

2022 Annual Meeting of the Working Group on Social Science Research on China (ASC)

University of Vienna, November 3-4, 2022

Report by Lukas Holzschuh

The 2022 ASC annual meeting was hosted at the University of Vienna by Christian Göbel and H. Christoph Steinhardt of the Department of East Asian Studies/Sinology on November 3rd and 4th. Contrary to the previous meetings since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the conference was held in person. It was structured into four panels, each featuring two to three papers. In the tradition of previous ASC meetings, paper discussants presented the main findings with their comments, in lieu of authors presenting themselves.

Approximately 25 ASC members participated in the conference, as well as guests (including Larry Catá Backer (Pennsylvania State University) and Keren Wang (Emory University), both of whom contributed papers for presentation), several members of the local Department of East Asian Studies/Sinology of the University of Vienna and other Vienna-based scholars. In total, around 40 people were present.

First Panel: Information and State-Society Relations

After a welcome address by H. Christoph Steinhardt, the first panel was chaired by ASC Speaker Tobias ten Brink (Jacobs University, Bremen). The initial paper, presented and commented on by Björn Alpermann (University of Würzburg), was “ICT-based Environmental Participation in China: Same, Same but Digital?” by Maria Bondes (Free University Berlin), Genia Kostka (Free University Berlin), and Wiebke Rabe (Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University). This paper examines the efficacy of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for public participation in environmental governance within the authoritarian context of China. The authors found surprisingly high levels of participation, showing the participatory potential of digital technologies even under restrictive conditions. They also address ICTs’ limitations both in a more general and in a non-democratic context. Maria Bondes was present to receive feedback and to engage in further discussion with the audience.

The second paper presented in the panel was “Mobilizing Social Anomie to Strengthen the State: Justification Strategies for ‘Social Credit’ on Sina Weibo” by H. Christoph Steinhardt and Christian Göbel. The scheduled discussant of this paper dropped out at short notice, so the authors had to prepare their own presentation. The paper presents an analysis of the Chinese state’s justification and framing strategy for the Social Credit System on Sina Weibo. In contrast to common justification strategies known from the surveillance literature, they identify a dominant narrative of social anomie as an allegedly pervasive societal problem in which the social credit system is portrayed as an effective solution. The paper concludes that potential counter narratives are scarce or censored and attribute the Chinese state notable success in its framing strategy. Both authors addressed provided comments and continued the discussion with the audience.

The last paper in the panel was “Governing ‘Charitable Big Data’: China’s Internet Fundraising Information Platforms and the Transformation of State-Business-NGO Relations” by Bertram Lang (Goethe University Frankfurt), which was presented and commented on by Katja Levy (University of Manchester). The paper explores China’s “internet philanthropy” boom, which had been subject to state direction and consequently had been dominated by large Internet Fundraising Information Platforms (IFIPs). Lang stipulates that the 2016 Charity Law led to fundraising transparency, but also consolidated corporate oligopolies, which exacerbated fundraising inequality in favour of a few organisations with strong governmental backgrounds.

Second Panel: Social Credit and the Law: Approaching a Complex Relationship through three Discourses

After a coffee and cake break, the conference proceeded with the second panel, chaired by Christian Göbel. The first paper was “The Imaginaries of Regulatory Spaces in an Age of Administrative Discretion: Social Credit ‘in’ or ‘as’ the Cage of Regulation of Socialist Legality” by Larry Catá Backer, presented and commented by on Heike Holbig (University of Frankfurt). This contribution takes a famous quote of Xi Jinping: “Power should be exercised within the cage of regulations” and uses the “delightfully ambiguous” concept of “within the cage of regulations” to explore the Social Credit System (SCS) in relation to Chinese law and its understanding of the exertion of power. Departing from this, the paper attributes the SCS to be “an alternative and potential socialist approach to the entire project of legality” as it moves the regulatory space towards digitalised systems. After Heike Holbig’s summary and comments, Larry Catá Backer was answering questions and providing a common ground concerning conceptions of law and legality. This was necessary as there were two barriers to understanding: both the divide between a law scholar and an audience of mostly sinologists, as well as the cultural difference between an Anglo-American and a continental European understanding of legality.

The next paper in the panel was “Legal and Discursive Dynamics of Personalized “Pillars of Shame” in Chinese Data Governance” by Keren Wang. He sees the SCS as a case of governance-by-data experimentation by the Chinese state. The paper focuses on concepts of personalized law and deeper ritual practices which are entangled within the construction of the Chinese SCS and applies its analysis to cases of data-driven “public shaming”. He classifies these practises as dramaturgical political performances in which ritual observance has been adapted for an always-on society. Overall, the paper presents a transdisciplinary framework for understanding emergent Chinese data governance structures. Alexander Trauth-Goik (University of Vienna) was contributing by summarising the paper and by providing comments to Keren Wang.

The final contribution of the day was from Marianne von Blomberg and Björn Ahl (University of Cologne): “Debating the Legality of Social Credit in China – A Review of Chinese Legal Scholarship”. They review the Chinese legal scholarship debate about the legality of the SCS. Specifically, they look at the widely pronounced academic criticism of the lack of legal bases for joint disciplining for trust-breaking (失信联合惩戒, ‘JDT’) measures. Their review concludes that the reaction to legal criticism implies a willingness to integrate the SCS within the national legal framework, which would represent a significant shift in direction. However, it remains to be seen how a possible integration will turn out in practice. Both authors were attending, and Doris Fischer presented and commented on the paper. Subsequent to audience provided feedback, the conference was wrapped up for the day.

Third Panel: Political Economy

On the second day, the conference proceeded with the third panel on political economy, chaired by H. Christoph Steinhardt. Here, only two papers were discussed as Nicolas Huppenbauer (University of Bonn) who was originally part of the panel could not attend in person. The first contribution was from Armin Müller (Jacobs University Bremen): “The Dynamics of Unemployment Insurance Coverage in Chinese Cities”. His study examines unemployment insurance coverage from different theoretical perspectives, linking coverage to socio-economic development, economic interdependence, state capacity, employment and skills, and collective action. His results suggest that population coverage is driven by fiscal capacity and the scope of formal employment. Conversely, economic interdependence erodes coverage, while results for collective action are ambiguous. Barbara Darimont (Ludwigshafen University of Business and Society) presented the paper and provided comments.

The second paper was presented and commented on by Gunter Schubert (University of Tübingen): “Mind the Gap: Financial Stability Policy in China” from Hui Li (University of Würzburg). The paper is a case study on implementation of Chinese

financial stability policy. It examines three specific subcases: structural deleveraging, the bankruptcy of Baoshang Bank, and the extinction of the P2P industry. The paper finds a significant discrepancy between financial stability policy and actual local implementation which represents a threat to the stability of the Chinese financial system. The paper initiated a lively discussion on financial governance in China.

Fourth Panel: China's Digital Rise: Geopolitical and Geoeconomic Implications

After a short coffee break, the conference proceeded with the final panel chaired by Larry Catá Backer. The first paper discussed was “‘Going out Digital’ – the Role of Chinese Foreign Direct Investment in Germany and Europe Amid the Global Competition Around Digital Technologies” by Lea Schneidemesser (University of Erfurt). Her paper aims to provide insights about Chinese investment dynamics in the German digital ICT industry beyond superficial fears of Huawei and Tiktok. She is focusing on types of investment and respective data access. Findings are that venture capital funding goes mostly into companies that operate business models based on economic transaction data, while mergers and acquisitions tactics focus on products that collect product data, and Greenfield investments are strong in the field of data infrastructure and social media. The paper finishes with questions rather than a conclusion as it is a draft version. Lena Springer (King's College London) summarised the paper and provided comments to Lea Schneidemesser.

The second paper was by Sarah Eaton and Daniel Fuchs (Humboldt University of Berlin): “Who's Afraid of Chinese Engineers? Emerging Multilateral Contestation in High-Tech Standardization”. The paper conceptualises conflict in high-tech standard-setting through an International Relation lens. They find that opposition against increasing Chinese influence on standardisation is not uniformly aligned. European actors are much less willing than the US in opposing China and are pursuing more cooperation instead. They conclude that this described preference divergence undercut recent “counter-institutionalization” measures in the context of standardisation. Tobias ten Brink provided a summary to the audience and comments to Daniel Fuchs.

The last paper of both the panel and the conference overall was from Maximilian Mayer (University of Bonn) and Amir Elalouf (Bar-Ilan University): “Financial and Geoeconomic Implications of China's Digital Currency” Their contribution explores use cases and potential advantages in China's adoption of the digital yuan. The paper explains differences in e-currencies and finds that domestically, the e-CNY has the potential to provide increased security, privacy, and anonymity compared to already existing mobile payment systems while at the same time allowing the state to monitor transactions more efficiently. Internationally it could aid in promoting the yuan and furthering the Chinese goal of eroding US dollars dominance. Timna Michlmayr presented the paper and provided comments to Maximilian Mayer.

After lunch, the ASC members held their annual assembly, which concluded the conference.

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