunächst vorgestellt werden. Im Zeitalter der „Entdeckungen“ im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert waren die internationalen Beziehungen intensiver geworden und erreichten im 18. Jahrhundert einen Höhepunkt. Die Idee einer friedlichen Organisation der Welt als politische Vereinigung begann in der Aufklärung, die somit den philosophischen Grundstein für Konzepte wie internationales Recht, Menschenrechte und internationale Zusammenarbeit legte.

Das Zusammenspiel zwischen der europäischen Aufklärung, der indischen „Renaissance“ und Japans später Edo-Zeit, auch als „Bunka Bunsei-Periode“ (1804–1829) bekannt, tritt in dieser Zeit in Erscheinung. „In dieser Zeit wurde Edo [Tokio] der Mittelpunkt einer [...] verfeinerten [...] Kulturphase des städtischen Lebens. Im achtzehnten Jahrhundert gab es in den großen Städten bereits lukrative Verlagsbuchhandlungen.“ (Hall 1968, 225) Das Geschehen um 1800 ist als „kleine Achsenzeit“ ein später Meilenstein. Indien als „Achsenzeitkultur“ gehört zweifellos – wie Japan und China – in dieses Bild. Die Periode, die ich hier eine kleine Achsenzeit genannt habe, sah einen Friedensimpuls, der weltweit ausstrahlte und im Nachhinein wie eine Vorbereitung auf die Haager Friedenskonferenzen erscheint, die 100 Jahre später stattfanden, und auf denen sich erstmals für das 20. Jahrhundert – über Europa hinaus – eine internationale Rechtsgemeinschaft konstituierte, Vorläufer von Völkerbund und Vereinten Nationen. In dieser Geschichte nimmt auch Indien eine bedeutende Rolle ein. Ein neues Staatenkonzert war im Entstehen, das die ganze Welt umspannte. (Schlichtmann 1997)

Am 3. September 1791 war die erste geschriebene Verfassung Frankreichs verabschiedet worden, deren wichtigstes Grundprinzip die Einführung der Volkssouveränität war. Die Erklärung der Menschenrechte, die bereits am 27. August 1789 angenommen worden war, wurde in die Präambel der Verfassung aufgenommen. Bemerkenswert ist der Artikel 1 im 6. Abschnitt der Verfassung, dessen erster Satz lautete:

Die französische Nation entsagt aller Unternehmung eines Krieges, um Eroberungen zu machen, und wird nie ihre Armeen gegen die Freiheit irgendeines Volkes gebrauchen.<sup>1</sup> (Häberle 2017, 34)

Damit hatte Frankreich im Prinzip dem Krieg, insbesondere dem Eroberungskrieg, eine Absage erteilt. Weltweiter Handel, kulturelle Interaktion und zunehmende Interdependenz machten eine globale Friedensorganisation und internationale Verwaltung notwendig. Wissenschaftler wie Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) und andere hatten dies längst erkannt. Die Französische und die Amerikanische Revolution bereiteten die Welt auf das bevorstehende Zeitalter vor.

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1 Der französische Verfassungsartikel fand Nachfolger, z.B. in der brasilianischen Verfassung 1891.

Der Wiener Kongress (1814–15) begründete nach den Napoleonischen Kriegen ein System der friedlichen Streitbeilegung. Der russische Zar Alexander I. hatte im Jahre 1815 eine Allianz christlicher Fürsten vorgeschlagen; auch die Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika sollten dem Friedensbund beitreten. Der britische Historiker Adam Zamoyski schreibt etwas abfällig: Alexander „hoffte, ‚mehr von jenen edelmütigen und leidenschaftlichen Gefühlen‘ in die internationalen Angelegenheiten hineinzutragen, die es den Nationen erlauben würden, sich ‚zur Errettung ihrer Freiheit miteinander zu vereinen‘ und brüderlichen Beistand zu leisten.“ (Zamoyski 2015) Zar Alexander hatte wohl auch Kenntnis von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’ Plänen und sein Denken über internationale Ordnung und Friedensverträge, die in eine ähnliche Richtung wiesen.

In Indien war Bengalen die reichste Provinz. Am Hooghly River waren die britische und die niederländische Ostindien-Kompanie (gegründet 1600 bzw. 1602) mächtig und wohlhabend geworden. 1772 wurde Kalkutta die Hauptstadt von British-Indien. Die intellektuelle Elite Großbritanniens stand damals unter Einfluss der Aufklärung und war, wie David Kopf gezeigt hat, im Gegensatz zu den späteren Beamten in der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts „eher kosmopolitisch als nationalistisch“ und von einem Geist der Toleranz, des Rationalismus und der Suche nach klassischen Ideen des Humanismus und Universalismus beseelt. (Kopf 1996, 22)

1784 gründete der Orientalist William Jones (1746–1794) in Kalkutta die Asiatische Gesellschaft. Vedische und buddhistische Schriften wurden entdeckt, gesammelt und übersetzt, der alte Geist wiederbelebt, Geschichten geschrieben und Zivilisationen rekonstruiert. Bibliotheken wurden eröffnet, Druckereien gegründet und wichtige Schriften gedruckt und veröffentlicht. „Kalkutta lieferte, London verteilte, Paris filterte und verallgemeinerte.“ (Said 1984, IX) So beschrieb es der französische Orientalist Raymond Schwab. Die deutsche Rezeption führte zu einer Identifizierung vermeintlicher (und erfundener) kultureller Gemeinsamkeiten mit einem arischen Ursprung in Europa.

Als James Prinsep (1799–1840) 1837 „das Geheimnis der Brahmi-Schrift enträtselte“ und die Inschriften des buddhistischen Kaisers Ashoka Maurya (reg. 268–232 v. Chr.) entzifferte, war es eine Sensation. (Kopf 1996, 266) Ashoka ragt in der Weltgeschichte dadurch hervor, dass er auf den Krieg als Instrument der Politik verzichtete und stattdessen die Verbreitung des Dharma verkündete, der „guten Lehre“, verbunden mit einer traditionellen Ethik des Verhaltens, die auf Diskurs statt auf Macht beruhte. „Die Wiederentdeckung des buddhistischen Indiens war die letzte große Errungenschaft der britischen Orientalisten.“ (Kopf 1996, 266) „The figure of Buddha was growing larger in the world.“ (Schwab 1984, 111) Die berühmte Ashoka-„Säule der Wahrheit“ wurde nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg zum Symbol des modernen Indiens. (Schlichtmann 2016)

In Japan hatten die Hollandstudien seit dem 18. Jahrhundert bewirkt, dass Japan mit der europäischen Kultur „besser vertraut war als alle anderen nichtwestlichen Völker,“ (Keene 1974, 292) ausgenommen vielleicht die Bengalen. Dabei handelte es

sich bei all diesen Bewegungen um einen Kulturaustausch, der wesentlich in beide Richtungen verlief. Die Anthropologen Carol A. Breckenridge und Peter van der Veer haben gezeigt, dass sich „der frühe Orientalismus parallel zur europäischen Aufklärung entwickelt hat.“ Nicht nur das, seine Inhalte waren „für das Abendland konstitutiv.“ (Breckenridge, van der Veer 1993, 7, 5) So hätte es ohne die Rezeption der Literatur, Religion, Kunst und Philosophie Indiens und des Fernen Ostens keine wirkliche europäische und westliche Aufklärung gegeben.

## Die Hollandstudien (Rangaku Kaitei)

Im Gegensatz zu Indien war in Japan der Buddhismus noch lebendig, hatte sich aber weitgehend mit dem einheimischen Shintoismus vermischt. Daneben war der Neokonfuzianismus die vorherrschende Philosophie. Um die Mitte des 17. Jahrhunderts wurde die holländische Gelehrsamkeit (Rangaku) zu einer wichtigen Disziplin in Japan, und bereits um 1670 waren holländische Dolmetscher in Nagasaki „in der Lage, Japanisch zu sprechen und auch zu schreiben.“ (Cohen 1947, 291) Auf diese Weise gelangte ein umfangreiches Wissen über Japan in den Westen. Bald begannen auch gebildete Japaner, die auf der Nagasaki vorgelagerten Insel Deshima mit den Niederländern in Kontakt kamen, westliche Wissenschaften zu studieren. (Schlichtmann 2001)

Gegen Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts war Edo, das heutige Tokio, bereits der kulturelle und politische Mittelpunkt Japans. Die ersten modernen Japaner, die „westliche Gelehrsamkeit“ (Yōyaku) pflegten, waren der Astronom und Geograf Nishikawa Joken (1648–1724) und der Konfuzianer Arai Hakuseki (1657–1725). (Arai 1980)<sup>2</sup> Der achte Shōgun, Tokugawa Yoshimune (1684–1751; reg. 1716–45), war ein Förderer der westlichen Wissenschaft. 1720 beendete er das bis dahin herrschende Verbot ausländischer Bücher und befahl einigen Gelehrten, Niederländisch zu lernen. Unter Tanuma Okitsugu (1719–1788), einem Daimyō, der durch die Führung der Staatsgeschäfte unter Shōgun Ieshige (1745–60) und Ieharu (1760–86) zur Macht aufgestiegen war, kam es in Deshima nicht nur zu einem besonders regen Austausch von Informationen, sondern auch von ausgefallenen Gegenständen mit den Niederländern. „Daimyōs sammelten Uhren und Ferngläser, tranken aus gläsernen Bechern und ließen sich sogar elektrische Experimente vorführen.“ (Hall 1968, 220) Etwa um die gleiche Zeit führte Shiba Kōkan (1738–1818) das kopernikanische Weltsystem ein. (Cohen 1947, 292)

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2 Arai veröffentlichte zwei Bücher über den Westen, das *Seiyō Kibun* (*Eine seltsame Geschichte über den Westen*, 1715) und das *Sairan Igen* (Verschiedene Ansichten über die Geographie der Welt, 1713, rev. 1725). Das letztgenannte Werk, das fünf Bände umfasst, war von Tokugawa Ienobu in Auftrag gegeben worden und basierte auf dem Werk des italienischen Jesuitenmissionars Mateo Ricci.

Von 1769 bis 1786 vermittelten Karl Peter von Thunberg (1743–1828), ein schwedischer Arzt, und Isaac Titsingh (1745–1812), der auch die holländische Niederlassung/Faktorei Chinsurah<sup>3</sup> in Kalkutta verwaltete und zwischen 1779 und 1796 dreimal der niederländische „Opperhoofd“, d. h. das Oberhaupt von Deshima, und zudem ein kundiger Gelehrter war, dem Westen japanisches Wissen. Titsingh korrespondierte zwanzig Jahre lang mit Edo-Gelehrten. (Schwebell 1981, 50) Im Jahr 1822 veröffentlichte er in London sein Buch *Illustrations of Japan*. (Lequin 1990) Man vermittelte so „den Japanern, die sich um ihre Quartiere scharten, eine Menge wissenschaftlicher Informationen aus erster Hand.“ (Hall 1968, 220) Zwischen 1750 und 1790 veröffentlichten die Ärzte und Pioniere der „Hollandkunde“ Maeno Ryōtaku (1723 –1803), Sugita Gempaku (1733–1817) und Ōtsuki Gentaku (1757–1828) Bücher über westliche Wissenschaft.

Japan bereitete sich sorgfältig auf das moderne Zeitalter vor. Bis 1869 hatten mehrere tausend Japaner westliche Wissenschaften studiert, vor allem auf Niederländisch, und neben englischen, französischen, deutschen und chinesischen Büchern wurden 670 Werke aus dem Niederländischen ins Japanische übersetzt.<sup>4</sup> (Fujii 1982, 19) Ergebnis der Niederländisch-Studien-Bewegung war nach Donald Keene, dass die Japaner um 1800 „mit der europäischen Kultur vertrauter waren als alle anderen nicht-westlichen Völker,“ (Keene 1974, 292) mit Ausnahme der Kalkutteraner vielleicht.

## Die japanische Freiheits- und Menschenrechtsbewegung (Jiyū Minken Undō)

Die o.g. Einflüsse legten den Grundstein für eine einheimische progressive intellektuelle Bewegung in Japan. Die Freiheits- und Menschenrechtsbewegung war eine politische und soziale Bewegung des späten 19. Jahrhunderts, die sich für bürgerliche Freiheiten, politische Teilhabe und demokratische Reformen einsetzte. Es begann in der frühen Meiji-Zeit, als Japan eine schnelle Modernisierung anstrebte. (Ienaga 1955) Es wird berichtet, dass der Protagonist der japanischen Aufklärung, Ueki Emori (1857–1892), der vielleicht einflussreichste Aktivist der *Jiyū Minken Undō*, als er 16 Jahre alt war, bereits in einem Aufsatz „Gefühle zum Ausdruck brachte,“ in denen er forderte „menschliches Leben zu respektieren und auf Krieg zu verzichten (*hitei suru*)“ und hinwies auf „die Notwendigkeit eines beratenden Gremiums (*kyōgi-tai*), um die Welt [...] zu vereinen.“ (Morifumi 2002, 16) Schon Thomas Paine sagte, „The world is my country.“ Für den Biographen Andrew Roth war Ueki daher der „Tom Paine der Demokratiebewegung,“ ein kluger „Theoretiker und Taktiker.“ (Roth 1946, 100)

3 William Jones nannte ihn den „Mandarin von Chinsurah.“

4 Nach Fujii waren unter den 670 Texten 130 Bücher über Medizin, 70 über Militärwissenschaft, 50 über Chemie und Physik, 40 über Astronomie und 30 über Politik.

1868 erfolgte die Meiji-Restauration (*Meiji ishin*), die nach der 1853 erzwungenen Öffnung Japans durch US-Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry die Macht des japanischen Kaisers (*tennō*) wiederherstellte. Die *Jiyū Minken Undō* war eine Reaktion und wollte Japan in einen modernen, föderalistisch gegliederten Rechtsstaat verwandeln. Vorbild waren vor allem die Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika. Auch die Regierung unter dem Meiji-Tennō Mutsuhito (reg. 867–1912) leitete Reformen ein, mit dem Ziel, eine starke politische Zentralgewalt zu etablieren. 1881 verkündete der Meiji-Kaiser, Pläne für eine Verfassung auszuarbeiten. Mit der Abschaffung des alten Feudalsystems und der Samurai-Klasse sollten wirtschaftliche und politische Veränderungen eingeleitet werden. Bis zur Annahme der Meiji-Verfassung 1889 gab es insgesamt mehr als 40 Verfassungsentwürfe (Irokawa 1981), wobei nach Einschätzung des Historikers Saburo Ienaga (1913–2002) Ueki Emoris „Nationaler Verfassungsentwurf“ „der demokratischste aller existierenden Verfassungspläne“ war, was auch gegenwärtig die einhellige Auffassung im akademischen Mainstream ist. (Ienaga 1967) Nicht nur das, sein Entwurf war ein Modell und „Vorbild für die japanische Nachkriegsverfassung“ von 1947, (Obata 2008, 83) mit ihrer Betonung der „Menschenrechte“, „Volkssouveränität“ und „lokaler Autonomie“ als seine Hauptmerkmale. In der Tat ist „Die Verfassung Japans dem Entwurf von Emori Ueki sehr ähnlich.“ (Ienaga 1974, 321) Es war Ienaga Saburō, der bedeutende Historiker, der Ueki erstmals aus der historischen Versenkung holte. (Ghadimi 2017, 199)

Insgesamt sollte die Einführung westlicher Ideen, Liberalismus, Demokratie und Menschenrechte eine wichtige Rolle spielen. Japanische Intellektuelle wie Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901) hoben die Bedeutung von individueller Freiheit und politischen Rechten hervor, die dazu beitragen sollten, die Grundlagen für die angestrebte nationale Erneuerung zu legen. Sein 1866 veröffentlichtes Buch *Seiyō-jijō* (Verhältnisse in der westlichen Welt) beschrieb „die fantastische neue Welt der Parlamente, Eisenbahnen, Dampfschiffe, Banken, Museen und Universitäten, die er auf seinen Reisen entdeckt hatte [...]“ (Hall 1968, 283) Da Ueki keine Fremdsprachen konnte, las er politische Abhandlungen, Autoren wie John Stuart Mill, Jean-Jacques Rousseau und Immanuel Kant, Bentham, Spencer und Tocqueville in japanischer Übersetzung. Er las die Geschichte der französischen und der amerikanischen Revolutionen und die Verfassungen der Vereinigten Staaten und Frankreichs und anderer Staaten, so wie er sie finden konnte. (Ghadimi 2017, 198) Diese Texte inspirierten japanische Aktivisten dazu, bürgerliche Freiheiten und eine Rechtsstaatlichkeit einzufordern. Lokale Eliten und ehemalige Samurai beklagten den bevorstehenden Verlust regionaler Autonomie und befürchteten, dass die Regierung nur ihre eigenen Interessen im Auge habe und ihre Privilegien beibehalten wollte. Ueki Emori besuchte ab 1875 in Tokio regelmäßige Vorlesungen von Yukichii Fukuzawa, (Ienaga 1955, 14) dessen Ideen ihn am stärksten beeinflussten. Er hörte seine Reden,

las eifrig seine Bücher, *Gakumon no Susume* (Ermutigung zum Lernen)<sup>5</sup> und *Bun-meiron no Gairyaku* (Grundzüge einer Zivilisationstheorie)<sup>6</sup> und war tief beeindruckt von den Ideen, die in diesen Werken vertreten wurden. (Ienaga 1955, 15) So entwickelte Emori seine modernen Ideen unter dem Einfluss der Aufklärung, wie sie von Fukuzawa und in zahlreichen Übersetzungen vermittelt wurde. (Ienaga 1955, 16)

Ende 1871, nachdem Bismarcks Reichsverfassung im April des Jahres verabschiedet worden war, entsandte die japanische Regierung eine Delegation in den Westen, um u. a. die verschiedenen Verfassungs- und Regierungssysteme zu studieren. Die sog. Iwakura-Mission wurde von dem Adligen Iwakura Tomomi (1825–1883) geleitet, einem führenden Vertreter der frühen Meiji-Regierung. Außerdem gehörten dazu auch der Jurist Nakae Chōmin (1847–1901), Ōkubo Toshimichi (1830–1878) und Itō Hirobumi (1841–1909), der die preußische Verfassung besonders intensiv studierte und in Kontakt mit deutschen Verfassungsexperten wie Lorenz von Stein (1815–1890) stand. (Zöllner 1990, 67) Insgesamt hielten sich die Reisenden 205 Tage in den USA und 372 Tage in Kontinentaleuropa auf. 1873 kehrte die Delegation in ihre Heimat zurück.

Ein Jahr später wurde die Risshisha gegründet, eine politische Gesellschaft, die von Itagaki Taisuke und anderen Samurai in der Domäne Tosa (heute Präfektur Kōchi, Japan) ins Leben gerufen wurde. Itagaki war ein ehemaliger Samurai und Regierungsbeamter, verließ die Meiji-Regierung, wurde ein Führer der *Jiyū Minken Undō* und setzte sich für ein parlamentarisches System und umfassende politische Rechte ein. Hauptziel war es, das Konzept einer konstitutionellen Regierung zu begründen, das umfangreiche Bürgerrechte garantieren sollte. Die Risshisha spielte eine entscheidende Rolle in der japanischen Freiheits- und Menschenrechtsbewegung. Im Jahr 1877 reichte die Vereinigung eine Petition ein, in der sie sich für die Einrichtung einer Nationalversammlung aussprach. Diese Petition war Teil umfassenderer Bemühungen, die Regierung zur Verabschiedung einer Verfassung und einer repräsentativen Versammlung zu drängen, wobei der Schwerpunkt auf der Einrichtung eines Parlaments lag, das den Bürgern eine Stimme bei der nationalen Entscheidungsfindung geben sollte. Ueki Emori, Mitglied der Risshisha, unterstützte deren Petition.<sup>7</sup>

Aktivistinnen wie Itagaki Taisuke (1837–1919) und Ueki Emori spielten eine zentrale Rolle. 1874 gründete Itagaki die Aikoku Kōtō (Öffentliche Partei der Patrioten), eine der ersten politischen Parteien in Japan. Itagaki wurde am 14. Mai 1882 von einem Samurai namens Kurasawa Genzō attackiert. Der Angriff ereignete sich, als Itagaki auf einer politischen Kampagne für seine neu gegründete Jiyūtō (Liberalen Partei)

5 Das Buch ist 2012 mit dem Titel *An Encouragement of Learning* in englischer Übersetzung erschienen (Columbia).

6 Das Buch ist 2008 mit dem Titel *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization* in englischer Übersetzung erschienen (Columbia).

7 Die Nationalbibliothek hat detaillierte Informationen zu den Ereignissen online: <https://www.ndl.go.jp/modern/e/cha1/index.html>.

unterwegs war. Schwer verletzt soll Itagaki die Worte gesagt haben: „Itagaki mag sterben, aber die Freiheit wird niemals sterben,“ die zu einem Symbol für die demokratische Bewegung in Japan wurden.<sup>8</sup> Noch heute sind diese berühmten Worte den Japanern, interessanterweise, wie ich feststellen konnte, auch allen Studenten, in Erinnerung. Ein gutes Omen!

Uekis „Verfassungsentwurf für die große orientalische Japanische Nation“ (*Tōyō Dai Nippon Kokken An*)<sup>9</sup> sah, dem amerikanischen Vorbild folgend, 70 unabhängige „Staaten“ (*shū*) vor, die „eine föderale Regierung bilden sollten, die sich an die Aufteilung der legislativen, exekutiven und judikativen Befugnisse halten würde. Die Streitkräfte sollten ausschließlich zur Verteidigung der Verfassung und nicht zur Führung ausländischer Kriege eingesetzt werden.“ Insofern ähnelt Uekis Konzept dem des Nakae Chomin, der einen „reichen Staat“ befürwortete, aber meinte, dass

dieses Ziel ‚starke Waffen‘ ausschließe. Als Pazifist lehnte er die Einberufung einer nationalen Armee ab und befürwortete stattdessen die Bildung freiwilliger Milizen zum Schutz rein lokaler Interessen. Nakae glaubte, dass der universelle Geist der Zivilisation in der Freiheit, der Volkssouveränität und den Menschenrechten liegt, und er prangerte westliche Praktiken an, die gegen diese Ideale verstießen. Also lehnte er den Aufbau eines Imperiums ab und vertrat die Ansicht, dass Japan eine kleine Macht bleiben sollte, die den benachbarten asiatischen Staaten hilft, sich gegen die koloniale Übernahme durch den Westen zu wehren. (Wakabayashi 1998, 9)

Auch für Ueki ist Freiheit das Allerwichtigste, denn ohne sie, schreibt er, „wäre der Mensch wie ein Vogel im Käfig.“ (Ueki 1949, 25) Ebenso wichtig fand er das Wissen. „Nichtwissen ist der Weg zur Hölle,“ schrieb er. (Ienaga 1949, 21)

Uekis 35 Artikel umfassende Charta der Rechte sah den „Schutz vor Folter und Todesstrafe, das Recht auf freie Meinungsäußerung, Versammlungs- und Religionsfreiheit sowie das Recht auf Ungehorsam und bewaffneten Widerstand gegen unrechtmäßige oder ungerechte staatliche Maßnahmen vor.“ Das japanische Volk konnte ermächtigt werden, „seinen Kaiser und seine Regierung zu stürzen, wenn es nötig wäre, um seine ursprünglichen Rechte und seine Freiheit wiederzuerlangen.“ (Wakabayashi 1998, 8) Ueki lehnte auch ab, „den ‚Kaiser‘ als heilig zu betrachten.“ (Obata 2008, 96)

8 Ich habe das Messer im Jiyū Minken Undō Museum, wo es ausgestellt ist, selbst gesehen.

9 <https://ja.wikisource.org/wiki/東洋大日本國々憲案>



und eine Vertretung haben sollte, auch die Nationen Rechte und eine Vertretung auf der Weltbühne haben sollten, schuf er die Grundlage für spätere Entwicklungen. Ohne eine Weltregierung, die ihnen zur Seite steht, so Ueki, wären insbesondere kleine Länder nicht in der Lage, ihre eigene Sicherheit und Autonomie zu gewährleisten. (Ghadimi 217, 210) Seine Vorschläge waren für die damalige Zeit radikal, vor allem im Kontext des späten 19. Jahrhunderts, da Japan gerade anfang, sich mit westlichen politischen Ideen praktisch auseinanderzusetzen. Er plädierte für ein internationales Regierungssystem und forderte ein wirksames System des internationalen Rechts – Ueki nannte es *Bankoku-Kōhō* – was übersetzt so viel wie „internationales öffentliches Recht“ oder Völkerrecht bedeutet. Dazu gehörten gemeinsame Grundsätze der Gerechtigkeit und Zusammenarbeit und eine Verwaltung, die die Beschlüsse eines Weltparlaments umsetzen und die Einhaltung internationaler Normen gewährleisten sollte. 1881, demselben Jahr, in dem Ueki seinen Aufruf zur weltweiten Föderation veröffentlichte, forderte er die Unabhängigkeit von Ryūkyū, dem heutigen Okinawa, obwohl es 1879 als Präfektur in den japanischen Nationalstaat eingegliedert worden war. (Ghadimi 2017, 211)

Auch Uekis Konzept eines *Bankoku Kyōgi Seifu*, zu verstehen als eine „deliberative Weltregierung“ oder „Weltparlament,“ in der die Vertreter verschiedener Nationen über globale Fragen beraten und entscheiden könnten, ist bemerkenswert. Dieses Gremium würde dafür sorgen, dass die einseitige Dominanz einer einzelnen Macht vermieden und Entscheidungen im Konsens und im Dialog getroffen werden könnten. Das Völkerrecht sollte als Instrument zur Erhaltung des Weltfriedens und zur Verhinderung von Konflikten zwischen den Nationen dienen. Durch die Schaffung eines gemeinsamen Rechtsrahmens, der für alle Nationen gelten sollte, würde die Wahrscheinlichkeit von Kriegen verringert und der gegenseitige Respekt gefördert. (Ienaga 1967) Sein Konzept der Idee/Realisierung universeller Rechte und demokratischer Teilhabe waren für die *Jiyū Minken Undō* von zentraler Bedeutung.

Ueki Emoris Gedanken zum Völkerrecht und zu einem Weltparlament waren seiner Zeit weit voraus und weisen eine bemerkenswerte Ähnlichkeit mit späteren Entwicklungen in der internationalen Diplomatie und in internationalen Organisationen auf. Er nahm damit Elemente dessen vorweg, was wir mit modernen internationalen Organisationen wie dem Völkerbund und später den Vereinten Nationen assoziieren. Uekis Ideen waren stark vom westlichen liberalen Denken geprägt, einschließlich der Grundsätze der Aufklärung und der Schriften europäischer Denker wie Jean-Jacques Rousseau und Immanuel Kant. In Tokio las Ueki „Übersetzungen über westliches Recht, Politik, historische Geographie und Naturwissenschaften.“ (Morifumi 2002, 16) Uekis Vorschläge für internationale Zusammenarbeit und Governance deckten sich mit den europäischen Plänen für einen immerwährenden Frieden und der Idee einer kosmopolitischen Rechtsordnung. Ueki betonte, dass das Völkerrecht als Instrument zur Erhaltung des Weltfriedens und zur Beilegung von Konflikten zwischen den Nationen dienen müsse. Er erklärte dies folgendermaßen:

Die Nationen der Welt können durch eine universelle Regierung und eine einheitliche Verfassung geschützt werden, und internationale Streitigkeiten können beigelegt werden. Wenn alle Nationen der Welt durch eine universelle Regierung und eine Verfassung der vereinigten Nationen geschützt wären und internationale Streitigkeiten beigelegt werden könnten, könnte jede Nation unterteilt werden und die direkte Demokratie wäre leichter umzusetzen. Dies würde auch die direkte Demokratie erleichtern. Zum Beispiel können die Armeen für den Inlandsgebrauch je nach Situation des Landes etwas ausgerüstet werden, aber für den Auslandsgebrauch benötigen sie vielleicht nur sehr wenig oder gar keine Rüstung und sollten am Ende des Tages ganz abgeschafft werden. Dies ist nicht nur ein großer Vorteil. Wenn nämlich die Kosten für Land- und Seestreitkräfte in irgendeiner Nation der Welt so hoch sind, dass sie den Menschen keinen Schaden zufügen, dann kann es keinen Zweifel daran geben, dass eine Nation ihren Wohlstand steigern sollte, wenn sie ihre militärischen Kräfte reduziert. (Morifumi 2002, 27)<sup>11</sup>

Diese fortschrittlichen und zukunftsweisenden Beiträge wurden auch nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg als Teil des intellektuellen Erbes der japanischen Demokratiebewegung und ihrer frühen Auseinandersetzung mit Konzepten der Global Governance und des Völkerrechts gewürdigt. Eine Weltregierung würde die Beziehungen zwischen den Staaten harmonisieren und sollte keine Zwangsinstanz sein. Morifumi bedauert, dass „bisher keine [hinreichende] Forschung stattgefunden hat, die sich mit der historischen Entwicklung der Außenpolitik von Ueki Emori befasst.“ (Morifumi 2002, 15) Ein bekanntes chinesisches Werk, das diese japanischen Bestrebungen ebenfalls widerspiegelt, ist das Buch *Da Tongshu* (Das Buch von der großen Einheit) des Chinesen Kang Youwei (1858–1927), „der umfassendste Entwurf eines idealen Gesellschaftssystems, das China je hervorgebracht hat.“ (Bauer 1971, 414)

Die Jiyū Minken Undō hatte wie schon erwähnt auch zur Gründung politischer Parteien wie der Liberalen Partei (Jiyūtō) und der Konstitutionellen Fortschrittspartei (Rikken Kaishintō) geführt, die sich für repräsentative Institutionen und eine verfassungsmäßige Regierung einsetzten. Sprachrohr der liberalen Partei (Jiyūtō) war die Zeitung *Jiyū Shimbun*, deren Herausgeber Ueki war.

Was die Durchsetzung einer demokratischen, freiheitlichen Verfassung betraf, wie sie Ueki vorschlug, so waren inzwischen internationale Veränderungen eingetreten, die diese Entwicklung verhinderten. 1870/71 hatte Preußen Frankreich besiegt und damit auch eine Änderung in der politischen Wahrnehmung Japans verursacht. Bis dahin hatten französische Militärberater den Japanern als Ausbilder zur Seite gestanden. Ueki war auch von den Veränderungen betroffen. Er hatte sich 1873, gerade 16 Jahre alt, in eine progressive Schule eingeschrieben, die von Toyonori Yamauchi gegründet wurde, einem ehemaligen Samurai, der jungen Männern westliche politische Ideen, Rechtswissenschaften und Regierungsführung beibringen wollte. Ueki erfuhr, „dass die Schule Französischunterricht mit dem Ziel der Ausbildung von Armeeoffizieren sei“ und dass alle Schüler dies im Hinterkopf haben sollten. „Das enttäuschte Ueki sehr, da er nicht die Absicht hatte, Soldat zu werden,“ im Gegenteil.

11 Morifumi zitiert aus Ueki Emori, *Ausgewählte Werke*, S. 67.

(Ienaga 1955, 13) Als im August des Jahres die Schulregeln geändert wurden, nutzte er die Gelegenheit und „beschloss, die Schule zu verlassen [...] trotz des Widerstands des Direktors und der Familie Yamauchi.“ (Ienaga 1955, 13) Vielleicht wurden die Schulregeln geändert, weil es aufgrund des deutschen Einflusses, nachdem Deutschland den Krieg gegen Frankreich gewonnen hatte, neue Einschränkungen der politischen Betätigung und der Bildung in Japan gegeben hatte. Im preußischen Stil wurde Wert auf Ordnung, Disziplin und staatliche Kontrolle der politischen Meinungsäußerung gelegt und Schulen und Universitäten wurden einer stärkeren staatlichen Kontrolle unterworfen. Auch das konnte Ueki nicht gefallen.

Tatsächlich waren es nun die Deutschen, die mehr und mehr das Sagen hatten. Das preußische Modell garantierte einen starken Staat, den selbst japanische Reformatoren wie Itō Hirobumi, der „Baumeister des modernen Japan,“ (Hori Makiyo) bevorzugten. Die japanische Führung wollte westliche Elemente nur selektiv übernehmen. Der deutsche Imperialismus und Militarismus und die Reichsverfassung wurden zunehmend als Vorbilder empfunden. Dies hatte zur Folge, dass die japanische Regierung sich gegen den Vorschlag von Ueki Emori entschied. Mit dem Sieg Preußens gegen die französischen Truppen bei Sedan, so Ghadimi, habe Bismarck an Einfluss gewonnen. „Furcht und Respekt“ seien weltweit das Ergebnis gewesen und könnten Japan, die Stärke Preußens vor Augen, dazu verleiten, selbst Krieg zu führen, wie es Preußen getan hatte. (Ghadimi 2017, 214)

Die Entscheidung war das Ergebnis einer gezielten Strategie der Meiji-Oligarchie, die sicherstellen wollte, dass der Kaiser als höchste Autorität fest verankert blieb und die militärischen „Vorrechte“ des „Kaisers“ garantiert würden. Westliche Berater wie Lorenz von Stein beeinflussten die Entscheidung für die deutsche Verfassung, die versprach, Japan Stabilität und Kontrolle zu gewährleisten. Die deutsche Reichsverfassung bot ein Modell, das die Macht des Monarchen und die zentrale Rolle des Kaisers und des autoritären Reichskanzlers stark betonte. Ueki Emoris liberal-demokratischer Entwurf wurde als potenziell destabilisierend angesehen und ließ die Meiji-Führung einen Machtverlust der Zentralregierung und des Kaisers befürchten.

Insgesamt gab es erhebliche Proteste und Widerstand gegen die Entscheidung der japanischen Regierung, sich an dem autoritären Verfassungsmodell nach deutschem Vorbild zu orientieren. Liberale und demokratisch gesinnte Intellektuelle, politische Aktivisten sowie Mitglieder der aufstrebenden Mittelklasse und oppositionelle Parteien forderten eine repräsentative und freiheitliche Verfassung. Die Freiheitspartei (Jiyūtō) und die Konstitutionelle Fortschrittspartei (Rikken Kaishintō) kritisierten die Entscheidung der Regierung scharf und forderten eine Verfassung nach britischem oder französischem Vorbild, die eine stärkere parlamentarische Kontrolle und umfassendere Bürgerrechte garantieren konnte.

Die stärkste Reaktion kam von der Jiyū Minken Undō. Die Aktivisten dieser Bewegung, darunter auch Ueki Emori selbst, sahen in der Entscheidung der Regierung einen Rückschritt in ihren Bemühungen um eine liberale Verfassung. Das gewählte

Modell der deutschen Reichsverfassung betonte die Macht des Kaisers zu sehr und schloss das Volk von einer wirklichen politischen Mitsprache aus. Durch Petitionen und organisierte Massenproteste und Versammlungen wurde versucht, im ganzen Land Druck auf die Regierung auszuüben.

Der Hauptvorwurf war, dass die Regierung die Entscheidung für die Verfassung ohne breite Konsultationen mit der Bevölkerung getroffen hatte, wie man früh gefordert hatte, also eine nationale Versammlung einzuberufen und eine Verfassung mit echter Bürgerbeteiligung zu entwerfen. Die Opposition nutzte Zeitungen, Pamphlete und öffentliche Foren, um die Vorteile einer liberaleren Verfassung zu propagieren.

In einigen Fällen führte der Protest gegen das autoritäre Verfassungsmodell zu gewaltsamen Auseinandersetzungen. In Teilen des Landes, insbesondere in ländlichen Gebieten, wo sich Bauern und Landbesitzer der Bewegung angeschlossen hatten, kam es zu Aufständen und Aufruhr. Die Regierung reagierte mit Repressionen, verhaftete führende Vertreter der liberalen Bewegung, schloss Zeitungen und verbot politische Versammlungen.

Obwohl die Proteste die Verabschiedung der Verfassung von 1889 nicht mehr hatten verhindern können, bildeten sie längerfristig die Grundlage für eine starke zukünftige politische Kultur in Japan. Viele Intellektuelle und politische Aktivisten, die sich damals gegen das preußische Modell aussprachen, traten später in den 1920er Jahren wieder in Erscheinung, als Japan unter dem Einfluss der Taishō-Demokratie politische Reformen einführte. Ihr Widerstand prägte das politische Bewusstsein einer Generation, die für eine parlamentarische und repräsentative Regierung gekämpft hatte.

Nach dem 2. Weltkrieg trug Uekis Verfassungsentwurf entscheidend zur Entstehung der neuen, freiheitlich-demokratischen japanischen Verfassung bei – ein später Sieg und Triumph!

## **Die Emser Depesche**

Die Gründung des Deutschen Reiches 1871, die zur deutschen Einigung führte, beruhte in mancher Hinsicht auf einem Schwindel. Preußen wollte mit den europäischen imperialen Mächten in einen Wettstreit treten und das Gleichgewicht zu seinen Gunsten verändern, um im Konzert der Mächte zu dominieren und den Einfluss auf andere Nationen militärisch abzusichern.

Die Depesche war ein Telegramm, das König Wilhelm I. von Preußen an Otto von Bismarck, den preußischen Ministerpräsidenten, schickte. Es berichtete über ein Treffen zwischen dem König und dem französischen Botschafter in Bad Ems, bei

dem der Botschafter versichern sollte, dass kein Kandidat aus dem Haus der Hohenzollern jemals für den spanischen Thron zur Verfügung stehen dürfe.<sup>12</sup>

Bismarck kürzte den Text, bevor er ihn veröffentlichte, um die Depesche provokativ erscheinen zu lassen. Die Veröffentlichung der gefälschten Fassung in der Presse heizte die öffentliche Meinung auf beiden Seiten an. „Bismarck wusste ganz genau, dass die Veröffentlichung der redigierten Depesche aus Ems keine andere Antwort als die Kriegserklärung mehr zuließ: das hat er provoziert [...] hier liegt [...] seine ‚Schuld‘ an diesem Krieg.“ (Salewski 1993, 90) Am 19. Juli 1870 erklärte Frankreich Preußen den Krieg.

Wie auch immer man die Querelen zwischen den europäischen Herrscherhäusern beurteilen mag, die Manipulation der Emser Depesche veränderte nicht nur den Lauf der europäischen Geschichte. Sie förderte weltweit den Militarismus und Autoritarismus. Das Ereignis des Deutsch-Französischen Krieges beeinflusste die ideologischen Strömungen der Zeit und führte zu einer Verschiebung in der internationalen Politik, in der militärische Stärke und autoritäre Führung zunehmend an Bedeutung gewannen. Der Historiker Michael Salewski bringt es auf den Punkt: „Die Völker lebten [...] seit 1871 nicht so sehr in einer ‚Nachkriegs-‘ und ‚Friedenszeit‘ als in einer ständigen ‚Vorkriegszeit‘. [...] Fortan würde der Krieg nie mehr das sein, was er im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert gewesen war.“ Salewski fragt weiter: „[...] hat die Politik der Europäischen Staatsmänner daraus die notwendigen Konsequenzen gezogen?“ (Salewski 1993, 97 und 94)<sup>13</sup>

Der erfolgreiche Einsatz von diplomatischer Manipulation und militärischer Macht zur Erreichung nationaler Ziele, wie es Bismarck demonstrierte,<sup>14</sup> fand Nachahmer, sodass Japan und andere Länder begannen, ihre eigenen Streitkräfte nach preußischem Vorbild zu modernisieren, was zu einem Wettrüsten und einer Militarisierung der Politik beitrug. Diese Entwicklung legte den Grundstein für die instabile geopo-

12 Königin Isabella II von Spanien hatte durch einen Putsch im September 1868 ihren Thron verloren. Es ging also um die Frage, wer ihr Nachfolger werden sollte. Ein möglicher Kandidat war Leopold von Hohenzollern, der mit dem preußischen König Wilhelm I., dem späteren deutschen Kaiser, verwandt war. Otto von Bismarck riet zur Annahme des Angebotes und Leopold willigte im Juni 1870 ein. Als der französische Botschafter in Spanien wenig später davon erfuhr, führte dies zu Protesten in Frankreich. Die französische Regierung drohte mit Krieg und Leopold zog seine Kandidatur zurück. Frankreich fürchtete, dass ein Hohenzollern-Prinz auf einem spanischen Thron das europäische Machtgleichgewicht zugunsten Preußens verschieben würde. Auch könnte Preußen nun Frankreich von beiden Seiten – im Norden und im Süden – einkreisen.

13 Auf heute bezogen könnte dies zu der Einsicht führen, dass eine Änderung dieser militaristischen Ausrichtung und eine Neuorientierung der Politik heute von Deutschland und Europa ausgehen muss, gegründet auf der Erkenntnis, dass Kriege nicht mehr geführt werden können.

14 Bismarck hatte die entscheidende Weichenstellung vollzogen und den politischen Kurs bestimmt: „Nicht durch Reden und Majoritätsbeschlüsse werden die großen Fragen der Zeit entschieden – das ist der Fehler von 1848 und 1849 gewesen – sondern durch Eisen und Blut.“ (Rede am 30. Sept. 1862 vor dem preußischen Landtag) Damit sei militärische Stärke (Eisen für Waffen und Blut für Opfer) notwendig für die Erreichung politischer Ziele, ein klares Zeichen gegen diplomatische oder parlamentarische Lösungen.

litische Lage in Europa, die 1914 in den Weltkrieg, den ersten „totalen Krieg“ mündete. Die Erzielung der Reichseinheit diente nicht dem Zweck der Förderung des internationalen Friedens, wie ihn Victor Hugo und andere Pazifisten forderten; das neu gegründete Kaiserreich wollte expandieren und strebte nach einer dominanten Rolle auf der Weltbühne.

Die Entscheidung Japans, deutsche Militärberater einzusetzen, hatte langfristige Auswirkungen auf die militärische Entwicklung des Landes und trug zur militärischen Expansion Japans in den folgenden Jahrzehnten bei. Japan übernahm viele Aspekte der preußischen Militärorganisation, -ausbildung und -taktik, was zur Modernisierung und Stärkung der japanischen Armee beitrug. Dies hatte weitere Folgen, die sich auch auf den Rest der Welt auswirkten. Die Übernahme des deutschen Verfassungsmodells hatte dabei eine entscheidende Rolle gespielt.

## Die Haager Friedenskonferenzen

Letztendlich trug der deutsche Militarismus nach dem gewonnenen Krieg gegen Frankreich zum Scheitern der Haager Friedenskonferenzen bei. Mit der Gründung des Deutschen Kaiserreichs hatte Deutschland, besonders nach 1890 durch die nach Bismarcks Entlassung von Wilhelm II. initiierte sogenannte „Weltpolitik“, eine zunehmend aggressive Außen- und Militärpolitik verfolgt, die sich in einem Expansionsstreben und Wettrüsten widerspiegelte.

Aber glaubte man wirklich, dass eine auf Gewalt und Abschreckung basierende europäische Friedensordnung überlebensfähig war? War doch inzwischen die Idee einer Organisation des Friedens auf der Grundlage friedlicher Koexistenz zu weit fortgeschritten, als dass sie noch ignoriert werden konnte. Die internationale Friedensbewegung, Diplomaten und selbst Regierungen unterstützten das Ziel der Haager Friedenskonferenzen, internationale Konflikte durch diplomatische Mittel zu lösen und Abrüstungsabkommen abzuschließen. Internationale Friedens- und Freiheitsbewegungen hatten im 19. Jahrhundert, auch in Indien und in Ostasien, lautstark ihre Interessen artikuliert und die öffentliche Meinung beeinflusst und mobilisiert. Es war klar geworden, dass der Friede nicht militärisch gesichert werden kann. Für die „fraglos vorhandene Gemeinschaft der Interessen“ musste nun „die entsprechende internationale Organisation“ gefunden werden, wie der deutsche Völkerrechtler Walther Schücking bemerkte. (Schücking 1918, 63)

Eine detaillierte Analyse und Kritik moderner Kriegsführung kam von dem polnischen Bankier Iwan Bloch (Jean de Bloch, 1836–1902). Diese erste Arbeit der Friedensforschung trug den Titel *Der zukünftige Krieg in seiner technischen, wirtschaftlichen und politischen Bedeutung*. Bloch forderte einen internationalen Gerichtshof und zeigte, dass zukünftige Kriege fatal wären (und damit unmöglich), und zwar aus drei Gründen: 1. Die moderne Kriegsführung macht es unmöglich, einen schnellen Sieg zu erzielen, 2. die Zahl der Kriegstoten wäre übermäßig und 3. der Krieg der Zukunft würde eine wirtschaftliche Katastrophe herbeiführen. Das Buch wurde ins

Französische, Englische, Deutsche und Japanische übersetzt und viel gelesen, unter anderem von den deutschen Militaristen, die den Krieg vorbereiteten. (Bloch 1899) Es erschien wie die Erfüllung eines Jahrhunderte alten Traums, wie er in zahlreichen europäischen Friedensplänen zum Ausdruck gekommen war, als im Mai 1899 der russische Zar Nicholas II (der Blochs Buch kannte) und Königin Wilhelmina der Niederlande offiziell zur ersten Haager Friedenskonferenz einluden. Die Zeit war reif für eine großartige Idee, eine Konferenz, eine Zusammenkunft der Nationen zur Abrüstung und Organisation des Friedens. Es war keine normale Friedenskonferenz, wie sie nach Beendigung eines Krieges üblich war: die durch die Aufklärung gut vorbereitete Konferenz fand in Friedenszeiten statt.

Es war die Chance des Jahrhunderts, dem „Militarismus der zivilisierten Welt“ eine Absage zu erteilen, Ländern wie China und Japan den Abstieg „auf das Kriegsniveau von England, Frankreich, Deutschland und Russland“ zu ersparen und zu verhindern – wie der amerikanische Pazifist Benjamin Trueblood warnend anmerkte –, dass sich das „bewaffnete Lager Europa“ zum „bewaffneten Lager der Welt“ entwickelte. (Trueblood 1899, 52-53) Aber genau das passierte, aufgrund der politischen Entwicklungen in Europa, und dabei hatte der deutsche Militarismus nach dem gewonnenen Krieg gegen Frankreich eine entscheidende Rolle gespielt.

Deutschland, unter dem Einfluss seiner militärischen Führung und imperialistischen Ambitionen, zeigte wenig Interesse an den friedlichen Lösungen, die in Den Haag diskutiert wurden. Das Deutsche Reich war nicht bereit, seine militärischen Ambitionen aufzugeben. Unterstützt wurde es u.a. von Österreich-Ungarn und der Türkei, nur europäische Länder, die gegen die obligatorische Gerichtsbarkeit stimmten, insgesamt 11,3% der 1907 versammelten 44 teilnehmenden Nationen. Im Gegensatz dazu unterstützten unter anderem Russland, China, die USA, England und Frankreich das Ziel der Konferenzen, eine friedliche internationale Ordnung zu schaffen. Deutschlands Fokus auf militärische Stärke und Expansion stand in direktem Widerspruch zu diesen friedlichen Bemühungen, die auch Japan unterstützt hatte. Dies trug letztlich zu ihrem Scheitern bei. Da die grundlegenden Spannungen und das Streben nach Macht und Einfluss in Europa nicht überwunden werden konnten, kam es zum Ausbruch des Ersten und schließlich des Zweiten Weltkriegs. Der einzige Ausweg heute, der eine Umkehr dieses Trends bewirken und aus der Spirale von Rüstungswettlauf und Krieg herausführen könnte, ist eine radikale Kehrtwende, die Bezug nimmt auf die Haager Friedenskonferenzen, angeführt wird von den europäischen Mächten und idealiter initiiert von der Bundesrepublik Deutschland.

Uekis freiheitliche Verfassung wurde schließlich nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg zum Vorbild für den „detailliertesten, liberalsten und wichtigsten“ Verfassungstext, vorgestellt vom „Ausschuss zur Erforschung der Verfassung“ (*kempō kenkyūkai*) und verfasst von Suzuki Yasuzo (1904–1983), einem bedeutenden Ueki-Forscher.

(Kempō Chōsakai 1961, 303)<sup>15</sup> Dieser Ausschuss wurde von prominenten japanischen Liberalen wie Takano Iwasaburo (1871–1949), Morito Tatsuo (1888–1984) und federführend von Suzuki Yasuzo geleitet. (Suzuki 1975) Suzuki veröffentlichte seine Vorschläge am 16. Dezember 1945 und legte anschließend dem Kabinett Shidehara seinen Entwurf für eine Verfassungsrevision vor. (McNelly 2000, 60) Theodore McNelly bestätigt, dass „sowohl [Milo] Rowell als auch Kades seine Bedeutung für die Arbeit der Verfassungsschreiber der GS [Government Section] hervorgehoben haben.“ (McNelly 2000, 60 und Okoshi 2018, 13)<sup>16</sup> Dies war der einzige japanische Verfassungsentwurf, der vollständig übersetzt und Ende 1945 „an MacArthur weitergegeben“ wurde. (Hellegers 2001, 502) Der Entwurf wurde um den 27. Dezember „in Japanisch und Englisch“ (Hellegers 2001, 766, Anm. 93) auch dem GHQ (General Headquarters) vorgelegt. (Schlichtmann 2023) Es war dieser Entwurf, von dem die Amerikaner später frei abschreiben konnten.

Die japanische Verfassung wird häufig als ‚MacArthur-Verfassung‘ bezeichnet, weil amerikanische Juristen sie während der Besatzung Anfang Februar 1946 in nur zehn Tagen geschrieben haben. Die Verfassung enthält jedoch einen beträchtlichen Anteil progressiven japanischen Denkens. Liberale Vorstellungen der Japaner haben durch Milo E. Rowell im Hauptquartier (GHQ) des Oberkommandos der Alliierten Streitkräfte Eingang in den amerikanischen Entwurf gefunden. Rowell war verantwortlich für den Empfang der japanischen Vorschläge für die neue Verfassung, welche GHQ für seine Zwecke nutzen wollte. Der Entwurf, den die Amerikaner aus einer Anzahl von Vorschlägen japanischer nicht-staatlicher Gruppen primär konsultierten, war von der *kempō kenkyūkai*. (Schlichtmann 2009, 101, Anm. 104)

Ueki starb am 23. Januar 1892 im Alter von 34 Jahren, kurz nachdem er bei den Wahlen 1890 noch einen Parlamentssitz bekommen hatte.

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<sup>15</sup> Zitiert in Hori. 1988, 234.

<sup>16</sup> Milo Rowell (1903–1977) war ein amerikanischer Anwalt und Armeeeoffizier, der vor allem für seine Rolle bei der Ausarbeitung der japanischen Verfassung bekannt wurde. Charles Kades (1906–1996) war Japan-Experte, Militäroffizier und mitverantwortlich für den sog. MacArthur-Entwurf der neuen japanischen Verfassung.



Das baufällige Haus (im Bild) wurde inzwischen abgerissen und lediglich das Arbeitszimmer in die „Liberty and People’s Rights Memorial Hall“ in Kochi, wo auch eine Statue von Itagaki Taisuke steht, verlegt. [https://www.city.machida.tokyo.jp/bunka/bunka\\_geijutsu/cul/cul03/index.html](https://www.city.machida.tokyo.jp/bunka/bunka_geijutsu/cul/cul03/index.html)

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## Asien Aktuell

### Kommentar

# Tourismus zwischen Taiwan und China: Brücke oder Hindernis für kulturellen und politischen Dialog?

Jörg Rodenwaldt und Alexis Stanimiroudis

### Abstract

This article examines the complex interplay between tourism and political relations between Taiwan and China. It analyzes how tourism, often touted as a bridge for cultural understanding, has instead become entangled in the ongoing political conflict, serving as both a tool for economic influence and a reflection of deep-seated tensions. The authors trace the development of tourism flows in both directions, highlighting periods of increased exchange alongside significant setbacks due to political events and policy changes. The core argument revolves around the ambivalent nature of tourism in this context: while offering economic benefits and potential for cultural exchange, it simultaneously reinforces political divisions and serves as a means of political leverage, ultimately leaving the future of cross-strait tourism uncertain.

**Keywords:** Taiwan, China, tourism, cross-strait, ROC, PRC, cultural exchange, economic benefits

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## Einleitung

Tourismus wird oft als universeller Vermittler gepriesen – als Motor der Annäherung, der durch interkulturelle Begegnungen Verständnis und Toleranz fördert. Reisen ermöglicht es den Menschen, neue Lebensweisen zu entdecken, ungewohnte Perspektiven einzunehmen und so Vorurteile abzubauen. Gleichzeitig stellt Tourismus einen bedeutenden Wirtschaftsfaktor dar, von dem ganze Regionen profitieren. Ob in Las Vegas, Dubrovnik oder auf den Malediven – die Reisewirtschaft ist nicht nur ein integraler Bestandteil des gesellschaftlichen Lebens, sondern auch ein Garant für wirtschaftliche Stabilität.

Doch was passiert, wenn Reisen nicht nur von Abenteuerlust und kulturellem Interesse, sondern auch von politischen und historischen Spannungen geprägt ist? Was, wenn die Brücke, die der Tourismus zu schlagen vermag, in Wahrheit von tiefen Gräben durchzogen wird? Ein aktuelles und besonders brisantes Beispiel dafür liefert der Austausch zwischen Taiwan und der Volksrepublik China. In diesem Fall wird der Tourismus zu einem Prüfstein für die Frage, ob gegenseitige Besuche wirklich zu Verständigung führen oder ob sie vielmehr bestehende Spannungen vertiefen, wenn wirtschaftliche Interessen und politische Agenden dominieren.

Dieser Artikel setzt sich mit der Frage auseinander: Inwiefern kann Tourismus in konfliktbeladenen Beziehungen wie zwischen Taiwan und China den Dialog und das gegenseitige Verständnis fördern, und inwiefern wird er dabei zum Instrument politischer und wirtschaftlicher Machtspiele? Diese komplexe und spannungsgeladene Beziehung wirft also die Frage auf, ob der Tourismus in solchen Kontexten tatsächlich Brücken bauen kann – oder ob er letztlich mehr Hindernis als Lösung ist.

## Entwicklung des Tourismus: Zwischen Austausch und Spannungen

### Tourismus von China nach Taiwan

Der chinesische Bürgerkrieg und die Gründung der Volksrepublik China (1949) führten zu einer jahrzehntelangen Isolation zwischen China und Taiwan. Direkte Reisen waren untersagt, und Kontakte beschränkten sich auf seltene Familienbesuche über inoffizielle Kanäle. Erst in den späten 1980er Jahren, mit dem Beginn der Demokratisierung Taiwans, lockerte sich diese strikte Trennung. Taiwan erlaubte seinen Bürgern, Verwandte in China zu besuchen, was den Grundstein für erste Reiseerleichterungen und kulturellen Austausch legte.

In den 1990er Jahren kam es zu ersten direkten Charterflügen, und ab 2005 bot China Reisen in Gruppen nach Taiwan an – unter strenger Regulierung. Mit der Wahl von Ma Yingjeou (KMT) 2008 verbesserten sich die Beziehungen erheblich: Regelmäßige Linienflüge wurden eingeführt, und chinesische Touristen erhielten die Erlaubnis, Taiwan zu besuchen. Bereits im ersten Jahr reisten über 300.000 Festlandchinesen nach Taiwan. Die Besucherzahlen stiegen rasant und erreichten 2015 mit etwa

4,2 Millionen ihren Höhepunkt – fast die Hälfte aller Touristen Taiwans. Die wirtschaftlichen Vorteile waren enorm, insbesondere für Einzelhandel, Gastronomie und Hotellerie.

Doch die politischen Spannungen trübten den Aufschwung: Nach der Wahl von Tsai Ing-wen (DPP) 2016 und ihrer Ablehnung des „Ein-China-Prinzips“ reduzierte Beijing die Anzahl der Gruppenreisen drastisch. Die chinesischen Besucherzahlen sanken deutlich, während Taiwan versuchte, die Verluste durch verstärkte Werbung in Ländern wie Japan und Südkorea auszugleichen.

Die COVID-19-Pandemie ab 2020 brachte den internationalen Tourismus schließlich fast vollständig zum Erliegen. Taiwan empfing lediglich 1,38 Millionen Touristen, darunter weniger als 200.000 aus China. Auch nach der leichten Erholung 2021 blieben die Zahlen gering: 2023 zählte Taiwan nur 226.269 Besucher vom Festland. Trotz Ankündigungen, den Austausch zu fördern, bleibt der Tourismus aufgrund anhaltender Spannungen weit hinter den früheren Spitzenwerten zurück.

## **Tourismus von Taiwan nach China**

Vor 1987 war es Taiwanesen aufgrund des Kriegsrechts untersagt, nach China zu reisen. Um dennoch Verbindungen aufrechtzuerhalten, nutzten viele den Umweg über Drittländer wie Hongkong oder Macau. Erst mit der Aufhebung des Reiseverbots im Jahr 1987 durften bestimmte Gruppen, darunter Veteranen und Personen mit familiären Bindungen nach China, offiziell das Festland besuchen. Bereits 1988 zählte China etwa 473.000 taiwanesischen Touristen, wie Ian Rowen in seinem Buch *One China, Many Taiwans* beschreibt.

Ein schwerer Rückschlag für den Reiseverkehr ereignete sich 1994 mit dem Vorfall am Qiandao-See im Kreis Chun'an in der chinesischen Provinz Zhejiang, bei dem 24 taiwanesischen Touristen ums Leben kamen. Diese Tragödie führte zu einem vorübergehenden Stopp von Gruppenreisen und einem Einbruch im touristischen Austausch. Dennoch erholten sich die Zahlen rasch: Bis 1999 stellten taiwanesischen Besucher 9,6 Prozent aller ausländischen Ankünfte in China und sorgten für 15,6 Prozent der Tourismuseinnahmen des Landes.

Mit der schrittweisen Lockerung der Beschränkungen für Freizeit- und Individualreisen wuchs die Zahl der Reisen rapide an: 1,2 Millionen im Jahr 1992, 3,7 Millionen im Jahr 2004 und nach chinesischen Angaben beeindruckende 6,1 Millionen im Jahr 2019. Interessanterweise klaffen die offiziellen Statistiken beider Seiten hier weit auseinander. Während chinesische Quellen die Zahl taiwanesischer Touristen deutlich höher ansetzen, meldete Taiwans *Tourism Administration* für 2019 lediglich vier Millionen Besucher. Für das Jahr 2023 vermeldete Taiwan 1,8 Millionen Reisen nach China – ein Rückgang, der sowohl durch die Auswirkungen der COVID-19-Pandemie als auch durch anhaltende politische Spannungen bedingt ist.

Der wirtschaftliche Einfluss taiwanesischer Touristen auf China bleibt begrenzt, da sie nur einen kleinen Anteil am Gesamtbesucherstrom ausmachen. Dennoch spielt

der Outbound-Tourismus von Taiwan nach Festlandchina eine vielschichtige Rolle. Wie Ian Rowen argumentiert, dient er nicht nur der Förderung wirtschaftlicher Beziehungen und des kulturellen Austauschs, sondern spiegelt auch die politischen Spannungen wider, insbesondere den andauernden Souveränitätskonflikt zwischen den beiden Seiten der Taiwanstraße. Eine vergleichende Studie von Larry Yu und Moo Hyung Chung betont ähnliche Dynamiken im Tourismus zwischen Taiwan und China sowie zwischen Nord- und Südkorea, wo Reisen ebenfalls eine doppelte Funktion als Brücke und Konfliktfeld erfüllen.

## **Tourismus als Mittel der Einflussnahme und Brücke der Verständigung**

In der wissenschaftlichen Literatur wird häufig betont, dass China wirtschaftliche Instrumente, darunter den Tourismus, strategisch einsetzt, um Taiwans wirtschaftliche Abhängigkeit zu stärken und langfristig politische Kontrolle zu erlangen. Ian Rowen beschreibt in diesem Zusammenhang, wie China 2008 – zeitgleich mit einer verstärkten militärischen Präsenz nahe Taiwan – begann, Millionen chinesischer Touristen auf die Insel zu schicken. Diese Maßnahme deutet Rowen als Versuch der chinesischen Regierung, durch den Zustrom von Touristen nicht nur die Wirtschaftsbeziehungen zu intensivieren, sondern auch die öffentliche Meinung in Taiwan zugunsten engerer Beziehungen mit dem Festland zu beeinflussen.

Ein zentraler Aspekt dieser Strategie ist die bewusste Instrumentalisierung des Tourismus als politisches Machtmittel, verkörpert im Slogan „Yi shang cu zheng, yi min cu guan“ („Politik durch Geschäfte machen, um die Regierung durch das Volk zu beeinflussen“). Unter dem damaligen Präsidenten Hu Jintao zielte diese Taktik darauf ab, Taiwans wirtschaftliche Abhängigkeit zu vertiefen. Dies geschah jedoch nicht isoliert, sondern begleitet von einer massiven militärischen Präsenz, die Zweifel an der friedensfördernden Absicht wirtschaftlicher Integration aufwarf.

Ein konkretes Beispiel für die politische Dimension des Tourismus war der wirtschaftliche Druck, dem die taiwanesishe Stadt Kaohsiung 2009 ausgesetzt war. Nach einem Besuch des Dalai Lama und der Vorführung eines Films über einen uighurischen Führer im Exil verzeichnete Kaohsiung einen deutlichen Rückgang chinesischer Touristenzahlen – eine Reaktion Beijings auf diese als Provokation empfundenen Ereignisse. Die wirtschaftlichen Einbußen und der Druck vonseiten der Tourismusbranche führten letztlich zu einer „Goodwill-Tour“, um die Beziehungen zu China zu verbessern, sowie zu einer Kürzung der Mittel für das Filmfestival. Dieses Ereignis zeigt eindrücklich, wie China Touristenströme als Hebel nutzt, um politische Entscheidungen in Taiwan zu beeinflussen.

Gleichzeitig gibt es jedoch auch Perspektiven, die den Tourismus als potenziellen Katalysator für Frieden und gegenseitige Verständigung sehen. Viele chinesische Touristen äußern während ihres Aufenthalts in Taiwan Bewunderung für die Lebensweise und Kultur ihrer Gastgeber, was durchaus dazu beitragen kann, Brücken des Verständnisses zu bauen.

Allerdings ist die Wirkung des Tourismus ambivalent. So trägt der chinesische Tourismus in Taiwan häufig dazu bei, Grenzen zwischen den beiden Entitäten zu verwischen. In den von chinesischen Touristen stark frequentierten Regionen entsteht oft das Gefühl, "in China zu sein". Dies führt zu einer „Festlandisierung“, bei der sich lokale Strukturen, Reiserouten und narrative Strategien an den Präferenzen chinesischer Besucher orientieren. Solche Entwicklungen zeigen, wie tiefgreifend der Tourismus die Wahrnehmungen und Beziehungen zwischen Taiwan und China prägen kann – sowohl im Sinne einer Annäherung als auch einer subtilen Form der kulturellen Vereinnahmung.

### **Tourismus als politisches Instrument: Der Fall des Sonne-Mond-Sees und des Zhaishan-Tunnels**

Der Tourismus zwischen Taiwan und China ist nicht nur ein wirtschaftlicher Faktor, sondern auch ein bedeutendes politisches Werkzeug, das Identität, territoriale Zugehörigkeit und nationale Souveränität in den Vordergrund rückt. Ein besonders anschauliches Beispiel hierfür ist der Sonne-Mond-See, eine der bekanntesten touristischen Attraktionen in Taiwan. Der Sonne-Mond-See ist für chinesische Touristen oft ein Ziel, das ihnen das Gefühl vermittelt, in einer vertrauten Umgebung zu sein – fast wie „zu Hause“. Doch die hohe Zahl chinesischer Besucher hat bei einigen Taiwanern das Gefühl hervorgerufen, dass sich die Gegend aufgrund der Anwesenheit vieler chinesischer Touristen wie Festlandchina anfühlt. Dies führt zu einer Entfremdung, bei der sich manche Taiwaner von einem ehemals rein taiwanesischen Reiseziel distanzieren fühlen.

Die Struktur der Tourismusbranche am Sonne-Mond-See weist starke Ähnlichkeiten mit den Praktiken des chinesischen Inlandtourismus auf. Dies geht aus den Forschungsergebnissen von Ian Rowen in seiner Studie *One China, Many Taiwans* (2014) hervor. Dies, kombiniert mit Chinas territorialen Ansprüchen auf Taiwan, trägt bei einigen chinesischen Touristen dazu bei, dass sie die Insel als Teil der Volksrepublik China wahrnehmen. Diese Wahrnehmung wird durch das Vorhandensein von Bildern des Sonne-Mond-Sees in den Reisepässen der Volksrepublik China verstärkt. Außerdem hat die taiwanische Tourismusbranche in Zusammenarbeit mit chinesischen Reiseveranstaltern ein Modell übernommen, das dem Inlandtourismus in China ähnelt, etwa durch Gruppenreisen und vorab organisierte Reiserouten. Rowen zufolge begann die institutionalisierte Zusammenarbeit zwischen taiwanesischen Anbietern und chinesischen Reiseveranstaltern erst ab 2010; eine vergleichbare Kooperation in dieser Form hatte es zuvor nicht gegeben. Auch wenn die Reiseleiter oft versuchen, politische Themen zu vermeiden, können ihre Erzählungen zur Entstehung unterschiedlicher Vorstellungen von Staatlichkeit führen.

Ein weiteres Beispiel für die komplexe Verknüpfung von Tourismus und politischen Fragen finden Chih Yuan Woon und JJ Zhang in ihrer Studie, in der sie die Nutzung ehemaliger militärischer Infrastrukturen in Taiwan, wie des Zhaishan-Tunnels auf

der Insel Kinmen, untersuchen. In einem Versuch, friedliche Begegnungen zwischen chinesischen und taiwanesischen Touristen zu fördern, wurden diese militärischen Relikte gezielt als touristische Attraktionen umgestaltet. Der Zhaishan-Tunnel wurde von verschiedenen taiwanesischen Tourismusbehörden und Akteuren zu einem symbolischen Ort gemacht, der eine „*affektive Atmosphäre*“ erzeugt – ein „stimmungsvolles Kraftfeld“, das den Besuchern eine Plattform für den Austausch über historische und kulturelle Unterschiede bietet. Diese Transformation zeigt, wie Tourismus als ein strategisches Mittel für die Identitätsbildung genutzt wird, um die Beziehungen zwischen den beiden Seiten der Taiwanstraße zu gestalten und möglicherweise zu deeskalieren, während gleichzeitig die politischen Dimensionen der historischen Spannungen berücksichtigt werden.

Der Tourismus am Sonne-Mond-See und im Zhaishan-Tunnel verdeutlicht, wie stark Tourismus mit Identitätsfragen, territorialen Ansprüchen und nationaler Politik verbunden ist. Beide Beispiele zeigen, dass der Tourismus nicht nur eine wirtschaftliche Bedeutung hat, sondern auch eine tiefgreifende Rolle bei der Wahrnehmung von Zugehörigkeit und Souveränität spielt. Während der chinesische Tourismus wirtschaftliche Vorteile für Taiwan gebracht hat, führt er gleichzeitig zu komplexen politischen und kulturellen Diskussionen über die Zugehörigkeit und das Verständnis von „Staatlichkeit“ zwischen den beiden Seiten.

## **Fazit: Aktuelle Entwicklungen und Ausblick**

Der Tourismus zwischen Taiwan und China steht somit in einem komplexen Spannungsfeld von politischem Einfluss, wirtschaftlichen Interessen und kultureller Identität. Viele Taiwanesen empfinden sich aufgrund des Zustroms chinesischer Touristen und der damit verbundenen Veränderungen in ihrem alltäglichen Leben zunehmend entfremdet. Trotz der sichtbaren Präsenz von chinesischen Symbolen und Währungen an beliebten touristischen Orten ist es wichtig, diese Elemente nicht als Anzeichen einer potenziellen Assimilation zu missverstehen. Vielmehr spiegeln sie die wachsende Komplexität wider, die der Tourismus in einem politisch hochgeladenen Kontext mit sich bringt.

Meinungsumfragen verdeutlichen eine gesplante Haltung gegenüber dem chinesischen Tourismus, wobei die Befürchtungen hinsichtlich der möglichen negativen Auswirkungen häufig stärker ausgeprägt sind als die wahrgenommenen wirtschaftlichen Vorteile. Innerhalb der taiwanesischen Reisebranche bestehen zudem Sorgen über die Struktur des Tourismussektors, etwa in Bezug auf unfaire Wettbewerbsbedingungen, verspätete Zahlungen und Kostendruck, der die Nachhaltigkeit der Branche gefährdet.

Chinas Nutzung des Tourismus als politisches Werkzeug könnte sich als kontraproduktiv erweisen. Anstatt eine stärkere wirtschaftliche Integration zu fördern, verstärkt die politische Dimension des Tourismus möglicherweise den Widerstand in Taiwan gegen eine Wiedervereinigung. Diese Entwicklung stellt das Potenzial des

Tourismus infrage, als Brücke zwischen den beiden Seiten zu fungieren. Im Gegenteil, die politische und militärische Aufrüstung Chinas gegenüber Taiwan lässt die Vorstellung, dass Tourismus allein zu friedlichen Beziehungen führen könnte, fragwürdig erscheinen.

Die politischen Spannungen beeinflussen den Tourismussektor erheblich, was sich in schwankenden Reisebestimmungen und plötzlichen Reisebeschränkungen zeigt, die oftmals als Reaktion auf geopolitische Entwicklungen eingeführt werden. Diese Unsicherheit führt zu einem Teufelskreis, in dem der Tourismus zwar ein Wirtschaftsfaktor ist, jedoch auch zur weiteren Polarisierung und zum Drang nach nationaler Selbstbestimmung beiträgt.

Der Tourismus zwischen Taiwan und China erweist sich als zweischneidiges Schwert: Einerseits bietet er Potenziale für kulturellen Austausch und wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit, andererseits verschärft er häufig bestehende Spannungen und Konflikte. Die ungleichen wirtschaftlichen Vorteile sowie die Ausbeutung innerhalb der Branche werfen dabei Fragen zur langfristigen Nachhaltigkeit auf. Während große Reiseunternehmen und bestimmte Regionen überproportional profitieren, gehen kleinere Unternehmen und abgelegene Gebiete oft leer aus. Hinzu kommt, dass die Reiseleiter ihre Arbeitskraft zunehmend politischen und wirtschaftlichen Interessen unterordnen müssen, was häufig ausbeuterische Züge trägt. Die Fokussierung auf kostengünstige Massenreisen verstärkt den Druck auf lokale Ressourcen, fördert soziale Spannungen und untergräbt so die Basis für eine gerechte und nachhaltige Tourismuswirtschaft.

Die Zukunft des Tourismus zwischen Taiwan und China bleibt angesichts der andauernden politischen Spannungen und geopolitischen Unsicherheiten ungewiss. Auch wenn es Bemühungen gibt, den Sektor zu revitalisieren, wird die politische Lage maßgeblich darüber entscheiden, ob der Tourismus in Zukunft tatsächlich als Instrument des Dialogs und der Verständigung oder weiterhin als Mittel politischer und wirtschaftlicher Machtspiele fungieren wird.

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# KONFERENZBERICHTE

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# **Abschluss-Workshop „Hochschulen als Akteure im Dialog mit China“**

ProjektZentrum Berlin, Stiftung Mercator, 15. April 2024

Bericht von Ilker Gündoğan, Rosa Schmidt-Drewniok und Matthias Stepan

## **Einleitung**

Der Abschluss-Workshop „Hochschulen als Akteure im Dialog mit China“ (HADCh) unter dem programmatischen Leitthema „Vertiefte Zusammenarbeit, erhöhte Sicherheitsbedenken: Hochschulen in Europa und ihr Blick auf China als Kooperationspartner“ stellt den letzten Meilenstein des gleichnamigen Forschungsprojektes dar. Matthias Stepan und Rosa Schmidt-Drewniok hatten über einen Zeitraum von zwei Jahren mehr als fünfzig qualitative Interviews mit Vertreterinnen und Vertretern von Hochschulen in den Metropolregionen Ruhrgebiet und Frankfurt-Rhein-Main geführt. Diese stehen im Mittelpunkt des von Jörn-Carsten Gottwald geleiteten Projekts. Das von der Stiftung Mercator geförderte Projekt widmete sich der Analyse und Diskussion der zahlreichen und facettenreichen Kooperationen zwischen deutschen und chinesischen Hochschulen.

## **Eröffnung und thematische Einführung**

In ihren einleitenden Statements betonten Nina Ohlmeier und Christian Straube (Stiftung Mercator) sowie Jörn-Carsten Gottwald (Ruhr-Universität Bochum) die Bedeutung einer differenzierten wissenschaftlichen Analyse von Wissenschaftskooperationen. Sie skizzierten die Notwendigkeit einer Neubewertung der wissenschaftlichen Zusammenarbeit zwischen deutschen und chinesischen Hochschulen angesichts veränderter globaler und (geo-)politischer Rahmenbedingungen. Der Wunsch nach einer Vertiefung der Zusammenarbeit mit chinesischen Hochschulen bei gleichzeitig wachsenden Sicherheitsbedenken sowie die zunehmende Politisierung der Beziehungen waren zentrale Themen. Die Bedeutung offener Kommunikationskanäle und Schutzmaßnahmen für die wissenschaftliche Gemeinschaft, insbesondere für chinesische Kolleginnen und Kollegen in politisch sensiblen Bereichen, wurde besonders hervorgehoben.

### **Vormittags-Präsentation-Diskussion: Die Rolle der Hochschulen im Dialog mit China (Deutsch)**

Matthias Stepan und Jörn-Carsten Gottwald präsentierten zentrale Ergebnisse des Projekts, die auf umfangreichen empirischen Daten und Analysen basieren. Sie diskutierten die vielschichtigen Beziehungen deutscher Hochschulen zu ihren chinesischen Partnern und die Art und Weise, wie deutsche Hochschulen Wissenschaftsdiplomatie betreiben, ohne sich in der Regel mit diesem Begriff zu identifizieren.

Im Mittelpunkt der Untersuchung standen die individuellen Perspektiven von Forschenden und Verwaltungspersonal an deutschen Hochschulen. Dieser Ansatz ermöglichte ein detailliertes Verständnis der grundlegenden Perspektiven, die die alltägliche wissenschaftliche und administrative Interaktion im Hochschulsektor mit China prägen.

Stepan betonte, wie wichtig es sei, Hochschulen als komplexe Akteure zu definieren. Bei der Analyse und der Entwicklung von Empfehlungen müssten Hochschulen als Mehrebenensysteme adressiert werden: von der Hochschulleitung über die Fakultäten und Institute bis hin zu den einzelnen Forschenden. Jede Ebene spiele eine spezifische Rolle im Dialog mit China, wobei häufig krisengetriebene Reaktionen auf externe Ereignisse im Vordergrund stünden.

Trotz wachsender Herausforderungen und einer zunehmend kritischen öffentlichen Wahrnehmung der Zusammenarbeit mit Akteuren aus der Volksrepublik China betonten die Wissenschaftler, dass die Kooperationen auch große Chancen bieten. Diese reichen von der Förderung wissenschaftlicher Exzellenz bis hin zur Verbesserung interkultureller Kompetenzen.

Auf der Grundlage ihrer Ergebnisse stellten Stepan und Gottwald mehrere Handlungsempfehlungen vor. Sie betonten die Notwendigkeit, die interne und externe Kommunikation und Abstimmung zu verbessern, klare Richtlinien für internationale Kooperationen zu entwickeln und die institutionelle und individuelle China-Kompetenz zu stärken. Diese sollten verstärkt über die Peer-Gruppen der Forschenden – insbesondere aus den MINT-Fächern – erfolgen.

Die Diskutantin Ruth Schimanowski (DAAD) betonte die gestiegene Bedeutung der Hochschulen angesichts der verschlechterten geopolitischen Lage, die Notwendigkeit, Mobilitätsströme differenziert zu betrachten (Dauer/welches Niveau BA/MA/Postdoc) und die unterschiedlichen individuellen Motivationen stärker in die Zusammenarbeit einzubeziehen. Wichtig sei der Wissenstransfer in die Lehre und der Peer-to-Peer-Austausch, insbesondere zwischen den MINT-Fächern und der modernen sozial- und geisteswissenschaftlichen Chinaforschung.

### **Nachmittags-Roundtable: Europäische Perspektiven zur akademischen Kooperation mit China (Englisch)**

Die von Anna Ahlers (MPIWG Berlin) geleitete Roundtable-Diskussion beinhaltete Beiträge von europäischen ExpertInnen: Ingrid d’Hooghe (Clingendael Institute,

Niederlande), Veronika Blablová (Association for International Affairs, Tschechien), Eva Pils (King's College London, Großbritannien) und Matthias Stepan, die die Notwendigkeit einer koordinierten europäischen Strategie betonten. Die Diskussion verdeutlichte die unterschiedlichen nationalen Ansätze und die Dringlichkeit eines gemeinsamen europäischen Vorgehens.

### **Abschlussbemerkungen**

In den Schlussbemerkungen wurde die Bedeutung des kritischen Dialogs und der strategischen Neuausrichtung der Wissenschaftskooperation mit China zusammengefasst. Die Diskussionen verdeutlichten die Notwendigkeit einer sensiblen, aber proaktiven Anpassung der Kooperationsstrategien. Die Wissenschaftsfreiheit und die nationalen Sicherheitsinteressen Deutschlands und der EU müssen gewahrt bleiben. Gleichzeitig sollte es weiterhin eine möglichst offene und pragmatische Zusammenarbeit in den Bereichen geben, die einen absehbaren Mehrwert für die drängenden Herausforderungen bieten.

Der Workshop unterstrich die Vielschichtigkeit der Interaktionen in der Wissenschaftskooperation mit China und forderte eine kontinuierliche, kritisch-reflektierende Auseinandersetzung mit den damit verbundenen Herausforderungen. Es wurde deutlich, dass Anpassungsfähigkeit und Risikomanagement integrale Bestandteile einer nachhaltigen Strategie in der Zusammenarbeit, nicht nur, aber aktuell insbesondere mit chinesischen Hochschulpartnern, sein müssen.

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Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg

**Rosa Schmidt-Drewniok**

Ruhr-Universität Bochum

**Matthias Stepan**

Ruhr-Universität Bochum

## **2024 Annual Meeting of the Association for Social Science Research on China (ASC)**

University of Bonn, November 21-22, 2024

Report by Frederik Schmitz and Anna Böhmer

The 2024 annual meeting of the ASC was hosted by Maximilian Mayer of the Department of Political Science at the University of Bonn. During the meeting, ten papers were presented by ASC members. Additionally, two round tables were held during the meeting. The first round table, titled “Global China and the Global South in a Multipolar World,” focused on China's foreign policy and included colleagues from Think Thanks working on China, while the second one, titled “Current Issues Around Research Cooperation with Chinese Partners,” addressed the current pressing questions of how to maintain cooperations with Chinese partners.

H. Christoph Steinhardt (University of Vienna, speaker of the ASC) and Maximilian Mayer (University of Bonn, host of the 2024 meeting) opened the 2024 annual meeting with welcoming addresses.

### **Panel 1**

The first panel, chaired by Tobias ten Brink from Constructor University Bremen, explored various dimensions of digital governance and perceptions of privacy in China. H. Christoph Steinhardt (University of Vienna) opened the panel with a presentation titled “The Authoritarian Privacy Paradox: Explaining Institutional Privacy Concerns in China.” His paper was discussed by Björn Alpermann (University of Würzburg). The paper reveals that preference falsification significantly reduces expressed privacy concerns toward the state. It also shows that state-related concerns are linked to political trust and regime confidence, while concerns about private companies are more broadly shared and shaped by personal experiences with privacy invasions and perceptions of anti-pandemic policies.

Marianne von Blomberg (University of Cologne, Zhejiang University School of Law) and Chungheng Liu (Microsoft Research) presented their joint work on “Imagined techno-dystopia: The making of ‘Chinese social credit system’ in the U.S. media debate.” This analysis examines how the Chinese Social Credit System is imagined in U.S. discourse as a techno-dystopian tool of authoritarian control, shaped by techno-orientalist narratives that depict advanced technology enforcing a unified score, victimized citizens, and global exportability. The imaginary serves both to reassure Western audiences of their institutional superiority and to mobilize

resistance against perceived threats to democratic institutions from both foreign and domestic sources.

The panel concluded with Ningjie Zhu (University of Bonn) presenting “From Top-Level Design to Ground-Level Practices: Reconciling Centralization and Local Autonomy through Algorithmic Regulation in Shenzhen's Digital Governance,” with a discussion led by Sabrina Habich-Sobiegalla (Freie Universität Berlin). The study finds that algorithmic regulation in Shenzhen is strategically aimed to balance centralization with local autonomy by separating public service innovation from digital control. Despite the centralization inherent in the top-level design approach, Shenzhen officials have retained significant autonomy and space for innovation in developing urban intelligence. They illuminate the adaptive capabilities of the Party-state and offer insights into governing processes in prioritized and emerging areas. This selective enforcement, driven by policy experimentation and leadership support, highlights the adaptive flexibility of China's governing system while challenging conventional views of uniform authoritarian control.

### **Panel 2**

Chaired by Anna Lisa Ahlers (Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, University of Oslo), the second panel focused on social policy and credit systems policy in China. The first presentation, “Comparison of social protection for the unemployed in the provinces of Jiangsu, Fujian and Guangdong,” was delivered by Barbara Darimont, Ruben Gnädig, and Yannick Henny (Ludwigshafen University of Business and Society), with Doris Fischer (University of Würzburg) providing commentary. This study examines the growing issue of unemployment in China, particularly among young graduates, and investigates the decline of unemployment insurance since 2014, despite earlier trends of greater inclusion of informal workers. By comparing provincial regulations and analyzing job portal data, it seeks to assess shifts in social security coverage and labor market demand, ultimately questioning what now protects against social risks amid the push for “common prosperity.”

The second paper, titled “The Long, Quiet River of the Social Credit Policy Process – a multiple stream framework view on policy deliberations,” was presented by Pierre Sel (University of Vienna) and discussed by Gunter Schubert (University of Tübingen). The study shows that despite strong initial support, the Social Credit System Policy (SCSP) has faced slow and fragmented implementation due to disconnects between policy advocates and implementers. Analysis of documents and interactions from 2001 to 2014 reveals a lack of consensus on legal and administrative frameworks, hindering coordinated execution.

### **Panel 3**

The third panel, chaired by Ilker Gündogan (University of Würzburg), shifted the focus to narratives, identity, and diaspora. Danqi Guo, Yang Yan, and Genia Kostka (Freie Universität Berlin) presented their research on “Propaganda for Digital Control: Unraveling State-led Online Narratives and Emotional Appeals in China,”

with Kristin Shi-Kupfer (University of Trier) discussing the paper. This study analyzes how the Chinese government uses narrative strategies—especially positive emotional appeals—to frame digital surveillance projects like “Skynet” and “Sharp Eyes” as tools for public safety and technological progress. The authors identified six key narratives that reveal efforts to legitimize surveillance expansion and bolster state authority.

Following this, Vivien Markert (University of Tübingen) presented her study entitled “Chinese Muslims in Cairo: Between Sinicization and Arabization,” with Michael Malzer (University of Würzburg) serving as the discussant. This case study shows that China’s Sinicization campaign under Xi Jinping has extended repressive governance practices to Chinese Muslim diaspora communities in Cairo. In response, these communities express loyalty and Chineseness through symbolic and discursive means, continuing a historical legacy rooted in earlier religious and national engagement.

#### **Panel 4**

The final panel, chaired by Askan Weidemann (German Institute for Global and Area Studies), examines China’s emotional politics and moral discourse. Frederik Schmitz (University of Bonn) presented a paper on “Feeling the Party – Immersive Experience and Emotional Legitimacy for the CCP”, commented by Heike Holbig (Goethe University Frankfurt), in which he shares initial findings from his case studies in China. His dissertation project investigates immersive memory infrastructures to produce emotional legitimacy through the re-experiencing of party history, specifically the Long March and the Anti-Japanese War.

The second presentation, “Disentangling China’s Moral Crisis: Moral Decline or Moral Transformation?,” was given by Xue Gong (University of Vienna), discussed by Felix Wemheuer (University of Cologne). This study explores whether China’s perceived moral crisis reflects a decline or a transformation of values amid economic reform, using World Values Survey data from 2007, 2012, and 2018. Findings show that post-reform generations display higher and more diverse moral standards over time, suggesting a moral transformation shaped by modernization rather than moral decay.

**Frederik Schmitz**  
University of Bonn

**Anna Böhmer**  
University of Bonn

## Nordostasiatische Friedenssommerschule 2024

Zentrum für Deutschland- und Europastudien (ZeDES) an der Chung-Ang-Universität in Seoul, 26.–31. August 2024

Bericht von Dr. Ki-Chung Bae

Das Zentrum für Deutschland- und Europastudien (ZeDES) an der Chung-Ang-Universität in Seoul veranstaltete im Rahmen des DAAD-Programms „Vernetzung der DAAD-Zentren für Deutschland- und Europastudien“ eine *Nordostasiatische Friedenssommerschule* zum Dachthema „Frieden in Nordostasien in einer Zeit des globalen Wandels“. Diese Sommerschule, ein internationales und interdisziplinäres Projekt für Masterstudierende und Doktoranden aus dem Zentrenkreis, zielte darauf ab, den Teilnehmenden aus verschiedenen Ländern ein tieferes Verständnis für Politik, Wirtschaft, Gesellschaft, Kultur und Geschichte der Region Nordostasien zu vermitteln und die Bedeutung gegenseitiger Zusammenarbeit für Stabilität, Wohlstand und dauerhaften Frieden in der Region zu unterstreichen. Insgesamt 39 Teilnehmende aus acht Ländern – aus China, Japan, Deutschland, den Niederlanden, Israel, Brasilien, Chile und auch aus Korea – nahmen an den sechs-tägigen Bildungs- und Kulturprogrammen teil.



Gruppenfoto nach der Eröffnungszeremonie.

Nach der Eröffnungsrede des Direktors des ZeDES, Prof. Dr. Nury Kim, gab es eine Reihe von Grußworten vom Präsidenten der Chung-Ang-Universität, Herrn Prof. Dr. Sang-Gyu Park, dem Botschafter der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in Korea, Herrn Georg Wilfried Schmidt, dem Direktor des Zentrums für Deutschlandstudien (ZDS) an der Peking University, Herrn Prof. Dr. Liaoyu Huang, und dem Geschäftsleiter des Zentrums für Deutschland- und Europastudien an der Universität Tokio, Komaba (DESK), Herrn Dr. Hideto Hiramatsu sowie einen Eröffnungsvortrag von Prof. Dr. György Széll, dem ehemaligen Vizepräsidenten der Universität Osnabrück.



Gruppenfoto vor der Statue von König Sejong auf dem Platz Kwanghwamun: König Sejong verkündete 1446 die Gründung von Hangeul, dem von ihm erfundenen koreanischen Alphabet.

Im Rahmen des Bildungsprogramms wurden sechs Vorträge jeweils mit einem Workshop angeboten, zu den Themen „Frieden in Europa und Nordostasien“, „Nordostasien im Spannungsfeld zwischen dem alten und dem neuen Kalten Krieg“, „Der Russland-Ukraine-Krieg und die Lage in Nordostasien“, „Teilung und Frieden auf der koreanischen Halbinsel“ und „Flüchtlinge und Frieden“. Durch die Zusammenarbeit sowie die Kulturprogramme lernten nicht nur die Teilnehmenden, sondern auch die Lehrenden über die (außen-)politischen Verhältnisse und gesellschaftlichen Besonderheiten in Nordostasien. Auch die Teilnehmenden aus verschiedenen Ländern haben sich innerhalb von relativ kurzer Zeit persönlich kennengelernt und sich gegenseitig motiviert, sich weiter mit dem Thema Frieden zu befassen. Ein besonderer Dank von den Teilnehmenden und Lehrenden gilt dem DAAD und der CAU für die großzügige Finanzierung sowie diverse organisatorische Unterstützung. Bei der Organisation waren das chinesische und das japanische DAAD-Zentrum ebenfalls eine große Unterstützung.



Gruppenfoto am letzten Bahnhof Wolchong-ri in Cheolwon: Die Gleise verlaufen nicht mehr nach Norden, sondern bleiben unterbrochen.

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## REZENSIONEN

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## **Michael Gottlob: Menschenrechte und Erinnerungspolitik in Indien – Historische Perspektiven im Zeichen der Dekolonisierung.**

transcript Verlag, 2024. 176 S., 40,00 EUR.

ISBN: 978-3-8376-7282-4

### **Rezension von Bernhard Hertlein**

Dass Völkern – Menschengruppen allgemein – abgesprochen wurde, eine Geschichte zu haben, ist Teil jenes Framings, mit dem europäische Mächte einst ihren Kolonialismus begründet haben. Heute ist dies ein Grund für das Bedürfnis, historische Erinnerungen zu pflegen und wachzuhalten. Freilich sind Erinnerungen nicht nur Kernbestandteil jeder Kultur, sondern auch ein Mittel der Politik. Erinnerungen sind nämlich gestaltbar. Besonders augenfällig geschieht dies aktuell in Indien.

Damit bewegt sich Michael Gottlobs neues Buch „Menschenrechte und Erinnerungspolitik in Indien“ auf ebenso spannendem wie schwierigem Terrain. Für den Autor, ein heute in Berlin lebender Literaturwissenschaftler, der unter anderem an Universitäten in Indien und Italien lehrte, ist dies nichts Ungewöhnliches. Auch in seiner Funktion als langjähriger Sprecher der Indien-Ländergruppe Amnesty International ist er Diskussionen über Ursachen und Folgen des Kolonialismus im Zusammenhang mit der heutigen Forderung nach universeller Geltung der Menschenrechte gewohnt.

Für das neue Buch, sein drittes über Indien, hat Gottlob unter anderem frühere Aufsätze überarbeitet. Die Diskussion ist im Fluss, seit die postkoloniale Theorie in den 1970er Jahren begann, die Fortwirkungen von Imperialismus und Ausbeutung in Afrika, Asien und im Pazifischen Raum zu thematisieren. Die Frage nach der Funktion von Geschichte und Geschichtsschreibung ist in diesem Zusammenhang von großer Bedeutung. Dem südasiatischen Subkontinent war zwar seitens der Kolonialmächte eine große und eigenständige Vergangenheit schlechterdings nicht vollkommen abzusprechen. Sie haben aber stattdessen darauf bestanden, dass sich Indien seitdem dem Fortschritt verschlossen und sogar zurückentwickelt habe.

Gottlob teilt in seinem Buch die Sicht postkolonialer Autor:innen, dass behauptete Geschichtslosigkeit und Fortschrittsunfähigkeit – neben Rassismus und ökonomischer Ausbeutung – ein Instrument zum Aufbau und Aufrechterhaltung der britischen Herrschaft in Indien gewesen sind. Gleichzeitig distanziert er sich von einer Minderheit um den indischen Psychologen und Sozialtheoretiker Ashis Nandy, die historisches Denken an sich unter Vorbehalt stellt und ablehnt. Dies sei trotz der Asymmetrie nicht gerechtfertigt, mit der außereuropäische Geschichte, wenn überhaupt, stets in Bezug auf die europäische gesehen wurde – aber nicht umgekehrt. Die entstandenen schiefen Bilder gerade zu rücken, dürfe nicht zur Folge haben, die Erinnerungskultur auszulöschen. Dazu sei das menschliche Bedürfnis, die eigene Geschichte zu kennen, zu groß.

Im Übrigen, so argumentiert Gottlob weiter, sei die aktuelle politische Entwicklung in Indien längst über diese These hinweggegangen. Weit mehr als vorige Regierungen des Landes, seien die Bharatya Janata Party (BJP) und Ministerpräsident Narendra Modi dabei, Erinnerungen umzudeuten und zu instrumentalisieren. Straßennamen würden ausgetauscht, Schulbücher umgeschrieben, Moscheen zerstört, Erinnerungen, beispielsweise an Gandhis Mörder und an die Massaker 2002 unter dem Regierungschef Modi in Gujarat, getilgt. Ziel der BJP sei es, Indien als Nation von Hindus und als Vormacht in der Region zu etablieren. Die Folgen spürten in Indien schon jetzt vor allem verfolgte Angehörige anderer Religionen, allen voran des Islam. Sie würden ausgesondert und, wenn eine Ausweisung nach Bangladesch, Myanmar oder Pakistan nicht möglich ist, gezwungen, sich der Mehrheit unterzuordnen. Gottlobs Buch ist topaktuell – und nicht nur im Blick auf die aktuellen politischen Entwicklungen in Südasien. Die Zweiteilung der Welt, in der zwar viele indische Studierende ganz selbstverständlich Konrad Adenauer, Hermann Hesse und Franz Beckenbauer kennen, aber kaum eine:r in Deutschland etwas mit den Namen Savarkar, Premchand und Sachin Tendulkar anfangen kann, ist evident. Mit dem Roman „AntiChristie“ von Mithu Sanyal hat dieses Thema übrigens gerade erst auch Eingang in die deutsche Belletristik gefunden.

**Bernhard Hertlein**

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Bernhard Hertlein promoviert über Indienbilder in der deutschsprachigen Jugendliteratur 1918–1945.

## **Maja Ruhl: Das Auslandsinvestitionsgesetz der Volksrepublik China.**

Duncker & Humblot 2025. 382 Seiten, 99,90 Euro. ISBN: 978-3-428-19241-0 (Print).

ISBN: 978-3-428-59241-8 (E-Book)

### **Rezension von Thomas Weyrauch**

Nach 36 Jahren habe ich noch immer die Stimme im Ohr: „Bringen Sie doch einmal ein Joint Venture“. Dies erwartete Madame Ding Hua, Leiterin des Wuhaner Außenamtes und Schwägerin Deng Xiaopings, von mir als Leiter eines Verbindungsbüros der Partnerstadt Duisburg gerade in einer spannungsgeladenen Phase des Jahres 1989. Gesetze über chinesisch-ausländische Gemeinschaftsunternehmen waren zwar bereits seit einer Dekade in Kraft, und die zwei Verfassungsartikel 18 und 32 versprachen einen hochrangigen Schutz für ausländische Investitionen, doch weckten die Protestbewegung und deren Niederschlagung kein großes Vertrauen in den Wirtschaftsstandort der Volksrepublik China.

In der Zwischenzeit erlebte China einen Boom an Investitionen aus dem Ausland, sodass auch das Recht mehrfachen Reformen unterzogen wurde. Schließlich verabschiedete der Nationale Volkskongress zum Zweck der Rechtsvereinheitlichung am 15. März 2019 das Auslandsinvestitionsgesetz, welches zum 1. Januar 2020 in Kraft trat.

In ihrer Dissertation widmet sich Maja Ruhl diesem Gesetzeswerk, seiner Stellung im Rechtssystem Chinas, seinem Aufbau, seiner Rechtspraxis und seiner Wirkung. Um das chinesische Auslandsinvestitionsgesetz verstehen zu können, geht die Autorin zunächst auf die wirtschaftlichen und rechtlichen Rahmenbedingungen der Volksrepublik ein, einem Entwicklungsmodell unter der Bezeichnung „Sozialistische Marktwirtschaft chinesischer Prägung“. Jene sozialistische Marktwirtschaft beinhaltet das Konzept des Staatskapitalismus mit dem besonderen Merkmal eines Parteienstaates, in dem die KPCh die Führungsrolle bei allen Entscheidungen des Staates einnimmt. Ein weiteres zentrales Element sei die unter der Bezeichnung „China Inc.“ typische „Verflechtung und Vermischung privater und staatlicher Akteure, die eine Unterscheidung zwischen privatem und staatlichem Handeln in der chinesischen Wirtschaft nahezu unmöglich“ mache.

Als Hauptkritikpunkte am chinesischen Rechtsrahmen für ausländische Investoren benennt Ruhl die mangelnde Zugänglichkeit des Rechts, die Rechtssicherheit und die staatliche Rechtsdurchsetzung.

Die Verfasserin wendet sich sodann der Entwicklung und Struktur des Auslandsinvestitionsrechts in China zu, wozu Abkommen mit anderen Staaten, eigene Gesetze und Sonderwirtschafts- und Freihandelszonen gehörten. Da ausländische Investoren ein einheitliches Gesetz einem komplexen System von Einzelnormen vorzögen und bereits Verhandlungen über Investitionsabkommen zwischen China einerseits und der EU bzw. den USA geführt worden seien, sei die ab 2011 beginnende Entwurfsphase 2015 abgeschlossen gewesen. Das Handelsministerium habe den Gesetzesentwurf mit insgesamt 170 Paragrafen zum Zweck öffentlicher Konsultationen vorgelegt. Im Jahr 2018 habe er sich schließlich auf der Gesetzgebungsagenda des Nationalen Volkskongresses befunden, welcher ihn – auf 42 Paragrafen abgespeckt – am 15. März 2019 als Gesetz verabschiedete. Obgleich es an einer eindeutigen Legaldefinition des ausländischen Investors mangelt, erfasst das Auslandsinvestitionsgesetz die Investitionstätigkeiten ausländischer natürlicher Personen, Unternehmen und Organisationen durch die Gründung eines *Foreign Invested Enterprise*, den Erwerb von Anteilen oder Vermögenswerten eines Unternehmens in China sowie die Investition in ein neu errichtetes Investitionsprojekt.

Ruhl wirft dem chinesischen Gesetzgeber fehlende Schutzbestimmungen im Auslandsinvestitionsgesetz vor, die das Prinzip der Meistbegünstigung, den Standard des *Fair and Equitable Treatments* und eine Schiedsklausel betreffen.

Bei der Investitionszulassung spielt die Inländerbehandlung eine zentrale Rolle als Schutzstandard. Sie gilt als Eckpfeiler der Nichtdiskriminierungsvorschriften und soll die Gleichbehandlung mit inländischen Investoren gewährleisten. Zur Steuerung des Marktzuganges bemerkt Ruhl: „Eines der größten Anliegen ausländischer Investoren in China ist der Marktzugang, der bisher relativ verschlossen war und in einem Ungleichgewicht zum Marktzugang chinesischer Investoren z.B. in der EU stand.“

Die Verfasserin setzt ihre Kritik auch bei einem weiteren Ansatz fort, der den ausländischen Investoren fremd ist. Für sie „ergeben sich aus der konsequenten Umsetzung der Inländerbehandlung nicht zwangsläufig nur positive Effekte, denn Investoren müssten es hinnehmen, dass sich in ihrem Unternehmen Zellen der Kommunistischen Partei Chinas bildeten, was nach der Satzung jener Partei ausdrücklich gewünscht sei. Dies wirke sich negativ auf das Unternehmen aus, welchem die Obligation auferlegt werde, diese Organisation mit allen Erfordernissen ihrer Arbeit auszustatten. Zum anderen führe die Bildung derartiger Parteizellen zu einem erhöhten Koordinationsbedarf, da die KP als weiter Akteur in die Entscheidungsfindung einbezogen würde.“

Klagen zur Intransparenz und Willkürlichkeit bei den Genehmigungsverfahren sind nach Ruhl darauf zurückzuführen, dass ungenaue und vage Formulierungen den Behörden einen weiten Interpretations- und Ermessensspielraum lassen. Somit werde der Zugang ausländischer Investitionen verzögert. Bei den weit gefassten Rechtsnormen sei es schwierig, den Genehmigungsbehörden einen Verstoß nachzuweisen.

Die Gründe für eine Ablehnung würden in den meisten Fällen mündlich mitgeteilt. Es fehle an einem effektiven Rechtsbehelfssystem für ausländische Investoren gegen eine Genehmigungsentscheidung. Es komme vielmehr darauf an, für positive Entscheidungen gute Kontakte zur Verwaltung zu unterhalten. Schließlich ständen neben den verschriftlichen Bestimmungen auch ungeschriebene oder unveröffentlichte Regeln in der Kritik.

Zur Darstellung des materiell-rechtlichen Investitionsschutzes gehören Ausführungen zum Schutz vor Enteignung, zur Berücksichtigung des FET-Standards (*Fair and Equitable Treatment*), zur Inländerbehandlung nach der Zulassung, zum freien Kapitalverkehr und zum Schutz des geistigen Eigentums. Ruhl behandelt gleichermaßen den Prozessualen Investitionsschutz mit der Investor-Staat-Schiedsgerichtsbarkeit, dem Verwaltungsrechtsweg und dem Beschwerdemechanismus.

Zusammenfassend stellt Ruhl fest, das Auslandsinvestitionsgesetz sei das erste chinesische Gesetz, das den Anspruch erhebe, eine umfassende und einheitliche Kodifikation des Auslandsinvestitionsrechts zu sein. Seine wichtigste Bestimmung sei die Inländerbehandlung vor der Zulassung, die jedoch durch verschiedene Rechtsinstrumente eingeschränkt oder durch Vorbehalte gewährt werde. Materiell-rechtliche Schutzbestimmungen hätten hauptsächlich deklaratorischen Charakter. Es gebe keine effektiven Rechtsschutzmöglichkeiten. Grundsätzlich zeige das Auslandsinvestitionsgesetz eine Annäherung des nationalen Rechts zum internationalen Investitionsrecht, doch besitze es nur eine begrenzte Funktionalität. Das Gesetz verkörpere eine Investitionsstrategie, die ein Yin und Yang (陰陽) zwischen Investitionsschutz und Investitionskontrolle herstellen wolle. Um die Reformen im Rechtswesen beurteilen zu können, müsse zwischen dem geschriebenen Recht (*law in the books*) und der Rechtswirklichkeit (*law in action*) unterscheiden werden. In China bestehe eine große Diskrepanz zwischen *law in the books* und *law in action*. Damit kommt Ruhl zu der Schlussfolgerung: „Den Investitionsschutz in China am Maßstab westlicher Vorstellungen zu messen, wäre ein gar sinnloses Unterfangen, da es sich um zwei unterschiedliche Staatssysteme handelt und dies ausländischen Investoren bewusst ist, bevor sie in den chinesischen Markt investieren. [...] Ausländische Investoren sollten sich demnach nicht nur mit den chinesischen Gesetzen befassen, sondern auch mit den politischen Rahmenbedingungen, die in China untrennbar mit dem Recht verwoben sind.“ (S. 342).

Hilfreich sind das Abkürzungsverzeichnis am Anfang des Buches sowie die Verzeichnisse für Rechtsquellen, Literatur und Stichwörter am Ende.

Ein zweifach auftretender Lapsus in Ruhls Arbeit betrifft Deng Xiaoping, die treibende Kraft der postmaoischen Wirtschaftsreformen. Ruhl bezeichnet Deng nämlich als „Staatspräsidenten“ (S. 35, 40), was er jedoch niemals war. Auch sollte der Terminus „Verfassung der KPCh“ (S. 100 f.) besser durch „Satzung der KPCh“ ersetzt werden.

Allerdings wird Ruhls anspruchsvolles Werk nicht durch jene Kleinigkeiten beeinträchtigt. Wohin sich China kurz- und mittelfristig auch bewegen mag, diese Forschungsarbeit wird gewiss ihre Bedeutung behalten. Da mittlerweile die Auslandsinvestitionen unter Xi Jinping nicht einfacher geworden sind, und sogar ein deutlicher Rückgang zu verzeichnen ist, dürfte die Lektüre dieser Arbeit deshalb auch weiterhin nützlich sein.

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Zusammengestellt von Uwe Kotzel

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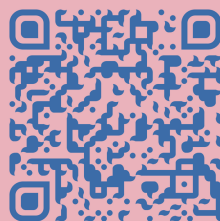


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