

The Regional Construction of China in German Civic Education Publications

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Abstract. Using the example of the most influential serial in the field of civic education in Germany (IzpB) this article is aimed at one of the central questions as raised by intercultural hermeneutics: Do images of the other rather emphasize familiar or unfamiliar aspects of another culture? [1] The analysis as outlined in this paper – both of the regional discourse and the figure part in those seven IzpB issues dealing with China exclusively (released between 1961-2005) – reveals two aspects: first, a distinct focus on a comparatively small regional selection and second, an emphasis on exactly those regions that – for disparate reasons – already *seem* to be familiar to the majority of the representatives of the external perceiving culture.

Publisher and Serial: Historical Context and Specifics of the Research Material

Civic education in Germany has undergone various changes ever since being established towards the end of World War I as a means of inland propaganda: Fostering the (back then) new idea of parliamentary democracy in the Weimar Republic and – after temporarily being incorporated into the *Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda* during the Nazi era – it meant to both counterbalance American re-education efforts and serve as pro-democratic and at the same time anti-communist organ in Cold War times.

Since then the central organ for civic education and at the same time publisher of the research material in question is the *Federal Agency for Civic Education (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, BPB)*. Their most various publications may accurately be characterized by an area of conflict consisting of propaganda, public relations and civic education [2], which becomes intelligible when considering the following. As agency the BPB is subordinated to the German *Ministry of the Interior*, and in addition their releases topically reflect the directives issued by the respective federal ministries of culture. Ever since 1976 all publications have to comply with self-imposed principles as defined by the *Beutelsbach consensus* in order to guarantee a certain standard regarding information presentation. In 2013 the BPB had an annual budget of 38 million € for their most various print/online publications and events.

The most influential serial released by the *Federal Agency for Civic Education* is called *Information for Civic Education (Informationen zur politischen Bildung, IzpB)*. Since 1952 this publication has been attending to socio-economic, political, geographical and historical matters. About ten percent of them focus on single countries. Among those China obviously has a special status as there is no other country with more (re-)issues at present. Between 1961 and 2005 seven IzpB deal with China exclusively.¹

The first two issues focus on its history and economy while the succeeding five claim to provide a comprehensive insight into that country as well as its people and thus an image of another culture

¹ Namely the following issues (year and consecutive number of publication): IzpB 1961 (No. 96), IzpB 1962 (No. 99), IzpB 1976 (No. 166), IzpB 1983 (No. 198), IzpB 1990 (No. 198), IzpB 1997 (No. 198), IzpB 2005 (No. 289); the numbering appears to be inconsistent as there are significantly revised (hence, by mistake called) “reissues” with the same consecutive number. The seven IzpB comprise between 23 and 73 pages.

in terms of the Image Science.² Some of the IzpB issues have been distributed in more than a million copies. In addition, their widespread utilization as teaching material has to be considered. Those facts clearly show that the IzpB issues in question are to be regarded as mass media. Hence, their impact on the perception of China of two generations of Germans must have been enormous.

Representativeness of Various Administrative Divisions for the Regional Construction of China

Especially huge countries like China dispose of an accordingly considerable regional diversity. The latter is not only determined by outside influences (e.g. geography, environment, climate etc.) but also by man-made ones, such as socio-economic, political, cultural etc. local disparities. The specific regional discourse on China in the IzpB has a strong impact on how the German audience perceived this cultural space. The focal selection of regions decides on what we get to see like single facets compose an entire image. Accordingly, the following analysis of the agenda setting is to reveal which regions this selection actually consists of and what their characteristics are.

China comprises 34 administrative highest-level divisions in total: 23 provinces, four municipalities, five autonomous regions and two special administrative regions. The following deals with the representativeness of those various divisions in the eye of the external beholder – with regards both to the text corpus and photographic images employed in the seven IzpB issues. As for the pictures, the place of origin of their motives could be identified without any doubt in 53 % of the cases by average.

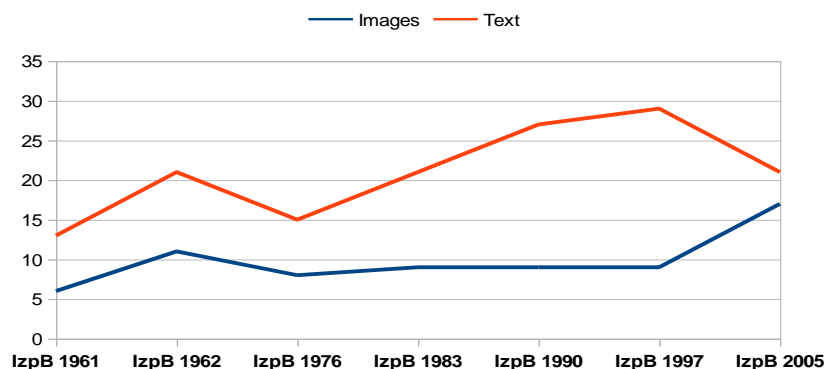


Figure 1. Number of administrative divisions both as depicted in images and mentioned in the text corpus.

The blue graph in Figure 1 shows that between six and 17 administrative divisions have been included in the figure part of the IzpB within the sample period – which is by average less than one third of the total number. In contrast, the textual discourse exhibits a comparatively high number of administrative divisions (between 13 and 29). This analytical approach *allegedly* suggests an overall relatively high representation of many regions. Why this result in fact is delusive will be shown in the following.

A comprehensive quantitative analysis of all administrative divisions reveals that in each case (both text corpus and figure part) only five account for about two thirds of the total³ while the remaining 26 represent only one third (cp. Figure 2).

² Its focus – rather than single images – is the human capability to create, perceive and communicate images in the sense of intellectual constructs in general.[3] Accordingly, the attention here lies on mental images and intellectual constructs as to be observed in the research material on China.

³ Beijing, Guangdong, Hong Kong, Jiangsu, Shandong, Shanghai, Taiwan, Tibet; due to overlapping results in text corpus and figure part only eight (instead of ten) in total.

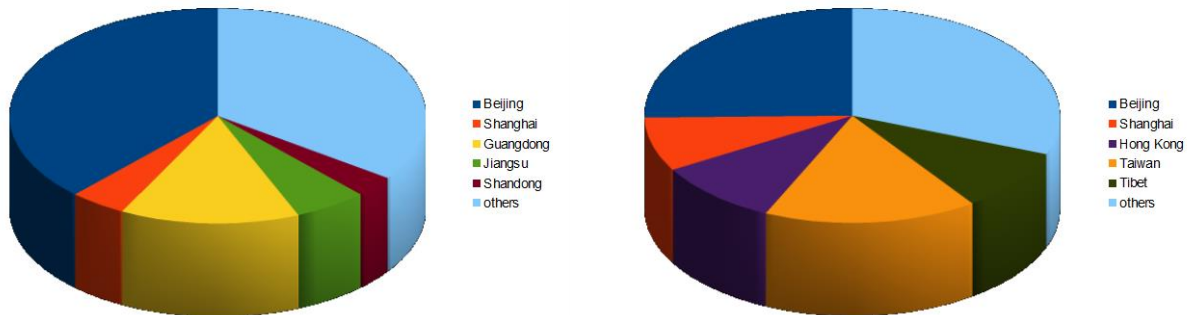


Figure 2. The five administrative divisions featured most in both text corpus (right) and figure part (left).

It is not surprising that Beijing as capital and seat of the government dominates both sections (text corpus/figure part). According to this evaluation Shanghai is the second-most eye-catching municipality. As for the figure part the provinces Guangdong (14%), Jiangsu (6%) and Shandong (3%) are predominant while the textual discourse mainly focuses on the special economic zone Hong Kong (10%), the renegade province Taiwan (17%) and the autonomous region Tibet (9%).



Figure 3. Focal points (red) of the regional construction of China in the IzpB.

As illustrated in Figure 3, the respective five predominant administrative divisions – both in the text corpus and in the figure part – put together represent less than one fifth of China's territory⁴ which is inhabited by less than a fourth of its total population.⁵ What is most striking here is a remarkable disparity between the predominantly featured administrative divisions and both the population and territory they actually represent. Furthermore, the regional construction hints at a remarkable East-West imbalance. With only one exception (Tibet) all administrative regions are onshore or at least inshore.

⁴ The area covered by the eight administrative divisions in question is 1.632.679 km², respectively 18% of China's total area of 9.571.302 km².

⁵ Numbers are based on the 2010 census. [4]

Table 1. Characteristics of the predominant administrative divisions.

	Administrative	Economic
Beijing	municipality	
Shanghai	municipality	coastal development area (1)
Guangdong	province	special economic zone (3) coastal development area (2)
Jiangsu	province	coastal development area (2)
Shandong	province	coastal development area (2)
Hong Kong	special economic zone	<i>one country, two systems</i> (§ 31)
Taiwan	renegade province	<i>one country, two systems</i> (§ 31)
Tibet	autonomous region	

Table 1 serves as starting point in order to answer the question on what the predominant administrative divisions actually represent and which conclusions may be drawn from the specific selection (un-)willfully (?) chosen by the editorial staff and/or the BPB as responsible publisher of the IzpB. Three partly overlapping groups can be defined.

First, it is apparently those regions dominating the discourse which have both economically and administratively a special status within China, and in that regards they are actually not really representative. At the same time it is exactly these which – systemically speaking – resemble the German setting rather than many others.

The second group consists of those administrative divisions that appear to be familiar to representatives of the observing culture because there used to be a colonial interconnection between them. Apart from that, and despite Eastern China is geographically further away from Germany than the West, it has ever since been easier accessible by sea than any other frontier region – which is why the coastal area was the vantage point for mutual ties between China and the West. Just to illustrate this, only a few facts shall be pointed out here: Guangzhou, the provincial capital of Guangdong – where a permanent trade post was established by the East India Company as early as 1711 – has been the first and for some time the only tie to the West. Hong Kong, claimed by Great Britain in 1842, became the most important free trade zone after 1949 while Shanghai between 1842 and 1946 was a melting pot consisting of the Chinese population next to the British, French and American concessionaires. Further treaty ports were located in Jiangsu (Nanjing, Zhenjiang) and Shandong where Germany among others temporarily controlled big parts of the peninsula (Qingdao, Yantai). Even Beijing, located about 200 km inland, was forced to host Western emissaries according to the Treaty of Tianjin (1858).

The third group comprises regions that have been/are paid great attention to by German and Western mass media and thus dispose of an above-average publicity there. In some cases it is somewhat hard to tell whether they cater to an existing public opinion or rather have created the latter in the first place. It took a separate paper to profoundly analyse why there is in fact a noticeable tendentious public opinion in the West on certain administrative divisions, which reasons therefore are to be taken into account and how qualified they are in the end. Regardless of that and for now, as actual state it has to be made note of the fact that the third group of administrative divisions is characterized by having a comparatively high presence in the external observers' minds anyway.

Summary

The findings presented in the preceding lead to the following conclusions. The specific selection of predominant regions *seems* to be familiar to the external beholder for various reasons. Some of them dispose of an ostentatious systemic proximity to the setting of her/his very own cultural origin. Others apparently are linked by a common past, namely by unequal activities of political, economic, military, diplomatic and missionary nature. A third group is characterized by a relatively high media coverage in Germany and/or the West. These three group characteristics are partly overlapping and thus emerge in different combinations. They point to the same conclusion in regards to the opening question on whether images of the respective other rather emphasize familiar or unfamiliar aspects of another culture. When it comes to the regional discourse, the German audience of the IzpB on China is mainly confronted with those regions it *believes* to be already somewhat familiar with or even disposes of (reliable?) previous knowledge.

References

- [1] cp. e.g. Fornet-Betancourt, Raúl: *Hermeneutik und Politik des Fremden. Ein philosophischer Beitrag zur Herausforderung des Zusammenlebens in multikulturellen Gesellschaften*. In: Schmied-Kowarzik, Wolfdietrich (ed.): *Verstehen und Verständigung. Ethnologie, Xenologie, interkulturelle Philosophie*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2002, pp. 49-59.
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- [4] <http://sowf.moi.gov.tw/stat/month/m1-01.xls> (retrieved: 20.02.2016)