Germany’s contentious China debate

Discussion published by Sascha Klotzbücher on Thursday, March 17, 2022

In an op-ed (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung F.A.Z., March 9), Sinology professors Bjoern Alpermann (University of Wuerzburg) and Gunter Schubert (University of Tuebingen) branded criticism of self-censorship and appeasement within German-language China studies toward the Chinese government as "crusaderism". (https://www.faz.net/aktuell/karriere-hochschule/chinaforschung-sinologen-wehren-sich-gegen-konformismusvorwurf-17859757.html)

With ad hominem allegations rarely seen in German academic contexts, both authors called discussants of this academic discourse “moral crusaders” (author's translation) and established China scholars were labelled as “new crusaders” (author's translation). Alpermann and Schubert brushed away arguments by claiming that there is no evidence for a growing influence of China on German China studies.

Andreas Fulda (University of Nottingham), Mareike Ohlberg (German Marshall Fund), David Missal (Sinologist and Tibet Initiative), Horst Fabian (independent scholar), and Sascha Klotzbuecher (University of Goettingen) have replied with their own op-ed titled "Willing to compromise without limits?" (F.A.Z., March 16).

You can read the German version here (paywalled): https://www.faz.net/aktuell/karriere-hochschule/die-chinaforschung-muss-ihre-rolle-ueberdenken-17877701.html

Pre-print of the German version:

https://publications.goettingen-research-online.de/bitstream/2/104798/1/Fulda%20et%20al_FAZ%20Beitrag%20Grenzenlos%20kompromissbereit_preprint.pdf

English translation of the op-ed:

Willing to compromise without limits?

In view of Xi's policy of repression, China studies must rethink its role. Ignoring problems and stigmatizing critical voices are the wrong way to go. A reply to an op-ed by Bjoern Alpermann and Gunter Schubert.
By Andreas Fulda, Mareike Ohlberg, David Missal, Horst Fabian and Sascha Klotzbücher.

Last week, sinology professors Björn Alpermann and Gunter Schubert branded the criticism of self-censorship and appeasement within German-language China studies toward the Chinese government that has flared up in recent years as "crusaderism" (F.A.Z., March 9). Critics of the conformist course, including authors of this article, were defamed as "moral crusaders" and stigmatized as defilers of their own nests. The authors brush away arguments by claiming that there is no evidence for a growing influence of China on German China studies.

The opposite is true: In the International Journal of Human Rights, Andreas Fulda and David Missal criticize on an empirical basis that "China research at German universities [is] highly dependent on 'questionable' funding and many of its China-related study programs could no longer be offered without financial support from the People's Republic of China." Massive financial resources flow from the Chinese side to German cooperation partners via Confucius Institutes and university partnerships. This thesis is based on more than a hundred requests to public authorities made by Missal under freedom of information laws, which can be viewed on the website unis.davidmissal.de. There, it is documented that German universities receive several million euros from China every year without much effort, often several hundred thousand euros per university. Both the University of Würzburg and the University of Tübingen, where Alpermann and Schubert teach, have left the inquiries unanswered.

That the grants are not trivial sums becomes clear when one considers all the things that can and often are financed with them: Endowed professorships; research assistants for senior professors in the context of projects financed by the German side; financial project support at German universities, entire conferences at German universities or at least the travel expenses of the Chinese members; lectures, conference attendance and travel expenses of German university personnel in China; lectures applied for funding at a Confucius Institute and thus formally organized by
it, including room rent and catering; sinological journals; subsidized teaching at sinology or Chinese studies courses by personnel sent from China, and much more.

Furthermore, Alpermann and Schubert doubt that German universities are dependent on Chinese donors. But even very small financial contributions lead to considerable dislocations. According to Freie Universität Berlin's (FU) vice president for international affairs, Verena Blechinger-Talcott, an endowed professorship at the FU is funded with 500,000 euros for five years from China, initially with Beijing as the judicial arbitration site. In a public hearing before the Berlin House of Representatives on May 17, 2021, Blechinger-Talcott stated for the record: "It was about a professorship for teaching Chinese ... for which we had and have no own funding possibilities in the budget of Freie Universität (authors' translation)." Berlin State Secretary Steffen Krach replied "that the FU is always in a position" to "finance this independently (authors' translation)."

As recently as September 2020, Duisburg-based China scholar Thomas Heberer argued at an expert discussion organized by the Left Party: "The only thing coming out of the Confucius Institute is language instruction in the master's program, because the university itself has no funds to hire additional teachers (authors' translation)." The Confucius Institutes and the professors of Chinese and East Asian Studies at the University of Duisburg-Essen involved in it had hit the headlines in October 2021 after the presentation of a biography of Xi Jinping by journalists Stefan Aust and Adrian Geiges was initially canceled without comment at the behest of the Chinese Consul General in Düsseldorf. Neither the Confucius Institute nor the university, but only the publisher who had been disinvited, had publicized this self-censorship. The then Federal Minister of Education, Karliczek, then advised universities in a letter to the German Rectors' Conference to review their cooperation with the Confucius Institutes and to seek exchange with the Office for the Protection of the Constitution and the Federal Intelligence Service. Contrary to Alpermann and Schubert's assumption, there are indeed financial and institutional dependencies.

Mareike Ohlberg, a staff member of the German Marshall Fund, is accused by the authors of serving and reinforcing a "China-critical narrative in the German and
international media (authors' translation)" with her research. It is understandable that media coverage of China has become more critical independently of the geopolitical rivalry between the United States and the People's Republic in light of the People's Republic's regression to an autocratic leader state, the cultural genocide in Xinjiang, the suppression of the democracy movement in Hong Kong, and the threatening military gestures toward Taiwan. Alpermann and Schubert, meanwhile, do not shy away from resorting to a popular motif of Chinese propaganda: Allegedly controlled by the United States, Western media paint as negative a picture of the People's Republic as possible. What they omit is how the Chinese government itself contributes to this image. The decoupling of the communication spheres between Europe and China is not, as the authors believe, attributable to the "'decoupling delusion' of a China-critical narrative of politically interested circles (authors' translation)," but rather the logical consequence of the "Great Firewall," with which the party-state shields the Chinese population from the outside world.

**Naming the price of access**

Alpermann and Schubert postulate three prerequisites for a proper engagement with China: "First, access to the country; second, the rejection of a 'moral aptitude test' for China researchers; and third, adherence to dialogue with Chinese universities (authors' translation)." All three points play an important role, but they must not lead to a situation in which China research is blindfolded and only studies what is tolerated by the Chinese side. This kind of research would make itself obsolete.

Sascha Klotzbücher has shown in his research that field research by foreign China scholars in the People's Republic of China takes place in a highly monitored, politically restricted field. The act of self-censorship associated with the inevitable "embeddedness" that is consciously or unconsciously demanded, especially upon entry, must be disclosed and methodologically anchored.

At no point do the authors refer to the self-critical discussion that has been going on
for years, unfortunately only by a few, about the state of the discipline, the role of intellectuals in China, and the field approach of China studies. Instead, they argue for "creative research strategies (authors' translation)" and "tactical compromises in research design (authors' translation)" to maintain field access. What these trade-offs consist of, however, they do not elaborate. Here they miss the opportunity to provide examples of what compromises they themselves made and what they achieved as a result. Also missing is a reflection on what influence such trade-offs have on epistemological content and how this can be made clear methodologically. As Samantha Hoffman has shown in her doctoral dissertation on regime security, it is possible to conduct excellent China research from abroad without field access. Since it would have been impossible to conduct interviews with cadres on this topic, she relied on publicly available party documents. On this basis, she was able to outline the methods the Communist Party uses to defend its authority.

The value of interpersonal contacts between Chinese and Western academics is undeniable. However, the authors fail to note the extent to which the Communist Party hinders open exchanges between China and Germany. For example, Mimi Leung reports for University World News that it has "has greatly restricted the number of academics and researchers allowed to physically attend conferences overseas" and that "(the) rules have now been extended to online conferences." Participants, Leung added, "must undertake to 'keep secrets' and not jeopardise the reputation of Chinese institutions." Professors at Chinese universities go to jail for critical blog posts or, like Xu Zhangrun, are banned from the university for his criticism of Xi's Corona crisis management. When Deng Xiangchao criticized Mao Zedong in 2017 for the millions of deaths caused by the "Great Leap Forward," he was promptly dismissed. In this respect, there are reasonable doubts about Alpermann and Schubert's general assertion that Chinese universities are places where "there are opportunities for critical debate with Western perspectives on China, and vice versa (authors' translation)."

*China research in a dilemma*

Of particular concern, however, is the authors' use of questionable crusador metaphors to devalue legitimate discourse about the self-understanding and norms
of China studies. From their professorial pulpit fellow scholars and other professional participants in the discourse are dismiss as "new crusaders." With the attribute "moral" they try to neutralize their arguments as being alien to science. Neglecting relevant facts, they limit themselves to personal attacks. In doing so, they themselves leave the realm of academic discourse. Their polemical threats of exclusion are an obvious attempt to discipline the field of China studies.

Sinology, which originated as textual scholarship, has evolved into social scientific China studies in recent decades. Access to the field has been attained through intensively cultivated, often individual, partnerships and friendships. The desire to continue contact with China is understandable. At the same time, however, the space for free academia and cooperation is visibly narrowing there. Methodologically, this ambivalence catches Chinese studies unprepared. All of a sudden, they have to put their own sinological research position in the spotlight and justify it publicly.

This confronts them with a dilemma: cooperation with possibly bad compromises or free science in the service of truth? What consequences are to be drawn from this must urgently be discussed internally in academia and on a political level. At both levels, the goal must be to ensure academic standards: openness, authenticity, commitment to truth, the right of doubt and criticism.

Such criteria will be difficult to enforce if the willingness to compromise demanded by the totalitarian party-state is signaled in advance as the price of academic cooperation. It is quite astonishing how many German scholars of China do not question the official narrative in their choice of topics and methods. The situation resembles the schism between Putin-understanders and -critics in the Russia debate. For China studies not to become an end in itself, but to produce knowledge and benefits for society here as well as there, a paradigm shift is needed. An open debate without regard to sensitivities and well-trodden patterns of cooperation is overdue.

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