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Research Report

CONDUCTING RESEARCH ON CONTEMPORARY CHINA: REFLECTIONS OF AN ACADEMIC PRACTITIONER

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The China Policy Institute, part of the School of Contemporary Chinese Studies at The University of Nottingham, was set up to analyse critical policy challenges faced by China in its rapid development. Its goals are to help expand the knowledge and understanding of contemporary China in Britain, Europe and worldwide, to help build a more informed dialogue between China and the UK and Europe, and to contribute to government and business strategies.

Conducting research on contemporary China: Reflections of an academic practitioner

Andreas Fulda¹

How do we conduct research on contemporary China?

The mission of the University of Nottingham's School of Contemporary Chinese Studies (SCCS) is to become one of the best centres for research, teaching and policy analysis on contemporary China in the UK and Europe. In order to make progress towards this ambitious goal SCCS staff and students have been invited to share their experiences in conducting research on contemporary China. Each paper may focus on different aspects of contemporary Chinese studies, e.g. in the disciplinary fields of economy, politics, history, literature and culture. I have been asked to directly address the following four key questions in the first contribution to this new debate:

How do you conduct your research on contemporary China?

What are the key paradigms and analytical lenses guiding your research?

Who benefits from your research and how?

How does your research fit into the bigger picture of European studies of contemporary China?²

In order to address these key questions I will start by reviewing four key development trends in my past and present research on contemporary China issues. In the first part of my paper I will explain the trajectory of my own research during the past ten years. In the second part I will discuss whether these development trends simply reflect shifts in personal preferences or whether they can also shed light on the evolving field of

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² The aim of this series of presentations is to document and review the various interdisciplinary methodologies that are currently being applied at our school. Especially, it aims to achieve the following objectives:

To document and disseminate emerging research trends among SCCS scholars.

To find ways for promoting communication and interaction between scholars of SCCS about sensible ways how to do research on contemporary China.

To explore possibilities for future collaborative research.

To develop detailed mechanisms amongst participatory scholars and institutes for research collaboration and funding applications in the near future.

contemporary Chinese studies. Let me begin by explaining how my understanding of science has evolved over time. As a young researcher I was still influenced by the positivist paradigm. With greater exposure to politics and society in the Greater China region I began to embrace a post-positivist paradigm to the study of contemporary China. It is also being called the normative, naturalist or constructivist paradigm. Post-positivism differs from positivism in its radically different axiomatic values and epistemological choices.³ It is my hope that through this series of presentations we will learn more about the concepts of science by other fellow contemporary Chinese studies researchers.

What do I mean by research on contemporary China?

Before I start describing evolving trends in my research of contemporary Chinese issues I need to define what I mean by research on contemporary China. The term evokes the image of a person immersing him or herself in a specific aspect of contemporary China, writing about it and eventually publishing academic articles and books. Clearly all of this could be called research on contemporary China. Yet I feel that such a view of contemporary Chinese studies is somewhat limited.

As a qualitative researcher my starting point is a research puzzle. Sometimes this can be a simple quote by another researcher which I may take issue with or a certain social or political phenomenon which has not yet been adequately explained in the existing academic literature. The evolutionary nature of research puzzles can best be illustrated by my very early research on contemporary Taiwan which lasted from 1998 until 2002. During the late 1990s Taiwan underwent considerable social, political and cultural transformation.

Living and studying in Taiwan in 1998-99 allowed me to gain first hand impressions of Taiwan's election-driven democratisation. I realised that much of the academic literature on contemporary Taiwan had a strong bias towards the official narratives of the KMT party-state. Taking a Taiwan-based perspective I offered an alternative account of Taiwan's lurch into democratisation. My motivation therefore was to innovate the existing academic discourse by taking on novel research puzzles and coming up with new and thought-provoking insights.

³ Yvonne S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba 1985, *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Sage Publications, Inc. Newbury Park: California.

Trend 1. Evolving research puzzles, key paradigms and analytical lenses

In my first three academic papers I discussed the following research questions:

How did the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) contribute to Taiwan's democratisation process?⁴

How have faction politics within the DPP shaped the development of political culture in Taiwan?⁵

How can we explain Taiwan's lurch into democratisation against the backdrop of Japanese colonial rule and KMT rule?⁶

In my first published article I had given research paradigms and analytical lenses very little thought. In a rather unreflective fashion I followed the epistemology of positivism. This gradually changed in my subsequent work which became increasingly discursive. I realised the power of philosophy, language and ideas in the social construction of reality. Under the influence of readings of Foucault and Habermas I gradually opened up to a post-positivist research paradigm as understood by Yvonne S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba.

From 2003 until 2007 I wrote my PhD dissertation on the promotion of participatory development in the context of Sino-German development cooperation. Rather than writing about this topic from an outsider's perspective I chose to work in German development cooperation in China for five years. A number of research questions emerged which would both assess the nature of contemporary Sino-German development cooperation and the potential of reforming elements of the system which were not working in the interests of both nations.

How is the European Commission planning to engage China and how does this relate to bilateral relations of key member states like Germany with China?⁷

⁴ Andreas Fulda 2000, "The Development of the DPP from 1986 – 2000" [Der Weg der taiwanischen Oppositionspartei durch die Institutionen, 1986-2000]. Globalisierung, Regionalisierung, Fragmentierung. Beitrage zur 2. Nachwuchstagung Ostasien, Bundesinstitut fuer ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien.

⁵ Andreas Martin Fulda 2002, "The Politics of Factionalism in Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)", in: International Quarterly for Asian Studies [Internationales Asienforum], Nr. 33, November 2002.

⁶ Andreas Martin Fulda 2002, "Reevaluating the Taiwanese Democracy Movement: A Comparative Analysis of Opposition Organizations Under Japanese and KMT Rule", in: Critical Asian Studies, September 2002 (34:3).

How are big group moderation techniques such as Future Search Conferences used in China to promote stakeholder dialogues?⁸

What are the opportunities for and obstacles to political aid in Sino-German Development Cooperation (2003-2006)?⁹

How can German members of parliament exercise greater parliamentary oversight over German ministerial bodies and agencies in charge of cooperating with the Chinese state and non-state recipient organisations?¹⁰

Trend 2. Towards excellent research with demonstrable benefits to public policy

The shift from my early research on contemporary Taiwan to development studies during my PhD signified a change from rather descriptive and analytical social science to applied social science. In my previous research I challenged dominant academic narratives about Taiwan's lurch into democratisation (1998-2002). In my PhD thesis I critically assessed the potential for a thorough reform of the Sino-German development cooperation system (2002-2009). As an outcome of my PhD research I became an advocate for policy change.

In the light of the current debates about the upcoming Research Excellence Framework (REF), the successor to the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), I would argue that such advocacy work should be seen as a good example of "excellent research to deliver demonstrable benefits to the economy, society, public policy, culture and quality of life."¹¹ While there is no consensus yet within the academic community about the desirability of

⁷ Frank Umbach and Andreas Fulda 2003, "The Future of EU-China Relations in the 21st Century: some general comments regarding the "China: Country Strategy Paper 2002-2006" of the European Commission and the prospect of a CFSP of the EU vis-à-vis China" [Zur Zukunft der EU-China-Beziehungen im 21. Jahrhundert: einige grundsätzliche Anmerkungen zum "China: Country Strategy Paper 2002-2006" der Europäischen Kommission vom 1. März 2002 und den Perspektiven einer GASP der EU gegenüber China]", in: ASIEN, October 2003.

⁸ Claudia Maennling, Arthur Zimmermann, and Andreas Fulda 2007, "Partizipation auf dem Prüfstand. Erfahrungen der internationalen Entwicklungszusammenarbeit, in: OrganisationsEntwicklung: Zeitschrift fuer Organisationsentwicklung und Change Management, 2007(03), 35-47.

⁹ Andreas Fulda 2009, Förderung partizipativer Entwicklung in der VR China: Möglichkeiten und Grenzen politischer Einflußnahme durch Akteure der deutsch-chinesischen Entwicklungszusammenarbeit (2003-2006), VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, Germany.

¹⁰ Andreas Fulda 2009, "Promoting Participatory Development in the PR China. The Case of Sino-German Development Cooperation (2003-2006)". International Quarterly for Asian Studies [Internationales Asienforum], Vol. 40, Issue 1-2, May 2009, 97-118.

¹¹ Higher Education Funding Council for England 2010, <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Research/ref/> (download 5 February 2010).

academic public policy¹² I contend that we should not shy away from work that will benefit the wider public. Indeed at the University of Nottingham, the existence of the China Policy Institute as the research institute for the School of Contemporary Chinese Studies recognizes the value both of research-based policy analysis and policy advocacy by academics.

Throughout my PhD it bothered me that key decision makers within a rather risk-averse German development bureaucracy were perfectly aware of deep-seated structural problems but still not willing to make even incremental changes to a dysfunctional system. Upon completion of my PhD I was employed by the School of Contemporary Chinese Studies at Nottingham in 2007. This allowed me to follow-up on my PhD thesis and write a discussion paper on the prospects of reform in Sino-German development cooperation.¹³

By sharing my discussion paper with various members of the German parliament I lobbied for greater parliamentary oversight over German development agencies dealing with China. Members of the German Liberal Party caucus found my suggestions useful for their own evolving development policy. I helped them draft a small enquiry (*Kleine Anfrage*) in March 2008 as well as a parliamentary motion in June 2008. In our motion we called for greater support for Chinese civil society organisations and the promotion of political participation.¹⁴

Our parliamentary motion was discussed in the German Bundestag at the end of June 2008 and subsequently passed on to the parliamentary committees for development (AWZ) and finances (Finanzausschuss). After the change in government in 2009 language of our motion made its way into the coalition agreement of the new centre-right government. It called for an intensified dialogue with Asia's civil societies and the

¹² E. Robert Statham Jr. 1995, *Between Inquiry and Advocacy: A Critique of the Pragmatic Foundations of Academic Public Policy*, Parkway Publishers Inc., Boone, North Carolina.

¹³ The China Policy Institute Discussion Paper was later published in the *International Quarterly for Asian Studies*. Andreas Martin Fulda, 2009, "Promoting Participatory Development in the People's Republic of China: A Case Study of Sino-German Development Cooperation (2003-2006)". *Internationales Asienforum: International Quarterly for Asian Studies*, (Spring 2009).

¹⁴ Deutscher Bundestag, 16. Wahlperiode, Drucksache 16/8572, *Kleine Anfrage* vom 12.03. 2008; Deutscher Bundestag, 16. Wahlperiode, Drucksache 16/8932, *Antwort der Bundesregierung* vom 24.04.2008; Deutscher Bundestag, 16. Wahlperiode, Drucksache 16/9745, *Antrag auf Beschlussfassung des Deutschen Bundestags* vom 25.06.2008; Deutscher Bundestag, *Plenarprotokoll* 16/172, *Stenografischer Bericht*, 172. Sitzung, Berlin, Donnerstag, den 26. Juni 2008. http://www.gmbh-kompakt.de/pdf/BTDrs161_72.pdf (download 5 January 2009).

strengthening of political participation.¹⁵ It showed me that we as academics could be effective advocates for policy change.

The shift towards applied social science has also informed my ongoing research on China's incremental democratisation. For the past five years I have continuously tried to identify research puzzles which are of interest both to Chinese academics as well as practitioners, be it reform-minded government officials or civil society practitioners. I would argue that China's incremental democratisation should not be seen as a mere academic topic. I consider it a historic process in which we may want to get involved as facilitators of social and political change.

Trend 3. Towards community-based participatory research

Let me now discuss who benefits from my research and how. This will be followed by a discussion how my research fits into the bigger picture of European studies of contemporary China. Given my previous emphasis on applied science I see differences in rather descriptive approaches to the study of contemporary China. As a liberal internationalist I argue that academics should be able to engage with China both critically and constructively. Let me explain how I try to achieve this through my ongoing research on China's nascent civil society:

Are the roles and functions of Chinese civil society organisations changing from social service provision to policy advocacy?¹⁶

Can Chinese civil society organisations expand the scope of their activity areas by collaborating with local governments?¹⁷

In contrast to my early work on Taiwan these papers are informed by ethnographic field research and participant observation. The utility of such applied research lies in its

¹⁵ CDU 2010, "Wachstum. Bildung. Zusammenhalt." - Koalitionsvertrag von CDU, CSU und FDP. 120. <http://www.cdu.de/doc/pdfc/091026-koalitionsvertrag-cducsu-fdp.pdf> (download 5 February 2010).

¹⁶ Andreas Fulda 2006, "Cong shehui fuwu guodu dao zhengce changdao. Zhongguo minjian zuzhi tongguo shehui fazhan gongzuo yingxiang zhidu jianshe", in: Konrad Adenauer Foundation, KAS-Schriftenreihe Nr. 62, Zivilgesellschaft in Deutschland und China: Entwicklung und Trends, September 2006.

¹⁷ Andreas Fulda, Song Qinghua and Li Yanyan 2009, "How to gain trust and promote system innovation. Strategies of Chinese civil society organisations collaborating with the government", China Policy Institute (Discussion Paper 52), Web: <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/cpi/documents/discussion-papers/discussion-paper-52-fulda-civil-society.pdf>.

possibility to contribute both to the evolving academic discourses about the subject matter as well as helping to enlighten the people of the process about existing political opportunity structures. When researching cross-sector collaboration between CSOs and local governments I organised an interactive workshop with 15 Chinese civil society practitioners in Beijing in June 2009.

This enabled workshop participants to reflect on their everyday practices as civil society practitioners. As an action researcher I was rewarded with a lot of empirical data. I have also followed this approach in my ongoing research on the changing role of policy entrepreneurs in Chinese reform processes. I conducted a similar workshop at the Civil Society Institute at the Sun Yat-sen University in July 2009 and will run two more interactive workshops in 2010. This is my way of giving back to the people who are helping to sustain my academic career.

Another example can be seen in my ongoing work as an academic advisor for the CANGO/RBF project "Social Advocacy Coalition for Healthy and Sustainable Communities" (2008-2011). This consultancy work parallels my ongoing individual research on policy advocacy and policy entrepreneurship. I have helped raise funds for the capacity building program, designed program components, identified members of the program's advisory council and helped organise a four-day national summit on water and health in Beijing in January 2010.

This work has allowed me to identify a number of new research puzzles worth pondering:

How do Chinese environmentalists engage in policy advocacy and policy entrepreneurship?
How do Chinese artists, writers, bloggers and academics transcend activism, arts and politics?

How do Chinese democratic reformers view the potential pathways for China's democratisation?

My research is influenced by European scholarship on contemporary Chinese studies but also departs from it in a number of significant ways. While I received my academic training in Germany and the UK I have also been strongly influenced by American scholarship on China. I admire scholars such as Andrew Nathan. I have also learned a great deal from American social educational reformers such as John Dewey and Donald

Schön, civil society practitioners such as Marvin Weisbord and Harrison Owen as well as social scientist Amitai Etzioni.

Given my participatory research style it will become increasingly difficult for me to disentangle the various influences on my scholarship, which may be European, American as well as Chinese. Many of my new academic articles will now be co-authored with renowned European and Chinese China experts as well as Chinese civil society practitioners. These articles will also be part of my second book "A Silent (R)evolution. How Citizen Activists Shape China's Future", to be published in Professor Zheng Yongnian's China Policy Series (tbc).

This most recent trend towards co-authorship is indicative of my desire to build up new epistemic communities of like-minded people. In this context I am also lobbying for more experiments with community-based participatory research, e.g. Healthy Community Assessments which involve researchers, civil society practitioners and community residents as genuine partners.¹⁸

Trend 4. Exploring the potential of new media

Throughout 2009 I have also started experimenting with new forms of media. During my teaching of undergraduate and postgraduate students I realised the power of video interviews or parts of documentaries as an effective way of conveying ideas and concepts. From April through July 2009 I filmed my first 35-minute documentary "Citizen Perceptions of Community in Ningbo, Nürtingen and Nottingham". Let me explain the added value I see in such new forms of media for both teaching and research.

During my recent stay in China I started filming my interviews with academics and civil society practitioners on issues ranging from pathways of China's democratisation to China's environmental health crisis. These interviews will be invaluable for teaching, public talks as well as training programs. Filming the interviews has also helped hone my skills as an aspiring social and environmental documentary filmmaker. I am convinced that the Web 2.0 will open new avenues for innovation in higher education and help us with our public outreach work.

¹⁸ For more information about the CBPR paradigm see: Developing and Sustaining Community-based Participatory Research Partnerships: A Skill-building Curriculum, available online: <http://depts.washington.edu/ccph/cbpr/index.php> (download 5 February 2010).

A “Water and Health Citizen Action Experience Sharing” took place in Beijing from 18-21 January 2010. The activity was organised jointly by the China Association for NGO Cooperation (CANGO) together with the American Bar Association (ABA) and supported by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF). During an Open Space on Thursday, 20 January 2010 I made the suggestion to produce and direct a documentary on “Water and Health.” I was inspired by David Novack’s documentary “Burning the Future. Coal in America”.¹⁹

Participants who joined our small group deliberations made a number of invaluable suggestions. They suggested that the documentary should show the value of preserving the environment, reveal existing problems and indicate emerging grassroots solutions to them. Since I made clear that I wanted to produce and direct the documentary myself people suggested that I should partner with one of the 25 environmental NGOs of the water and health network to gain access to communities.

Despite the foreseeable challenges that I will face in realising this project I am convinced that the planned documentary on water and health and the human costs of China’s development model will lead to a great number of spin-offs such as seminars and workshops, academic papers and book chapters. It will almost certainly pave the way for new and interesting research directions in the future. Also it is my hope that by submitting the documentary to film festivals it will help raise awareness for China’s nascent environmental health movement.²⁰

Comparison and conclusion

By discussing four development trends in my research on contemporary China I have described the trajectory of my learning curve by reflecting on 1) evolving research puzzles, key paradigms and analytical lenses, 2) excellent research with demonstrable benefits to public policy, 3) my advocacy of community-based participatory research, and 4) the exploration of new media such as documentaries in teaching. In the final part of my paper I would like to explain how these trends are interlinked and how they have helped inform my understanding of science in general and social science in particular.

¹⁹ See also David Novack’s official website:

http://www.burningthefuture.com/show.asp?content_id=14089 (download 5 February 2010).

²⁰ For a good introduction to Chinese social and environmental documentaries see Visible Record Ltd 2010, Introduction to Chinese Documentary Film, <http://www.visiblerecord.com/en/> (download 08 February 2010).

In my early research on contemporary Taiwan (1996-2002) I was interested in the island-state's political history. Dissatisfied with being a mere observer or analyst of contemporary Taiwan I felt compelled to become an actor in my own right. I chose to become an advocate for change in Germany's development policy towards the PR China (2002-2009). I managed to shape the development policy of the current centre-right coalition government (2009-). Living and working in China has also profoundly transformed my analytical lenses and research approaches to contemporary China.

While my approaches to the study of contemporary China may seem unconventional to the casual observer I meet increasing numbers of socially-conscious Chinese and western China experts who are following a similar approach. Many share the conviction that it is not enough to simply learn about the problems that China faces (the what? question) but feel that they want to be a part of the solution of many of these complex problems (the how? question). They see it as their social responsibility to become academic practitioners. A small but growing number of foreign and Chinese social scientists dealing with contemporary Chinese issues combine their research with attempts to promote social and political development in China.

Critics of such academic activism should consider how they themselves are giving back to society. Some colleagues may argue that by teaching and researching we are already contributing to the enhancement of specialised knowledge which also benefits the wider public. But I am sceptical. First of all we mostly publish in English and therefore prevent a majority of the Chinese population from benefitting from our research results. Secondly, the utility of our research for social and political development can also be questioned.

While there is justification for "pie in the sky" research without any specific purpose I feel that given the very real problems that China faces there is an argument to be made in favour of applied social science and academic activism. We can identify key social and political problems which merit greater attention and contribute our ideas in order to help solve them. My understanding of science in general and social and political science in particular is that it should help inform and enlighten people and be a critical voice in reform processes. Teaching undergraduate, postgraduate and PhD-students therefore is a key task which should be given higher priority in our work. Furthermore we should use our research to strengthen those individuals and organisations in Chinese reform processes

which deserve to be given a greater voice. This is a guiding principle of my current and future research on contemporary China.