

2024 Annual Meeting of the Association for Social Science Research on China (ASC)

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Report by Frederik Schmitz and Anna Böhmer

The 2024 annual meeting of the ASC was hosted by Maximilian Mayer of the Department of Political Science at the University of Bonn. During the meeting, ten papers were presented by ASC members. Additionally, two round tables were held during the meeting. The first round table, titled “Global China and the Global South in a Multipolar World,” focused on China's foreign policy and included colleagues from Think Thanks working on China, while the second one, titled “Current Issues Around Research Cooperation with Chinese Partners,” addressed the current pressing questions of how to maintain cooperations with Chinese partners.

H. Christoph Steinhardt (University of Vienna, speaker of the ASC) and Maximilian Mayer (University of Bonn, host of the 2024 meeting) opened the 2024 annual meeting with welcoming addresses.

Panel 1

The first panel, chaired by Tobias ten Brink from Constructor University Bremen, explored various dimensions of digital governance and perceptions of privacy in China. H. Christoph Steinhardt (University of Vienna) opened the panel with a presentation titled “The Authoritarian Privacy Paradox: Explaining Institutional Privacy Concerns in China.” His paper was discussed by Björn Alpermann (University of Würzburg). The paper reveals that preference falsification significantly reduces expressed privacy concerns toward the state. It also shows that state-related concerns are linked to political trust and regime confidence, while concerns about private companies are more broadly shared and shaped by personal experiences with privacy invasions and perceptions of anti-pandemic policies.

Marianne von Blomberg (University of Cologne, Zhejiang University School of Law) and Chungheng Liu (Microsoft Research) presented their joint work on “Imagined techno-dystopia: The making of ‘Chinese social credit system’ in the U.S. media debate.” This analysis examines how the Chinese Social Credit System is imagined in U.S. discourse as a techno-dystopian tool of authoritarian control, shaped by techno-orientalist narratives that depict advanced technology enforcing a unified score, victimized citizens, and global exportability. The imaginary serves both to reassure Western audiences of their institutional superiority and to mobilize

resistance against perceived threats to democratic institutions from both foreign and domestic sources.

The panel concluded with Ningjie Zhu (University of Bonn) presenting “From Top-Level Design to Ground-Level Practices: Reconciling Centralization and Local Autonomy through Algorithmic Regulation in Shenzhen's Digital Governance,” with a discussion led by Sabrina Habich-Sobiegalla (Freie Universität Berlin). The study finds that algorithmic regulation in Shenzhen is strategically aimed to balance centralization with local autonomy by separating public service innovation from digital control. Despite the centralization inherent in the top-level design approach, Shenzhen officials have retained significant autonomy and space for innovation in developing urban intelligence. They illuminate the adaptive capabilities of the Party-state and offer insights into governing processes in prioritized and emerging areas. This selective enforcement, driven by policy experimentation and leadership support, highlights the adaptive flexibility of China's governing system while challenging conventional views of uniform authoritarian control.

Panel 2

Chaired by Anna Lisa Ahlers (Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, University of Oslo), the second panel focused on social policy and credit systems policy in China. The first presentation, “Comparison of social protection for the unemployed in the provinces of Jiangsu, Fujian and Guangdong,” was delivered by Barbara Darimont, Ruben Gnädig, and Yannick Henny (Ludwigshafen University of Business and Society), with Doris Fischer (University of Würzburg) providing commentary. This study examines the growing issue of unemployment in China, particularly among young graduates, and investigates the decline of unemployment insurance since 2014, despite earlier trends of greater inclusion of informal workers. By comparing provincial regulations and analyzing job portal data, it seeks to assess shifts in social security coverage and labor market demand, ultimately questioning what now protects against social risks amid the push for “common prosperity.”

The second paper, titled “The Long, Quiet River of the Social Credit Policy Process – a multiple stream framework view on policy deliberations,” was presented by Pierre Sel (University of Vienna) and discussed by Gunter Schubert (University of Tübingen). The study shows that despite strong initial support, the Social Credit System Policy (SCSP) has faced slow and fragmented implementation due to disconnects between policy advocates and implementers. Analysis of documents and interactions from 2001 to 2014 reveals a lack of consensus on legal and administrative frameworks, hindering coordinated execution.

Panel 3

The third panel, chaired by Ilker Gündogan (University of Würzburg), shifted the focus to narratives, identity, and diaspora. Danqi Guo, Yang Yan, and Genia Kostka (Freie Universität Berlin) presented their research on “Propaganda for Digital Control: Unraveling State-led Online Narratives and Emotional Appeals in China,”

with Kristin Shi-Kupfer (University of Trier) discussing the paper. This study analyzes how the Chinese government uses narrative strategies—especially positive emotional appeals—to frame digital surveillance projects like “Skynet” and “Sharp Eyes” as tools for public safety and technological progress. The authors identified six key narratives that reveal efforts to legitimize surveillance expansion and bolster state authority.

Following this, Vivien Markert (University of Tübingen) presented her study entitled “Chinese Muslims in Cairo: Between Sinicization and Arabization,” with Michael Malzer (University of Würzburg) serving as the discussant. This case study shows that China’s Sinicization campaign under Xi Jinping has extended repressive governance practices to Chinese Muslim diaspora communities in Cairo. In response, these communities express loyalty and Chineseness through symbolic and discursive means, continuing a historical legacy rooted in earlier religious and national engagement.

Panel 4

The final panel, chaired by Askan Weidemann (German Institute for Global and Area Studies), examines China’s emotional politics and moral discourse. Frederik Schmitz (University of Bonn) presented a paper on “Feeling the Party – Immersive Experience and Emotional Legitimacy for the CCP”, commented by Heike Holbig (Goethe University Frankfurt), in which he shares initial findings from his case studies in China. His dissertation project investigates immersive memory infrastructures to produce emotional legitimacy through the re-experiencing of party history, specifically the Long March and the Anti-Japanese War.

The second presentation, “Disentangling China’s Moral Crisis: Moral Decline or Moral Transformation?,” was given by Xue Gong (University of Vienna), discussed by Felix Wemheuer (University of Cologne). This study explores whether China’s perceived moral crisis reflects a decline or a transformation of values amid economic reform, using World Values Survey data from 2007, 2012, and 2018. Findings show that post-reform generations display higher and more diverse moral standards over time, suggesting a moral transformation shaped by modernization rather than moral decay.

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