

Prof. Dr. Verena Blechinger-Talcott
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Date: 13 July, 2022 Place: Online (Zoom)
Original Language: English Interviewer: Yuko Noguchi (The Japan Foundation, Beijing)
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Personal Profile

Dr. Verena Blechinger-Talcott is the Vice President for International Affairs and Professor of Japanese Politics and Political Economy at Freie Universität Berlin. She studied Political Science, Japanese Studies and Law in Munich, Kyoto and Tokyo. She received her M.A. in Japanese Studies in 1991 and her PhD in Political Science in 1997, both from Munich University. She has been invited as the Visiting Professor to the University of Tokyo (2008). In 2012, she became the Director of the Graduate School of East Asian Studies, which is funded through the German Federal Excellence Initiative. She is also the president of European Association for Japanese Studies (EAJS), a member of Academic Advisory Board of German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ), and Special Advisor of the Beijing Center for Japanese Studies.

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Q. When was your first encounter with Japanese Studies in China, like meeting Chinese scholars and students working on Japanese studies?

A. My very first encounter with Chinese scholars and students working on Japanese studies was in 1989, the Heisei Gan-nen (平成元年), when I did my study abroad at Doshisha University in Kyoto. There was quite a number of students, postdoctoral fellows, and visiting professors from China. So, that was my first interaction with Chinese colleagues. And then, from that time on, at international conferences from time to time, I would also meet Chinese colleagues working on Japanese studies.

Actually, my way in was when the Japan Foundation asked me to visit the Beijing Center for Japanese Studies at Beijing Foreign Studies University, and I first visited in the spring of 2019 and took part in a seminar. I was really impressed by the quality of the program and the very, very high level of Japanese language proficiency exhibited by the students and the faculty.

Q. What was your impression or findings regarding Chinese scholars and students at that time?

A. What I found very interesting was the broad range of topics, both in the area of cultural studies approaches to Japan but also in the area of economics and sociological approaches to Japan. There was quite a broad range of topics, ranging from the encounters between Japan and China and also studies of Japanese modernization and contemporary Japan. I was quite impressed by the comprehensive range of topics and by the very thorough approach to Japanese language sources in the study, especially by the Chinese colleagues.

Q. What is the biggest difference between Japanese studies in China and that in your country? How do you think Chinese scholars in Japanese studies can contribute to the international academic world?

A. I think the biggest difference between Japanese studies in Europe and Japanese studies in China is the perspectives and the positionality where the Chinese colleagues are coming from.

Many things that my colleagues in Europe and the United States take for granted are based on our own backgrounds in Western culture and societies. But many of these points are questioned by our Chinese colleagues, or they have a different approach, because they come from a different perspective, and so they ask questions that we probably would not necessarily think of first. I think that is very enriching for the discussion. This is a very valuable contribution to international and global Japanese studies.

I think it's very important in Japanese studies to also use a global approach and bring various positions and viewpoints together to generate new insights. If we only look at Japanese studies done by scholars from Japan, Europe, or the United States, we have a certain set of things that are interesting to us because of the background we have and the theoretical discussions that we have in our field, but colleagues from China, and if I may say so, also from other parts of Asia, have a different perspective and it is very fruitful to bring these perspectives together.

One of the dreams that I have, if I may dream, would be to actually have a research project where we have people from the US, Japan, Europe, China, and other countries all work on the same topic to bring these various positions together and then get a more rounded and more fruitful approach to Japanese studies.

The topic that comes to mind is about modernity. We have done a number of workshops with doctoral students from Europe, Japan, and China, and some of the topics that came up again and again were perspectives on modernity. What does it mean to be a modern society? And on social interactions of relationship within societies, you may call social coherence, could be a topic. But it also experiences in the way Japan approached its modernity, which we have quite a number of presentations also on cultural approaches to modernization in Japan, ranging from photography to novels to just concepts of modern by Japanese thinkers and social scientists, and this was a very fruitful exchange.

There is also another topic that was the historical experience, especially in the area of Manchu-kuo, not the era of Japanese military presence in China, but in the founding of Manchu-kuo and the experience of Japanese colonialism from Chinese perspectives. There is quite a number of presentations on each issue of education and educational systems. And from my perspective studying in Europe, discourse is on colonialism and post-colonial studies. I think this is a very interesting voice to have in this discussion that could also shift it to the continent of Asia a bit more. In this way, it also brings a contribution to post-colonial studies that goes beyond the studies of Africa and America and puts Asia stronger in the focus. I think this may also be something that might be very interesting theoretically and empirically.

Q. We held a joint workshop among Freie Universität Berlin, Beijing Foreign Studies University, and the University of Tokyo. How was the reaction of your students during that time?

A. Our students really enjoyed the joint workshops. Indeed, the students from the three universities approached similar topics, but the perspectives they went into this research were different, so the exchange was indeed a very fruitful one. And I have the feeling that everyone learns something from it.

And again, I was quite impressed by the very strong language proficiency also in English on the sides of the students from the Beijing Center for Japanese Studies. They also often had more senior doctoral students as discussants, and they were very, very good in summarizing the presentations and discussions, and then also in identifying the interesting points that could lead to a joint benefit for all presenters. I believe that was a very good exercise. It was also important for our students to see that Japanese studies take different shapes in different cultures, in different countries, things you take for granted are not necessarily seen in the same way by everyone. It was a very good learning experience in this context.

Q. Could you give some messages to the young scholars and students in China who are making efforts in Japanese studies?

A. I have two messages for them. One is “Be proud of what you have achieved.” I think, if you came especially from the program at the Beijing Center for Japanese Studies, you have a very good Japanese language proficiency and a very, very strong skillset in the scholarly field you are engaged. So be proud and be self-assured that you are ready to go out and present your research, don’t be afraid to present it to international conferences.

The second message is, “Be engaged in exchange,” because academia, and especially the field of Japanese studies, is an international field. It lives from the interaction of multiple perspectives and it lives from exchanging views within the community both with our colleagues in Japan but also with our colleagues in the various areas of Japanese studies in Europe, the United States and Asia. So in that way, taking part in this discussion and then also trying to take something with you enrich your own researches from the perspectives and questions that you get there.

Indeed, for everyone in Japanese studies, it is good to get out of the comfort zone of their national frame and to present their work to people from other schools in Japanese studies, so exchanges help especially to train scholars early in their careers to get stronger in discussion and to get better understanding of the field.

It would also be very good to start more comparative researches. Bringing experiences from Japan, Europe, and other Asian countries together as comparative cases will be great because it also opens up the field of Japanese studies to scholars from other fields like history, sociology, political science, literature, and cultural studies. They could also come in and bring their perspectives, and generate more interesting topics, which would strengthen both the field of Japanese studies and their own original fields. This could also be a very good thing to do more in the

future.



Published on June 29, 2023

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