Final Report: Junior Research Stay at Peking University

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"Sustainable Lifestyles in Beijing – an example of transformability towards a sustainable society?"

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In fall 2017, I spent three months at Peking University (PKU) for the purpose of conducting anthropological fieldwork for my master's thesis. The following will provide a brief introduction to my research project, useful contacts for future applicants I was able to make as well as helpful tools during my stay.

Thanks to the University Alliance for Sustainability exchange program I was able to realize a research project that was both challenging, as I would delve into anthropological field work which was new to me, and promising, as I took side with the minority group of sustainability researchers who do bottom-up qualitative studies instead of top-down quantitative ones.

I set out to study the lifestyle of Peking University (PKU) students actively engaged in sustainability-related projects on campus, either facilitated by the University Alliance for Sustainability (UAS), enrolment in sustainability-related study programs, student clubs, or NGOs active on the PKU campus. My research aimed at (1) investigating whether the students' sustainability-related engagement on campus matches their general lifestyle, and (2) if this was the case, to understand how sustainable lifestyles were performed in the students' everyday life in Beijing. By choosing the approach of participatory observation and in-depth guided interviews my project aimed at tackling the crucial problem called the "sustainability gap", i.e. the discrepancy between what people claim they are doing when asked in a survey, and what they really are doing in their everyday life.

On the ground, I was confronted quite soon with the fact that reality did not reflect my assumptions on the nature of the targeted student associations. Although the students were actively

participating in their associations, I could only trace limited turnover from this engagement into their everyday life. This paradox has several underlying reasons, which I am not going to discuss in detail here, as I was lucky enough to stumble upon an affluent group of Beijingers who do adhere to a sustainable lifestyle. A spontaneous visit to the monthly international meet-up "Green Drinks" for people active in the environmental sector at the Bookworm Café/bookstore provided me with exactly such a movement fitting with my research design of studying everyday practices. I redesigned my research plan and adapted it to study the off-campus milieu. Geographical distances, intense working life or other time constraints of many participants posed serious challenges among other factors to conducing the planned participatory observations. Still, a total of about 15 guided interviews were conducted, I participated in numerous activities, events, meetings (mostly off-campus), excursions, conferences,[1] and became part of the everyday life of a few key figures in the aforementioned sustainability related movement. Thus, I was able to gather valuable qualitative data on the motivations, values, ideas, goals, and thoughts underlying the change of lifestyle of my interviewees, which may help to shed light on the transformation capacity of Beijing citizens confronted with ecological, economic, and social conditions that make the current system untenable. As I plan to publish my research results concerning the sustainable lifestyle movement, I will not elaborate on it here.

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[1] Among them, sustainability related university courses, language courses, excursions into the surrounding mountains with the PKU climbing club, bird watching, clothes swap events, sustainability meet-ups at the BCorp certified pizza place Gung-Ho, a conference at the Chinese Academy of Sciences entitled "健康、环境与发展论坛第九届年会", and a student MUN on environmental issues.

in me, allowing me to participate in their quotidian life, inviting me to their homes or letting me otherwise participate in their own world.

Conclusively, I would like to amend the comprehensive list of useful tools gathered by Jan-Philipp Laurinat in his fellow report by the amenities of the payment app Zhifubao (支付宝): (1) Upon registering the PKU student card (in the in-app function "Campus Life") it can be topped up comfortably through Zhifubao. (2) If you dispose of an NFC enabled smartphone, you may use the in-app function "City Card" to check the balance on your metro card (一卡通). Do not, however, try to top up your metro card through that function as, currently, this service does not work properly (my own experience as of fall 2017; your money would result lost and only a complicated hotline call will return it to you). Finally yet importantly, I can only repeat Jan-Philipp's suggestion to install the FU-VPN before departing for China!

If I can be of any further help, please do not hesitate to contact me at joachim.prackwieser@posteo.de.