

Framing Risk: Hazard Perceptions as a Crucial Factor in Imagining East Asia

Between 1-2 June 2007 scholars from eight members of the academic network consortium EastAsiaNet ([in alphabetical order, Barcelona Autonomous University, Duisburg University, Leeds University, Lund University, Lyon University, Nordic Institute for Asian Studies, Sheffield University, and the University of Venice) participated in a workshop focusing on risk in contemporary East Asia.

The perception of East Asia in public debate today is increasingly shaped by the notion of risk. The ongoing rise of East Asia as an economic powerhouse in the global economy, geo-strategic interests, and demographic developments are only a few examples of phenomena that create risk-inherent opportunities and threats, inside and outside the region. The Korean peninsula, Japan and the Greater China region constitute a focal point in worldwide political and corporate strategies, as well as in academic research. Even though the concept of risk is elusive, in that there exist various definitions and ways to categorize it, it nevertheless represents a powerful structural term that affects the ways in which states, societies and individuals deal with the imagined opportunities and imprecise fears that arise from East Asian dynamics.

The 21st century is often referred to as the Asian century indicating a potential shift of powers and the emergence of a new global order. In the EU the formulation of policies towards East Asia, such as the 7th Framework Programme, aim at promoting a better understanding of the region as a strategy to embrace the upcoming challenges. In this context knowledge and knowledge production undoubtedly are crucial factors to identify and mitigate risks – that is to seize real opportunities and to comprehend the true nature of threats. What is perceived as risk, however, depends not only on “true” hazards, as framed in probabilistic concepts, but also on mental models and shared beliefs, or collective imaginaries. The embedded nature of risk in formal and informal institutions such as laws, norms or values has a significant impact on public and individual image creation. Thus knowledge about East Asia also depends on the cultural and societal context in which it is created.

Risk as a contingent concept may constitute a promising approach for East Asia studies to reflect on its own research biases and to address a distorted understanding of the region in public debate. EastAsiaNet as a network of European research schools, therefore, devoted this workshop to perceptions of risk and their impact on an understanding of East Asia. The overall goal was to initiate a discourse on European East Asia Studies as a first step towards formulating a research agenda and curriculum that facilitates cutting-edge research and responds to the increasing interest in and need for knowledge on contemporary East Asia.

The presenters and paper titles were as follows:

Winfried Fluechter	<i>Hazard Perceptions in East Asia: “Danger” versus (?) “Risk” as a Tool for Political Purpose</i>
Stefan Brehm	<i>Risk management in China’s state banks: international best practice and the political economy of regulation</i>
Glenn Hook	<i>Mediating Risk in Japan: Crossing national boundaries and the role of the state</i>
Werner Pascha	<i>Risk perception in Japanese business – an exploration of some major issues</i>
Flemming Christiansen	<i>Risks and Opportunities: Class Difference in China</i>
Sean Golden	<i>Perceptions of Risk from Chinese Points of View</i>
Simona Alba Grano	<i>China’s Environmental Crisis: Implications for a Globalized World</i>
Heather Zhang	<i>China’s Social Policy in Transition: New Risks and Institutional Responses</i>
Roger Greatrex	<i>China and the inherent risks involved in the SCO’s future development</i>
Gregory Lee	<i>Risk, Representation, Repression: Manipulation of the Fear of the Chinese Other</i>
Valeria Zanier	<i>China enters the world – no risks foreseen: An analysis of China’s accession to the WTO through Chinese sources</i>
Geir Helgesen	<i>Attribution Error in Risk Perceptions: North Korea and the World</i>
Christian Goebel	<i>A Localist Perspective of Risk in East Asia: Peasant Burden and Regime Stability in China</i>

Concepts and Conceptions of risk

The workshop opened with a paper by **Professor Winfried Fluechter** who brought attention to the role of man-made hazards, as opposed to natural dangers, in discussions of risk. Fluechter considered growing mega-urbanizations and hazard prone areas, and identified risks that arise either through voluntary behaviour or as a

result of necessity. In conclusion he warned against the semiotic unity of concepts that can blur natural and political risks. Addressing the Chinese context, **Professor Sean Golden** presented a thoughtful analysis of the perceptions of risk, both internal and external, which are being developed by some of the leading Chinese thinkers, contrasted with the perceptions of risk being utilised by Euro-American thinkers. His analysis involved case studies of the main themes found in the theories of Hu Angang, Wang Shaoguang and Wen Tiejun in the field of economic policy; in the views of Wang Hui and Yu Keping on social movements, emerging civil society and democratisation; and in the proposals for new theories of foreign policy by Qin Yaqing; as well as the contrasting views of Euro-American policy and opinion makers, and the policy statements on China of the EU Commission and the US Department of State. In a paper concerned with issues of identity and risk, **Professor Gregory Lee** analysed representations of the other, focusing both on historical perspectives of the issue and also on contemporary articulations of fears relative to China and Chinese people in Europe. He pointed out that historical occurrences, such as the exclusion of Chinese from US citizenship in nineteenth and twentieth-century United States, and more recent events, among them ethnic riots involving Chinese and Italian police in Milan in April 2007, illustrate the potential violent and radical outcomes of textual representational strategies. Turning to Japan, **Professor Glenn Hook** focused on the paucity of research on risk in that country. Hook suggested that we know little about the complex and changing relationship between the Japanese state, risk and the Japanese citizen. The main question he addressed is how the Japanese state has mediated the citizen's exposure to external risks. In the context of a more pro-active military role and the pressures of globalization, the citizen is increasingly being required to deal with a range of risks, yet the role of the state in this process remains under explored. In order to elucidate the role of the Japanese state Hook investigated risk under the Koizumi administration.

Economics

In the sole paper on Japanese economics, **Professor Werner Pascha** examined the applicability of the risk-life cycle proposed for the study of Japanese politics by Hook and Takeda (2007) to the world of Japanese business. Pascha suggested that one aspect in business that may be more important than in politics is the interaction/competition among enterprises. He also pointed out connections between Douglass North's concept of institutional change and the role of accommodating risk. As one of his conclusions he proposed that undertaking a number of case studies could be helpful to achieving a better understanding of risk-life cycles in Japanese business. In the field of Chinese economics, the largest field of interest at the workshop, **Professor Flemming Christiansen** argued that economic growth in China since 1978 has realigned all aspects of livelihood and the distribution of wealth, leading to widening social disparities. Exposure to hazards is an important feature of class-based allocation of resources in Chinese society during the reform era. Expanding on this line of reasoning, **Dr. Heather Zhang** argued that relatively less attention has been paid to the 'losers' in China's reform process, including the majority of rural migrants with low skill levels, farmers who have lost land and livelihoods (without sufficient compensation) as a result of urban development programs, and many rural families and communities who have to shoulder the burdens of covering the risks for their migrant members – risks created by free market and an inadequate social safety net. Continuing the focus on rural China, **Dr. Christian Goebel** noted that whereas countless media reports have proclaimed the

21st century not as Asia's but specifically China's century, some scholars speak of "growth without miracles", a "trapped transition", or even predict "the coming collapse of China". In his paper Goebel applied what he called a localist perspective of risk, risk perception and risk "management" to contribute to a more nuanced picture of the "China threat". **Dr. Simona Alba Grano** dealt in this context specifically with the tragic cost of environmental degradation that China's rapid economic growth is resulting in. She explained that since the 1990s there has been an increasing national effort and, especially since the turn of the century, a considerably greater commitment of funding for environmental protection and management. In fact, such expenses are projected to total US\$243 billion between 2006 and 2010. But the actual results to date are not as gratifying as China's authority had hoped in terms of environmental performance. Important environmental goals have not been met, a matter that worries the highest levels of government, but is often of less concern at local levels where GDP growth is the matter of greatest preoccupation. Turning to the reform process itself, according to **Dr. Stefan Brehm** who focused on risk management practices within state owned commercial banks, there is a significant gap between policies and economic adjustment since reform measures provide only weak incentives for the enforcement of new regulatory principles. He concluded that, on a more general level, banking regulation in China illustrates that a normative approach based on international best practices insufficient to address the issue of financial stability in developing countries because it neglects the role of institutional embeddedness. **Dr. Valeria Zanier** reviewed the entry of China into the WTO, noting that entry into the WTO represented a risk for many Chinese companies, firstly because they were not prepared to meet international competition, and secondly because bigger Chinese companies might take advantage of smaller ones. Evaluating the messages are contained in the rhetoric of Chinese official discourse on China's WTO accession Zanier presented a positive view of the challenging yet essential task before the Chinese leadership.

International relations

There were two papers on risk in international relations, one focusing on Korea and the other on Central Asia. The sole paper on Korea, given by **Dr. Geir Helgesen**, examined new developments on the Korean peninsula, where from condemning North Korea, backed by most of the rest of the world, including China, the US in a matter of months decided not only to sit down with North Korea at the negotiation table, but even to agree with them on major issues which up until now had kept both parties outside the reach of the other. Helgesen argued that the six-party talks, initially seen by the US as a tool to pressure North Korea to give in, has a stake in the more flexible position characterizing the main adversaries in this conflict. **Professor Roger Greatrex** dealt with the present condition and future of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. He emphasized to the fact that China has become, in tact with its economic development, one of the world's major consumers of oil and gas. China and India together have less than 2% of the global gas reserves, compared with Russia (27%) and Iran (15%). In his opinion, China has significant security concerns in Xinjiang, and potentially with infiltration from Central Asian countries. The ongoing question discussed by Greatrex was the risks and opportunities offered by membership in the SCO to a China intent on its 'peaceful rise'.