

Workshop at the Ethnographic Museum, University of Zurich
July 21th, 2017

Current Trends in (Chinese/Swiss) Mountain Farming and Rural Transformation Studies

Short report

In the context of the Seed Money Grant project "Skills and Aging. New Trajectories in Anthropology of Technology", funded by the Sino Swiss Science and Technology Cooperation (SSSTC), the workshop was held during the stay of the Chinese colleagues in the joint program in Switzerland. It offered Chinese researchers from Yunnan Agricultural University (Kunming, China) and Swiss researchers from several academic institutions (Agroscope; School of Agricultural, Forest and Food Sciences at Bern University of Applied Sciences; University of Lausanne; University of Zurich) and a young anthropologist and dairy farmer (Emmental, Bern) the possibility to meet face to face and become familiar not only with academic research foci in both countries that share many similarities of cultivating steep mountain terrain, but also to discuss the roles of national key players and institutions and current trends that shape the rural transformation in China as well as in Switzerland.

The elaborate welcome speech by Prof. Zhang Haixiang (Dean of the Institute of New Rural Development, Yunnan Agricultural University) highlighted the interest of Sino Swiss Mountain Agriculture Research, bringing together the rich academic institutions, resources and research results of both countries. Prof. Zhang identified several key issues, among them the question of farmers' skills and aging, steep slope cultivation technologies, urgent environmental issues under conditions of climate change, as of major importance for academic research in the years to come. Prof. Zhang's contribution was followed by the key note speech held by Dr. Stefan Mann, Agroscope, on the urgent matter of employment in steep slope farming in Switzerland, addressing in particular the topic of the heterogeneous profiles of employees on Swiss alpine farms. Three further lectures completed the input part of the workshop: Prof. Du Fachun, Deputy Dean of the Institute of New Rural Development, Yunnan Agricultural University, presented deep insights into results of his long term research on sustainable grassland management on the Qinghai Plateau, highlighting current achievements in local and national development strategies. Prof. Li Wenfeng, Junior Professor at the Institute of New Rural Development, Yunnan Agricultural University, gave a lecture on his current applied research project based on a newly developed digital database on soil traits of Yunnan mountain farmlands. Finally, Prof. Mareile Flitsch outlined 70 years of rural transformation in PR of China – concluding that identifying relevant common key questions lays at the basis for linking case studies and conducting comparative (field-) research in both Yunnan and Switzerland. She further stressed that this requires first of all and on both sides an in-depth understanding of the historical timelines in which agricultural transformations in both countries evolved.

The lectures opened the floor to a dedicated discussion in the workshop plenum on commonalities and differences between Chinese and Swiss Mountain Farming. The discussion highlighted respective research topics on issues in the context of rural transformation. The discussion centered around the following key questions and findings as well as commonalities and differences between China and Switzerland:

- An obvious difference between the two countries: While Yunnan mountain farmers are living permanently in the highland areas, Swiss alpine farming is only seasonal.
- An obvious commonality between the two countries: Grasslands and steepness of the terrain challenge the analytic frames for comparative research questions.
- Climate change, ecological migration, urbanization and tourism are further common and highly urgent topics that shape(d) rural transformation.
- Digital technologies and Big Data for sustainably transforming rural (mountain) areas will be path leading in both countries.
- In China academic research is always and exclusively applied research, while in Switzerland there are both applied and non-applied research projects.
- Research institutions in both countries should (re-)address the question how to further improve academic training on doctoral level to foster the skills of young researchers for planning and conducting relevant transdisciplinary, comparative research.

The second part of the workshop consisted of a guided tour on a Bio farm in Dietikon (<http://www.hofkaeserei-imbasi.ch>), where current issues in sustainable and organic farming were discussed on the spot and together with the farmers.

The workshop was organized as the start of an emerging joint research focus on anthropology of technology research on Mountain Farming in Southwest China and Switzerland, focusing on “Skills in rural transformation”. It was integral part of the ongoing Seed Money Project "Skills and Aging. New Trajectories in Anthropology of Technology". In April 2017, the University of Zurich/Ethnographic Museum and the Yunnan Agricultural University in Kunming/Institute of New Rural Development (INRD) have furthermore signed a Memorandum of Understanding MoU which will in future further facilitate joint research projects.

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Link: Program of the workshop (pdf hochladen)

Link: Report in Chinese on the website of Yunnan Agricultural University in Kunming, China: <http://new.ynau.edu.cn/info/1155/24142.htm>