

## **Sino-German Conference on Environmental Politics:**

“Reinterpreting the environmental challenge from a multi-disciplinary perspective”

Both China and Germany are in the midst of large-scale environmental transformations. The 18<sup>th</sup> Chinese Communist Party National Congress established “Ecological Civilization” as one of the five elements of socialist modernization and called for the integration of ecological protection into all spheres of the economy and society. The reforms are intended to be system transforming and to address China’s severe pollution problems. Important legislative changes have been made and there are more to come - with a growing focus on market mechanisms and public involvement in environmental protection.

In a process that began decades ago, but that gained a new dynamic after the 2011 Fukushima nuclear accident, Germany is revolutionizing its energy system. The German “Energiewende” is a plan to transition the country away from both nuclear energy and fossil fuels in order to achieve a climate-friendly, resource-efficient, and sustainable economic structure. At the same time, Germany is pursuing concepts closely tied to the concept of ecological modernization, the idea that development and environment can be integrally linked to achieve more sustainable forms of growth.

The Peking University – Freie Universität Berlin conference on **“Reinterpreting the Environmental Challenge from a Multi-Discipline Perspective,”** brought together a group of 40 Chinese and 10 German-based scholars to exchange ideas about these and other recent developments and theoretical ideas pertaining to environmental protection in China, Germany, and the European Union. The workshop was held from July 13-15, 2014 and supported by the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Beijing (represented by Dr. Lutz Pohle); the Research Institute of Marxism (RIM) (represented by Dean Ju Hongjun and Prof. Huan Qingzhi) of Peking University; the Environmental Policy Research Centre (FFU); the Center for International Cooperation (CIC) of Freie Universität Berlin (FUB) and the Beijing Office of FUB (represented by Ms. Beate Rogler).

The workshop focused on the following three issues: 1.) sustainable development and its leadership, 2.) green urbanization, green energy and green technology innovation, and 3.) eco-civilization construction in China. A longer-term goal of the workshop was to deepen research, student, and faculty exchanges between Peking University and the FUB, which share a strategic partnership. Conference organizer, Professor Huan Qingzhi, was a Humboldt research fellow to Germany in 2005/6 and 2009, and is a specialist on European Green Parties. Co-organizer, Professor Miranda Schreurs, has had dozens of research visits to China since her first visit to Beijing 25 years ago. Recently, she became an advisor to the China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development (CCICED).

The conference began with an afternoon of presentations, discussion, and exchange that focused on doctoral students. On day two, the conference was opened by presentations by high-ranking Chinese policy makers. Recent developments in China’s environmental laws were presented by Professor Xia Guang, Director of the Policy Research Center for Environment and Economy, of the Ministry of Environment. This was followed by a case study of Shandong Province’s environmental initiatives, by the Director of Shandong Province Environmental Protection Bureau.

By the end of the conference, it was clear just how important climate change had become as an area of research in Chinese universities. Peking Univ. Prof. Haibing Zhang explained China’s climate change policies and the increasingly visible role of China in international climate negotiations. Prof. Xuedong Wang of Sun Yatsen University focused attention on the challenges China faces in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and Dr. Huiming Li analyzed why there was

inadequate leadership in global climate governance. Dr. Li Li of China's Foreign Affairs University looked into the question of public leadership in decarbonization. Prof. Dr. Martin Jänicke (FFU), who has advised the Chinese government in the past, discussed his reasons for hope that climate change could be successfully addressed, examining accelerators of change in the multi-level climate governance system. With a growing number of initiatives at the local and national levels, a dynamic of transition has been unleashed, which he argues will be hard to stop.

There were several additional over-arching themes that emerged out of the conference. Several presentations focused on the regional dimensions of environmental protection. Graduate student Liang Dong compared regional environmental governance in Northeast Asia with the EU model. Hohai Univ. Dr. Heqing Liu explored the EU's marine energy policy and its implications for China-EU cooperation. Dr. Zhe Gong of Hubei University presented an overview of China's revised environmental protection law and the responsibilities of local governments.

That comparisons between China and the European Union are becoming of increasing interest was also visible. Renmin University's Hui Du examined risk prevention and reforms in environmental regulations in China and the EU, and Peking University's Dr. Ling Han compared Chinese and EU policy regarding heavy metal pollution prevention.

There was much attention to China's new guiding philosophy of "eco civilization," one of the five key pillars of China's modernization initiatives. Dr. Yi Wang of Henan Univ. of Technology considered the aesthetic dimensions of eco-civilization construction and Dr. Xiaona Yao of China East Normal University considered what the concept of deep ecology could bring to understandings of the eco-civilization concept. Prof. Dr. Zhen Lin and Luya Li of Beijing Forestry Univ. examined the remarkable developments in Shenzhen to promote "eco-civilization transformation."

Other presentations focused on energy transitions, both at the German and the EU levels as well as in China. Eva Öller raised the question in her presentation as to whether the German *Energiewende* is slowing down. Miranda Schreurs introduced ways in which the *Energiewende* was bringing about innovations in governance institutions, including more public participation, as the country attempts to win public support for more renewable energy infrastructure. The FUB's Dr. Dörte Ohlhorst-Thomas, explored the socio-technical challenges involved with a transition to an energy system based on renewable energies. Dr. Xinlei Li of Shandong Uni. (who has her PhD from the Freie Univ. Berlin), introduced China's renewable energy policy instruments and their implications for EU-China cooperation. The FUB's Dr. Sibyl Steuwer shifted attention to European energy efficiency politics and Dr. Kerstin Tews, also of the FUB, discussed the progress of and challenges associated with the Europeanization of energy and climate policy.

That environmental protection is increasingly seen as a matter of local politics was also visible. Jan Beermann focused attention on the growing role being played by city to city partnerships in environmental protection and climate mitigation, looking at several such partnerships between India and Germany. Lisa Pettibone compared the role of civil society groups in urban sustainability in Germany and the United States. Dr. Chenxing Guo, of the China Energy Conservation and Environmental Protection Group later explained efforts by China's state-owned enterprises to reduce emissions and save energy.

The presentations by both Chinese and German scholars were often critical of existing policies and approaches, focusing on areas where reforms are needed. There was a strong emphasis on the role of civil society, protests, and Not In My Backyard movements. Dr. Ran Ran of Renmin Univ. examined critical political discourse in Chinese environmental politics. Dr. Hui Guo of Nanjing Forestry Univ. examined fog and haze as socio-political challenges for China. Particularly fascinating were the presentations by Dr. Bingqiang Ren and Huisheng Shou of Beihang Univ. who

considered urban NIMBY protests and Shandong University's Dr. Ying Liu who introduced populous environmental protests in Xiamen.

There were also several theoretically-oriented presentations. Graduate student Sen Shen (of Peking Univ who will be joining the FUB) analyzed the concept of ecological modernization and its historical development. Prof. Qingzhi Huan turned to the concept of eco-civilization, crucial to the understanding of current policies in China today. Prof. Shulan Zhang and Xiaojun Xu of Shandong Univ. examined green transformation from an eco-feminist perspective and Dr. Rensheng Liu of the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau drew comparisons between eco-Marxism, eco-civilization, and Chinese urbanization. Dr. Liang Li of Nanjing Forestry University considered the relationship between freedom and ecology, with a focus on Bookchin's perceptions of green cities.

Finally, a highlight of the conference was a presentation on education for sustainable development initiatives at the Freie Univ Berlin, including discussion of the university's SustainIT! Program, which makes sustainable development an integral part of university education and the award winning Schüler Uni, a program for young students (ages 11-13) to learn about climate and energy issues in intensive sessions at the university. Chinese students then presented their efforts to make learning about environment fun.

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The new feature of international environmental politics in a post-Copenhagen era and the full initiation of implementing the eco-civilization construction strategy in China, provide an up-to-date context for both Chinese and European scholars to reflect and reinterpret the environmental challenge confronting with the world today. For the Chinese side, we need to have a better understanding to the Western countries' experiences in identifying and dealing with environmental problems over the past decades and the emerging tendencies, and conduct a more extensive and systematic exchange and dialogue with the whole world regarding how to develop a socialist discourse and practice of eco-civilization construction in China.