

## 1<sup>st</sup> Editorial Conference of the *Yearbook Eastern and Western Philosophy* on “Publicity and Public Sphere” (from 8 – 10 October 2014 in Beijing)

Since the early 1980s, that is, since the beginning of the economic and political reforms, the question of the emergence of a 'civil society' has been discussed contentiously not only in the People's Republic of China, but also in the West - above all regarding the extent to which reforms of a civil society emerge according to the model of Western democracies or have their own laws that remain true to the traditions and political circumstances of China.

The legitimation of a public sphere is beyond question here, as political decisions can only be legitimized within public discourse and through the intervention of mass media, even in cases where the public sphere is one that has been established by the political system itself. Apart from this, with the Internet platform 'Weibo', the formation of networks such as the EU-China Civil Society Forum, or the non-journalistic aggregation of fragmented public spheres (through Google, Twitter, Facebook) there have arisen forms of a non-political but certainly politically relevant public sphere in China. Yet the question of how the specific understanding of the public sphere in China has arisen, what function is granted to it for societal development, and what restrictions it is subject to requires fundamental clarification, especially as the status of the 'public sphere' is continually being called into question in the West.

Within the philosophical discussion, since the publication of Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, a lively debate on the status of a 'civil society' has developed - that is, a debate on the question of whether in pre-modern China there already were 'public sphere' structures comparable to the 'civil society' of 17th and 18th century Europe. This discussion has become more nuanced since the 1980s, where one group defended the view that the development of a public sphere in China was to be dated to the middle of the 19th century - above all as the result of a 'Chinese response to the West' - whereas another group saw structures of a public sphere much earlier, for example, in ancestral temples or clan organizations, and also in private publishing houses or academies, above all those of the 'Treaty Ports' (see Yu Keping: 'The Emergence of China's Civil Society'. *Focus Asien* No. 11). At a considerable distance from the concept of civil society in Habermas's sense, the discussion has by and large attempted to define the public sphere in an ideal-typical manner as a 'social space' in which public opinion can be articulated free of authoritarian intervention (Habermas 1984, 52). In the East and West today, the discussion of a 'civil society' or 'public sphere', which has been dominated by the social sciences, is increasingly being confronted with the methodological problem of having to explain the theoretical - here, in particular, philosophical - foundations of its divergent (empirical) observations, especially as the normative claims that orient themselves according an ideal model of the public sphere themselves give occasion to further research on the public sphere - and as the European discussion on the status and the formation of a

public sphere is by no means consistent. In their 1991 research paper on the theory of the public sphere, the Berlin sociologists Jürgen Gerhards and Friedhelm Neidhardt concluded that in light of 'the societal use and the political value of the concept of the public sphere (...) it is astonishing that the social sciences have contributed as little to its clarification as they have to the illumination of the object that it describes.' For the classic figures of sociology (Marx, Durkheim, Weber and Simmel) the public sphere plays 'no role as a central category'.

The planned conference intends to assess this self-criticism of sociology and philosophically review the desiderata. The philosophical approach to the problem may be more suited to explaining sociological phenomena such as the medialization of politics, the emergence of an infotainment public sphere (more pronounced in China as in the West), the privatization of what is public, indeed, ultimately also the depolitization of the public sphere. For the planned conference, we have invited suggestions for discussion that will be debated in a critical and objective dialogue with the Chinese conference participants - also in order to defuse the political controversies on this issue. The selection of the participants will be based on this constellation of problems. Thus, the emergence of the public sphere is decisive for the question of successful political decision-making, the medialization of politics is decisive for questions within systems-theory on the increase in importance of media logic in politics, and finally the depolitization of the public sphere is decisive for the question of the moral status of the public sphere.