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The Frankfurt Book Mess

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By Nicolai Volland

The Frankfurt Book Fair (Frankfurter Buchmesse), the largest trade show of its kind, turned messy this year before it had even started. At the center of the brouhaha: China, the official guest of honor of the book fair 2009. Or, to be more precise, the row over the revoked invitation of two Chinese “dissidents,” Dai Qing and Bei Ling, to a symposium in the run-up to the Book Fair. The incident had an air of tragicomedy, and turned into a public relations disaster for the organizers as well as an embarrassment for about all those involved. In a larger sense, the debacle illustrates the paradoxes in the public perception of China in Germany; it also raises questions about the status of China-related knowledge in Europe and its ability to reach and influence decision makers in politics and business.

In comparison with the fallout, the story itself seems simple. During the planning stages of a symposium on “China and the World: Realities and Perceptions,” the hosts decided to invite, apart from representatives selected by the Chinese co-organizers, two intellectuals well-known for their critical opinions. The participation of Dai Qing and Bei Ling was announced to the press, only to be revoked a few days later after protests from the Chinese side: The Chinese co-organizers had threatened to withdraw from the event if Dai and Bei were allowed to participate in the planned symposium. After an internal debate (the actual process of the deliberations that took place remain unclear) the German side withdrew their earlier invitations and asked Dai and Bei not to come. Predictably, the revocation of the invitations caused a public outcry and allegations in the press that the organizers of Germany’s most time-honored cultural event were bowing to bullying from a Communist Chinese regime. Once the incident spilled over into the international arena – with reports that the two Chinese intellectuals had been “banned” from the Book Fair (patently untrue of course: they had been disinvited from the symposium, but not barred from participating in the book fair, which will be held four weeks later, from 14-18 October) – Dai and Bei were under pressure to react. Initially annoyed by the flip-flop of the German event management, both decided to attend the symposium nonetheless. Dai secured a visa with sponsorship of the German P.E.N. club (miraculously, she found her ticket to Frankfurt cancelled despite reassurances from the travel agency), while Bei flew to Germany at his own expense. Amidst enormous press attention, Dai and Bei attended the symposium as audience members, and – predictably – triggered a walk-out from the Chinese delegation, who agreed to return only after Dai Qing and Bei Ling had left the conference venue. The spectacle was perfect for the press.

Why Dai Qing and Bei Ling? Dai has received a considerable amount of attention both in China and abroad for her lobbying against the Three Gorges Dam hydroelectric power project (which has gone ahead despite her protests and is nearing completion this year, amid continuing concerns about its environmental impact and the embezzlement of relocation funds) and other ventures into investigative journalism. Her work on the Three Gorges Dam has been translated into English. Bei Ling is a U.S.-based poet and founder of the literary journal Tendency, whose poetry has been translated into numerous languages, including English and German. Both Dai Qing and Bei Ling are thus modestly familiar to China-interested audiences in Europe. The German press (and journalistic peers elsewhere) has been quick to invest Dai and Bei with the honorific “dissidents,” a label that may be disputable, to some extent, and that has contributed to the multiplicity of misunderstandings. After all, Dai Ling continues to live and work in China; she has difficulty publishing in China but retains her passport and is allowed to travel freely. Dai Qing and Bei Ling are dissidents in the sense that they hold opinions at variance with those of the Chinese government, and insist in publicizing these opinions, at sometimes considerable personal cost. For European audiences, however, the category “dissident” is shaped chiefly by the image of activists from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (Aleksandr Solshenitsyn, Vaclav Havel, Wolf Biermann), who were openly hostile to the political regimes in their countries and thus faced constant and highly visible repression. The European press is usually quick to use the term “dissident” in the discussion of Chinese independent intellectuals, and it is not always clear if doing so actually helps their respective domestic audiences to understand the situation of critical minds like Dai Qing.
By revoking the invitation to Dai and Bei, the organizers of the event invited controversy. In fact, the choice of China as “guest of honor” was controversial to begin with. The Frankfurt Book Fair has a history of selecting news-making (headline grabbing) countries as “guests” (the 2008 “guest of honor” was Turkey; in 2004 the focus was on literature from the Arabic world). But the invitation of China may have been especially prone to evoke emotions on radically different ends of the spectrum of political imagination. Perhaps even more so than in the U.S., the public in Europe is torn between the image of China’s economic juggernaut and that of the nation as the last bastion of Communism. Press voices continue to hail China as the “white knight” who is going to save the world from the fallout of America’s reckless financial binge with its massive stimulus program. At the same time, 2009 marks the twentieth anniversary of both the Tiananmen Square massacre and the collapse of those repressive Communist regimes that had cast a shadow over Europe for four decades.

The clash of these two distinct images of China also reveals the schizophrenic nature of the Frankfurt Book Fair. On the one hand, the Buchmesse is the largest trade fair worldwide, attracting more than 7,000 publishers and booksellers worldwide. The Book Fair is a crucial venue of copyright trading and deal making, an industry event that few important players in the industry can afford to miss. During the first three days, admittance is restricted to industry insiders; it is only during the last two days that the Book Fair opens its doors to the general public. Then, however, the fair presents itself in a radically different light: From a multi-billion dollar industry, publishing then becomes a bastion of culture and entertainment; publishers compete with each other to present their stable of writers, by organizing book signing event and public readings. The Book Fair styles itself as the celebration of High Culture, drawing the attention of the German intelligentsia with innumerable discussion forums, many of which are carried in the press and on television.

China, the “guest of honor” 2009, has been torn between these two identities of the Frankfurt Book Fair. Industry interest in the Chinese publishing market is huge. Despite its admission to the WTO in 2001, China has kept its publishing industry almost entirely off limits to foreign investment; while some international publishing groups have tried their luck in fringe businesses, with mixed results (for example, the German giant Bertelsmann Bookclub), no foreign companies have been allowed to enter the market nor has the Chinese government approved foreign investments in Chinese publishing houses. There have been signs recently, however, that the Chinese publishing industry is being prepared for the next step in marketization; after the establishment of publishing conglomerates that have become the new behemoths of the industry, these conglomerates are expected to go public on the Chinese stock market before long, and there have been rumors for some time that the semi-official “gray” publishers (these “second channel” publishers usually operate as “publishing consulting companies”) may be given increased legal leeway. For the foreign publishing industry, the potentially huge Chinese print market thus remains enormously attractive. The consideration to invite China as “guest of honor” to the world’s biggest industry fair is motivated by these considerations. The fact that sixty Chinese state-owned publishing houses have heeded the call to Frankfurt shows that there is considerable interest on both sides to increase collaboration.

On the other hand, the Frankfurt Book Fair mobilizes the German intelligentsia with a wide array of meetings, symposia, and public debates organized in the run-up and on the sidelines of the fair – events that receive ample press coverage. In these debates, a very different image of China surfaces: The critical lens of the European intelligentsia tends to zoom in on topics including human rights and democracy; in the public imagination, publishing and the world of books are inseparable from the freedom of speech and related core values of the democratic polity – Gutenberg’s printing press in Mainz (a stone’s throw from Frankfurt) and Martin Luther’s print rebellion against the imprimatur of the Roman Catholic church go hand in hand. China’s political system and the Communist Party’s censorship of the press flies in the face of the professed core values of the German intelligentsia, which celebrates itself annually at the book fair.

The decision to name China as the guest country of the 2009 Book Fair made the clash of the economic-superpower-China and the repressive-Communist-regime China virtually inevitable. Both images are simplistic and little more than caricatures of the complexities embodied by contemporary China. It is discomforting to see, then, how easily an otherwise well-informed European public could be taken hostage by images so crude and superficial. The brouhaha around Dai Qing and Bei Ling shows exceptionally poor judgment by the organizers of the symposium and the managers of the Book
Fair. Yet the incident also highlights the deplorable limitations of China-related knowledge in Europe. Germany is home to first-rate scholarship about modern China (for example at my alma mater, in Heidelberg, or at the University of Frankfurt itself), but sinological expertise is still failing to reach a wider audience and affect decision-making processes such as those at the management level of the Book Fair.

The decision to hold a symposium on “China and the World” in the run-up to the Book Fair was ill-conceived to begin with. To turn the event into a propaganda show for the official Chinese delegation was out of the question and would have invited protests from the critical public, but the decision to mend the situation by inviting two “dissident” writers and asking them to perform a dialogue in front of German TV cameras – and hoping that the official Chinese delegation would comply with this design – must be described as outright naïve. The protests of the Chinese side would have been predictable to anyone with a modest knowledge of Chinese affairs, but it seems that no one in the organizing committee did ever seek expertise from the German Chinese Studies community. If the German side wanted to create a genuine dialogue about “realities and perceptions” of China, there would have been other means than inviting personae non grata like Dai and Bei.

The unrealistic expectations of the Book Fair organizers filtered into the rhetoric surrounding the “China and the World” symposium, and remain visible even in translation, in the awkward term “official” that was used by the spokespersons for the Book Fair (“The objective of the symposium is to facilitate dialogue with official China...,” as Book Fair director Juergen Boos put it). The German term, das offizielle China, reflects the assumption that there is an official Chinese position on topics ranging from literature to press freedom, in contrast to “unofficial” – i.e. dissident – opinions. Informed observers, including those from the academic community, have tried for years to emphasize the diversity of contemporary China and the complexity of its cultural sphere, but as the tumultuous symposium shows, they seem to have made little headway in communicating this more nuanced understanding to the public at large, which all too readily looks at China through the lens of Stalinist Eastern Germany.

Looking back, who has gained from the symposium incident? No one, I believe. The buzz surrounding the revoked invitations to Dai Qing and Bei Ling has ended in embarrassment for all those involved. The first casualty of the incident is the Chinese government. The concerted walk-out of the Chinese delegation from the auditorium left the impression of an overly nervous government whose representatives duck away from controversy and difficult questions posed by a critical public. Neither has the sentence “We did not come to be instructed about democracy,” which a former Chinese ambassador hurled at reporters, helped the image of China. True, a self-confident and powerful nation can and should resist attempts at moralizing and grandstanding, but the vehemence of the protests against the invitations to Dai and Bei and the walk-out achieved just the opposite. The pressure the Chinese government put on the organizers of the symposium confirmed the image of China as a bully, in blatant disregard of its own rhetoric about non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations (this observation was made by Frank Ching in the New Straits Times). It shows a poor understanding of the workings of a time-honored institution such as the Frankfurt Book Fair, disregard for the conventions of public debate at symposia like this one in a democratic nation and, more generally, utter misjudgment of public opinion in Europe. If the Book Fair was an attempt to bolster China’s soft power abroad, then this attempt has failed spectacularly.

It is questionable, too, what Dai Qing and Bei Ling have gained from their defiant stance. Their decision to come to Frankfurt is understandable, and the ferocity of the Chinese government’s reaction made it almost impossible for them to back down. But was their public protest during the “China and the World” symposium the only – and the most effective – way to voice their protest? The symposium was convened weeks before the Book Fair even begins, and most of the international audience will not arrive until shortly before the fair kicks off in October. During the Book Fair itself, hundreds of China-related events will take place, and it should be assumed that Dai Qing and Bei Ling would easily have found better opportunities to communicate with the German and international public. The Book Fair program itself hosts a wide variety of voices and guests; as Didi Tatlow of the Wall Street Journal points out, hard-core dissidents such as Uyghur independence activist Rebiya Kadeer and representatives of the Dalai Lama are scheduled to speak in Frankfurt during the Book Fair. Dai Qing has generally taken a much less confrontational approach towards her critics; it is not clear how her
appearance at the symposium helped to promote her cause in China or to communicate with the public in Europe, beyond the sensational headlines.

The prize for the poorest performance undoubtedly goes to the German organizers. The planners of the symposium demonstrated particularly poor judgment in their attempt to present their German audiences with a stage-managed debate between a Communist regime and its dissident critics; the conceptualization of the event reads like a public demonstration of a European brand of tolerance and dialogue that never took place. A stage-managed confrontation of different opinions has little to do with the commitment to nuance and mutual respect that real dialogue requires. The revocation of the invitations proved to be predictably disastrous, as it alerted the German and international press to an event that would have otherwise received little attention. Instead of fostering dialogue and reducing the temperature of the fraught Euro-Chinese relationship, the symposium incident became a re-enactment of numerous previous clashes in which European politicians exposed themselves to charges of hypocrisy or of “bowing to China” – the German chancellor Angela Merkel has not too long ago learned what it means to be punished by Beijing for meeting the Dalai Lama, and French president Nicolas Sarkozy has had similar experiences. European decision makers large and small, have found themselves caught between their domestic public opinions and the need to manage their relationship with the emerging economic superpower. Sarkozy’s sudden policy reversals have not helped his position, and neither has the statement by Book Fair director Boos that “the Frankfurt Book Fair will not allow itself to be pressured by anyone” enhanced his own credibility. Driven by misjudgment and an overly simplistic view of China, the event management had maneuvered itself into a hopeless situation. The public is unlikely to be served any better unless decision makers such as those in charge of the Book Fair take into serious account the significant amount of expertise on China that is available in Europe, and develop a more nuanced understanding of China that goes beyond the economic-powerhouse and repressive-Communist-regime dichotomy.

**POSTSCRIPT**

On Sept. 24, the *Spiegel* magazine reported that the poet and critic Liao Yiwu had been barred from leaving China to attend a Book Fair related event. Liao had been invited by the Haus der Kulturen in Berlin, a non-profit, to attend a symposium, but had been told by Chinese State Security personnel that he would not be permitted to leave the country. The news predictably caused a storm of protest in Germany, with the head of the German P.E.N. chapter publicly musing that it may have been “too early” to invite China as “guest of honor” to the Frankfurt Book Fair. Stay tuned for more controversy in the run-up to the fair, which starts on October 14.

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