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WISO@HONGKONG

Transformations & Sites Encountered in China's Greater Bay Area

BY ULRIKE DECKER

This year has shown to be a historically significant year for China: on the one hand celebrations to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China and Shenzhen's 40th anniversary as the country's first Special Economic Zone, on the other, continuous calls for structural reform due to a slowing economy and enduring protests organized by the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

For six weeks, Master students of the University of Cologne's Faculty of Management, Economics and Social Sciences (WiSo) had the opportunity to directly experience this pull between the past, present and future, between festive jubilation and civil discontent. As part of the academic short programme WiSo@HongKong, students spent three weeks in Shenzhen and three weeks in Hong Kong, where these timely developments undoubtedly shaped discussions and experiences within and outside the classroom.

Shenzhen

Designated as the country's first Special Economic Zone in 1979, Shenzhen has transformed from a quaint fishing village to a high-rise metropolis attracting major investment and China's young tech workforce. "Shenzhen speed" has become a branding term that suggests fast development, agility and termination. This ambition is noticeable not only in the city but also on campus of the WiSo faculty's local partner, the Chinese University of Hong Kong-Shenzhen (CUHKSZ). Established in 2014, CUHKSZ plans to expand to 11,000 students and a campus of 1,500 acres by 2022.

Shenzhen is so high-tech oriented that Cologne students learned quickly that cash, credit cards and USB sticks are remnants of the past and have little use there. Chinese Buddy students helped out by unlocking communication and social media, loading university ID cards with funds, and calling cabs via various apps that were restricted or not accessible to visitors. China's efforts to become a leader in digital technologies — headquarters of Huawei and Tencent are located in Shenzhen — are recognizable, and so are central principles governing and restricting digital realms.

Briefings at the Shenzhen Stock Exchange and the DJI's headquarters provided students opportunities for professional networking and complementing their learnings from coursework on China's financial markets and innovation management with first-hand accounts from the field. From the top of the world's 4th highest building, the Ping An Finance Centre, and while viewing the evening light show designed by international artists to celebrate the city's swift development, it becomes clear that Shenzhen is dressed-up and dazzling, ready for an opportunity to take centre stage in the Greater Bay Area.



Shenzhen lightshow



Hong Kong

Hong Kong, known as a key economic powerhouse in Asia, is currently facing declining numbers in retail sales, investment and tourism, and may be on the verge of recession. The special administrative region has been under pressure economically and politically. Underlying poor prospects and overall growing competition from mainland Chinese for decent jobs and affordable housing has allowed recent protests to activate and engage a wider demographic than just youth disapproving of the Beijing-backed extradition bill.

Discovering and understanding local management practices, changing dynamics in the world economy, and China's shaping of the future of globalisation, were key learning goals in the coursework students completed in Hong Kong. Briefings by the DZ Bank, the German Chamber of Commerce, and the German Consulate added information on corporate services offered and potential career opportunities available to Cologne graduates.

Finding new business opportunities based on Hong Kong's reputation for strong corporate governance and being the world's freest economy is still possible, as fin-tech start-up NEAT demonstrated to students while explaining their portfolio of financial and regulatory compliance services. In a briefing with Beiersdorf, students also learned creative and innovative tactics to sustain and grow in Hong Kong's highly competitive market of — predominantly Western — luxury goods and to form strategic partnerships with Chinese online platforms to utilize the enormous potential of cross-border ecommerce.

Hong Kong's accessibility, its natural, cultural, and social environment, remains attractive to foreign visitors and the city maintains a large expatriate population. This positive perception is also reflected in students' attitude towards a possible career in Hong Kong after graduation: post-programme, 13 out of the 16 WiSo@HongKong participants stated that they can see themselves living and working in Hong Kong for a couple of years.



Conclusion

Through focused academic content and select co-curricular excursions and interactions, the inaugural WiSo@HongKong aimed to develop communication, teamwork, and leadership skills, to provide insights into region-specific industries, individual corporations, and approaches to innovation, and to build a genuine interest in the country, intercultural sensitivity, and understanding of social-geographical issues.

Before their travels, the idea of "one country, two systems" wasn't a new concept for students who enrolled in the WiSo@HongKong programme. However, returning from the programme and having crossed the Hong Kong-Shenzhen border twice, students' understanding of this policy has changed from simple knowledge to a deeper learning and a shift of consciousness through experiencing its daily implications personally.

"It was a unique experience that offers many learning opportunities, both academically and personally, if you are willing to be open to them. The programme can truly change your perspective on your future career path and your view on greater China."

2019 WiSo@HongKong participant

