

Final Report: Sustainability Volunteer Swap at Peking University, China (PKU)  
“Societal Transformation to Sustainability”  
8th - 16th October 2017

SUSTAIN IT!:

Regina Aulenbach, Friedrich-Meinecke-Institute, Freie Universität Berlin, bachelor’s history/philosophy  
Carolin Bergmann, Otto-Suhr-Institute, Freie Universität Berlin, master’s social sciences and politics  
Ricarda Faber, Otto-Suhr-Institute, Freie Universität Berlin, bachelor’s social sciences and politics  
Isabella Pfusterer, Otto-Suhr-Institute, Freie Universität Berlin, bachelor’s social sciences and politics

**1. PURPOSE:**

SUSTAIN IT! is an interdisciplinary initiative for sustainability and climate protection at Freie Universität Berlin, which serves as an interactive platform for discussing local and global questions of sustainability in the fields of politics, science, economics, administration, technology, society and education, and for implementing practical solutions.

Within the framework of the UAS scholarship, we aimed at developing and strengthening intercultural relations in the area of sustainability. The overall goal of our trip was to establish international networks – in particular liaison with other students and student initiatives - within the realms of environment protection and societal approaches towards sustainability. This report will give a brief overview of our stay at Peking University and the activities we conducted during our 9-day stay in Beijing.

**2. MAIN ACTIVITIES CARRIED OUT:**

CAMPUS TOUR

Our very first activity in Beijing was a campus tour at Peking University. At this occasion, we met Luis Li, a scholar who attended the FUB Spring Campus and kindly offered to show us around. We had met during his stay in Berlin and stayed in contact via social media.

Our walk together was a great possibility to exchange opinions and experiences concerning the works of sustainability at universities in China respectively Germany, while exploring the campus. We were amazed about how green and beautiful it is: the architecture is a combination of modern and traditional elements, which seemed to us like a symbol for modern China’s dualism of modernization and preservation of culture. A huge park and a natural pond invite students to take relaxing walks during their breaks. If they need to travel longer distances they have the option to rent “yellow bikes” for a very affordable price. All over the campus you can find bike stands with both classic bicycles and e-bikes, which can be unlocked via a mobile App. Given this simple and inexpensive system, students frequently use this green means for transport. Furthermore, we had the opportunity to do a short tour in the prestigious School of Government.

Thanks to Ms. Yao Jingyi and Ms. Wang, we had the chance to not only learn more about the school itself but also about the Chinese language.

#### MEETING BEATE ROGLER - Head of Beijing Office, Freie Universität Berlin

On our second day, we received a very warm welcome from Beate Rogler, who represents and leads the Freie Universität's Office in Beijing. Previous information exchange via e-mail such as maps, booklets and guides helped us getting ready for the trip and feeling a little more prepared for travelling to China, a country which none of us had previously visited. On our arrival, we were very happy to meet Beate Rogler and her Assistant, Sabrina Bergmann, in person and further share the outline of the program we had put together for our stay in Beijing. Furthermore, Ms Rogler gave us additional useful material to promote student exchange programs for PKU students at FUB. She also kindly connected us with other FUB students, who were also undergoing a research project at PKU. In addition, Sabrina was very helpful in adding us to the "FUB in Beijing"-WeChat Group. We really enjoyed the afternoon with both and thank them for their support.

#### SUSTAINABLE ART LAB

One of our main projects carried out on PKU's campus during our stay in Beijing, was an interactive photo-booth event titled: '*WHAT DOES SUSTAINABILITY MEAN TO YOU?*'. SUSTAIN IT! had successfully planned and organized very similar events at FUB in the past, therefore, we wanted to bring this fun yet thought-provoking event within the context of sustainability to PKU. Art labs not only provide unique means of promoting sustainable lifestyles but also give opportunity to creating a direct dialogue with participants. Furthermore, they create an interactive space where participants can exchange ideas and experiences in a free and creative manner.

Considering the language barrier and cultural differences, we wanted to keep the main message of this activity simple. Out of card-board we created a big picture frame which had the question written onto it (both in English and Chinese) and handcrafted several sustainable-themed props which participants could hold up when having their photo taken. In addition, their understandings, ideas and hopes concerning sustainability could be written onto white-board speech bubbles, which we also prepared for the activity. We created a WeChat channel (equivalent to WhatsApp in China) in order to further promote our main objective of demonstrating that sustainability does not necessarily impose a restricted and daunting lifestyle but can in fact, be easily achieved and be fun. Participants were able to scan a QR-Code to gain access to this channel and see their own photos and the ones of others. We were happy to receive such great response prior and during the event and that many students and staff of PKU and in particular of the School of Government (Ms. Yao Jingyi, Ms. Wang) where the event took place pushed our activity through various channels. This tremendous help in advertising and setting up the event resulted in many interested participants taking part at the art lab and in lively exchanges about the Chinese perception of sustainability.

It was especially interesting to see that for many participants sustainability covers a great variety of topics. Nevertheless, cleaner air was a recurring theme seemingly being of substantial importance to many.

We are already organizing such an art lab over here at FUB with the intention of sending the pictures to the Chinese participants via WeChat in order to strengthen the intercultural relations be built when visiting PKU.

Moreover, throughout the event, we had the possibility to inform students about potential exchange options and research stays at FUB using the material we had received from Beate Rogler. It was great to see the keen interest students showed when talking about these FUB programs and Germany/ Berlin in in general.



#### INFORMATION EXCHANGE at the College of Urban and Environmental Sciences

Prior to our travel to Beijing, we got in touch with Prof. Xing Tong, who we met during the FUB Campus Days in July. She gives a lecture entitled “Industrial Ecology” at the College of Urban and Environmental Sciences of PKU, Department for Urban and Economic Geography. We were given the opportunity to organize one of her seminars. Before exchanging and

discussing ideas within the field of sustainability, we held a presentation about the philosophy, objectives and past projects of SUSTAIN IT!. We were very happy to see that both students and teaching staff of the Department for Urban and Economic Geography demonstrated great interest in our initiative - many questions were asked, and information exchanged. First, we provided an overview of the structure and the aims of SUSTAIN IT!. Second, we underlined some successful activities we had realized on campus in order to give some inspiration to students for their



own projects. Finally, we were able to engage our curious and committed audience in an enriching discussion. We were deeply impressed by the positive feedback and the willingness of implementing some of the FUB’s projects at PKU. Especially of interest were the urban gardening and the clothes swap. Students informed us about the ongoing initiative of “tool-sharing” which had successfully been implemented on PKU campus some years ago. This in turn, triggered inspiration regarding our own future projects at FUB. We also learned that often students are facing institutional and bureaucratic burdens when trying to establish initiatives or projects. We hope that SUSTAIN IT! - its structure and the way it operates at FUB - might serve as a role model and help facilitate better future cooperation between university staff and students at PKU.

In order to gain insight into students' perception of sustainability we also installed the Sustainable Art Lab in the classroom. With the aim of stimulating the students' minds we showed a short movie with interviews we had conducted at FUB, asking what students do in order to "feel green". When participating in the art lab, numerous students of PKU, again, referred to the environmental dimension of sustainability, pointing out the wish of being able to breathe cleaner air one day. In the end, we gained interesting insights into the understanding of sustainability of the students. We are very thankful to Prof. Xin Tong for giving us the opportunity for this enriching exchange at the College of Urban and Environmental Science. It is our wish to stay in contact with both students and teaching staff in order to observe and exchange about the development of future initiatives and projects taking place at PKU.

#### DISCUSSION: Pathways towards Sustainability - discussion and presentation

On this evening event at the School of Government, PKU, students could get an insight into the work of two



actors representing civil society within the field of sustainability: Ms Sun Wei of Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and Mr Zhao Ang of the Rock Environment and Energy Institute (REEI). Before listening to their highly informative and illustrative presentations we introduced this event by showing our aforementioned short video shot during the "FUB Hochschultage für Nachhaltigkeit und Klimaschutz", which

are organized annually by SUSTAIN IT!. As it includes short statements of German students on the topic of sustainability, we hoped to have given an impression of the state of affairs on our Campus and maybe even Berlin/ Germany. Thankful to the support of a fellow FUB student of sinology with several relevant contacts in Beijing, Joachim Prackwieser, we were able to provide Chinese subtitles. After the presentations, of which Zhao Ang's was focused on energy policy and Sun Wei's on sustainability in general and the rooms of maneuver for NGOs, students had time to ask questions and give feedback. We were very happy to see the great interest and the development of a discussion.

Apart from being very instructive, this evening was also a chance for us to establish intercultural contact, as both Sun Wei and Zhao Ang were so kind to offer us further support and cooperation if there should be another opportunity to do so.

#### GREEN MEET-UP

The Green Meet-up was a unique experience in order to get a deeper insight into civil society's commitment towards sustainable issues in Beijing. Once again thanks to Joachim Prackwieser, we could participate in the meeting. In the "Bookworm", an international café, we had the opportunity to meet a small circle of ambitious people with high ecological awareness. Since we were a small group of around 15 people we had the possibility to have an intense exchange, especially about "green lifestyles". It was extremely interesting to share ideas about zero waste lifestyles, sustainable consumption and eco-friendly food. Even though all participants agreed that there is obviously still a lot to do in order to strengthen the awareness for an ecological transformation in China (for understandable reasons) we were impressed about the vast amount

of ideas which were presented to us throughout the meeting. One striking project was the “Bulk House” which aims at promoting a Zero Waste lifestyle in Beijing. For instance, they offer composting workshops and are planning to create their own website in order to spread their ideas.

### **3.FURTHER ACTIVITIES CARRIED OUT:**

#### BIRDWATCHING

PKU’s environmental initiative Greenlife regularly organizes bird watching sessions in the early morning on the PKU campus. People get the chance to watch through binoculars rare and fascinating bird species that live there. Our participation in this event was a great nature experience and inspiration for us. We think that a comparable low-threshold approach to enable people to connect to nature and, ideally, convince them that it is worthy of protection, could enrich the FUB campus as well.

#### DINNER WITH STUDENTS FROM FUB SPRING CAMPUS

As a more informal activity, we had dinner with Luis Li and his friends and fellow students. They kindly chose an excellent Chinese vegetarian restaurant for us, since most of us do not eat meat. Tasting traditional Chinese food, such as Peking Duck in a vegetarian version, we learned - in a very enjoyable way - that it is absolutely possible to live a meat-free lifestyle in Beijing. Apart from strengthening our relations we also learned more about cultural differences in the German and Chinese academic life: It is, for example, necessary to be an active party member in order to become a senior official in China.

### **4.OUTCOME:**

#### WHAT WE ARE TAKING WITH US:

Our stay in Beijing was a unique and enriching experience with regards to several aspects: first, we could broaden our horizon by getting a deeper insight into the Chinese perception of sustainability. Furthermore, we appreciate that after this short but intense stay we developed a better understanding for the Chinese culture and made new inspiring contacts. Second, we were all able to improve our organization, creative and communication skills since we were all strongly involved in the preparation and implementation of our projects. Of course, we had to share the workload somehow (see individual impressions). Nevertheless, most tasks were done by team work, which leads to: third, we are convinced that our stay at PKU strengthened our team spirit within SUSTAIN IT!, which will be a huge advantage for the preparation of future projects in Berlin. One of them will definitely be the installation of our sustainable art lab at FUB. Its purpose is the Sino-German exchange of ideas, which will be done in our WeChat channel, for, to us it is important keeping up the dialogue with the inspiring contacts we made in Beijing.



INDIVIDUAL IMPRESSIONS:

**REGINA AULENBACH**, responsible for communication and organization of the discussion round:



As mentioned before, all the activities we carried out and were the result of good teamwork and could not have been worked out without mutual supplementation. A task that was mainly in my responsibility though, was the panel discussion entitled “Pathways towards Sustainability”. I contacted several persons who work in the field of sustainability in China and seemed of special interest for students. After we got a positive response from Mr. Zhao Ang and Ms. Sun Wei, I kept in contact with them and coordinated a suitable time and space, that would both enable the speakers to come and be attractive for the students.

The advertisement for the event was really a team project, as we used, among other means, several channels of the new media. On the evening of the panel discussion I welcomed our two guests and lead through the evening, introducing SUSTAIN IT! and our two speakers. I especially tried to encourage students to ask questions and make their own statements at the end of the evening.

The organization of this event was an invaluable experience for me. I learned how to find suitable speakers in a different country with a network of initiatives, that was still mostly unfamiliar to me. Finding the right mixture of formal courtesy and warm friendliness in our communication, keeping in mind possible cultural differences, was an exciting and new challenge for me. I was positively surprised how friendly, helpfully and openly both Mr. Zhao Ang and Ms. Sun Wei reacted to my requests, even though we were “only” students. This positive experience will encourage me to be courageous and optimistic when organizing similar events in the future. This exchange really enriched both my education and my personal wealth of experience. I am very grateful for this unique chance.

**CAROLIN BERGMANN**, responsible for art activities and information services:



I enjoyed the stay at Beijing immensely. Not only was it interesting to witness how students at PKU reacted to our quite unique approach to combine issues of sustainability with art, it was also a great opportunity for us as active SUSTAIN IT! members to strengthen our team spirit and get to know one another better. I think this exchange gave us many impulses for new events we will hold at FUB in the future.

Furthermore, I was impressed by how bad the air pollution can be in this megacity and how it functions as a day-to-day reminder of the importance of an ecological transformation towards renewable energy and cleaner mobility.

Nonetheless, the potential that advanced technology offers in the fields of sustainable lifestyles and

environmental protection was also brought to my attention in Beijing. Since the scholarship was a good opportunity for us to add a few days more to our stay we also had the opportunity to visit some of the remarkable sightseeing spots and remnants of the impressive cultural heritage Beijing has to offer.

It is hard for me to decide which aspect of the exchange I liked best since there are so many different impressions and experiences to choose from. In conclusion I can say that this exchange truly broadened my horizon and provided me with considerable insight into different approaches toward sustainability. I am grateful to having been offered the opportunity to participate in the Sustainability Volunteer Swap offered by the UAS and for all those great experiences I was able to make because of this.

**RICARDA FABER**, responsible for administration, project organization and communication:



Although we planned this exchange trip as a team, I would say that my main duties involved taking care of all organizational, administrative and communicative tasks. I took charge of gathering all necessary documents and information ranging from travel info to establishing contacts and arranging meetings in Beijing.

As I already had attended seminars on topics covering China's environmental and climate politics during my studies at FUB, I was very pleased to find out that we had been granted the scholarship for a volunteer swap at Peking University. China, being such an interesting country in terms of its history, culture and political system within the realms of sustainability represents a strong point of interest to me. It was fascinating being able to gain insights into students' (and therefore civil society's) awareness about sustainability within the context of their day-to-day lives. This trip also provided further understanding about China's severe environmental pollution issues. Witnessing first-hand how heavily polluted Beijing's air is and how citizens deal with this problem, was a great opportunity and has given me further inspiration for my bachelor's thesis and maybe even beyond that. In addition, I was happy to learn that the city of Beijing is already undergoing a "green transformation" (e.g. mobility: e-bikes, bike-sharing). Having been able to exchange with students and getting to know environmental projects and initiatives, which are part of Peking University, will also give us - as SUSTAIN IT! - inspiration for future projects. Finally, I had the chance to fulfill one of my dreams - visiting the Great Wall of China! Overall, it was a very enriching yet fun trip, which I am very grateful of having been a part of it.

**ISABELLA PFUSTERER**, responsible for information services and communication



Throughout the stay I had the possibility to improve my communication skills in various situations: First, when preparing and holding the lecture about the aims and philosophy of SUSTAIN IT!. In particular, I appreciated the intercultural exchange of various ideas how to make university a “more sustainable place”. Second, I gave a welcome address at the discussion and promoted it in advance by talking directly to students in the foyer of the School of Government. Moreover, it was a great pleasure to consult PKU students about exchange options at FUB and talking with them about their perception of sustainability. Especially thanks to the latter, I could broaden my own perception and gain totally new insights. I was particularly fascinated when hearing about Chinese policies in order to bring forward “eco-civilization” and the population’s perception of it. I am convinced that the exchange with students and staff at PKU have strongly deepened my academic interest in Chinese environmental politics. It might also influence the choice of the topic for my BA’s thesis. But our stay in Beijing has not only shaped my academic studies but also me, personally. For me, it was a great honor and pleasure to immerse in the Chinese culture for the very first time of my life. Furthermore, I am happy that I could strengthen my team player skills since we worked close together and supported each other anytime. Hence, I am convinced that the strong group dynamics were a decisive reason for the positive outcome of our activities. Overall, I am very thankful for the opportunity having been able to participate in this thrilling and highly informative volunteer swap.