

2025 Annual Meeting of the Association for Social Science Research on China (ASC)

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Report by Lukas N. Eggert and Vivien Markert (both from the University of Tübingen)

The 2025 Annual Meeting of the ASC was hosted by the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) in Berlin and organized by a team from the ASC consisting of Anna L. Ahlers and Franziska M. Fröhlich (both Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin), Björn Alpermann and RYanne Flock (both University of Würzburg), Christina Maags (University of Sheffield), and Christoph Steinhardt (University of Vienna, then Speaker of the ASC). The paper selection was carried out by Heike Holbig (Goethe University Frankfurt). In his welcome address, Mikko Huotari (Director of MERICS) expressed his enthusiasm for the collaboration between MERICS and the ASC. Christoph Steinhardt also delivered a welcome address, in which he noted that this marked the 25th Annual Meeting of the association. Over the course of two days, eight papers were discussed. This was complemented by a roundtable on the impact of China studies on policy debates.

Panel 1

The first panel, on China's political economy, was chaired by Anna L. Ahlers. It opened with a paper by Robert Pauls (Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University) and Jörn-Carsten Gottwald (Ruhr University Bochum), titled "The Party Rules and the State Governs: Party-State Capitalism and the Reordering of State-Market Relations in the Jiangsu Pilot Free Trade Zone", discussed by Marina Rudyak (University of Heidelberg). The authors' contribution focuses on Xi-era governance reforms, illustrating how the Party strengthens its political leadership while limiting the state to rule-based regulatory practices, and thereby challenging prior concepts of China's political-economic model. This argument is supported by an analysis of centralised reform documents and a case study of the administrative licensing reforms within the free trade zone.

The second paper, by Lukas N. Eggert (University of Tübingen), titled "Digital Development and Ideological Discipline – The CCP's Governance of the Gaming Sector" explores the dual strategy underpinning state governance of China's gaming sector. The paper demonstrates how the state promotes industry growth and innovation while simultaneously imposing strict ideological oversight. Using the

Shanghainese game developer miHoYo as a case study, the paper further illustrates how companies navigate the state's dialectical governance approach with the potential to turn it into a competitive advantage. The paper was discussed by Nicolas Huppenbauer (University of Bonn).

The panel concluded with Gil Hizi's (Goethe University Frankfurt) paper, "Village Branding and the Commodification of Intangible Cultural Heritage in China Today: CunBA as a Case Study", discussed by Rianne Flock. Looking at "Village NBA" (cunBA), the paper analyses the relationship between rural development and popular sport in the context of an ethnic minority village in Guizhou, proposing that this phenomenon functions as a "total social brand". While the government promotes cunBA as a voluntary expression of "passionate love" for sport, the paper reveals significant ambivalence, uneven investment, and nostalgia among residents for older, more self-managed traditions. The paper concludes that this model of development uses modern spectacle to create economic opportunities that partially suspends the pressures of urban involution.

Round Table

The first day concluded with a round table on "China Studies & Policy Impact", which was chaired by Claudia Wessling (MERICS) and invited discussants from academia and politics. Anne Braun (Federal Foreign Office) highlighted the increasing demand for China literacy within the Foreign Office, but also the limited capacity of politicians and officials to engage with academia due to time constraints, and the disconnect between academic research formats and policy-adequate input.

Mikko Huotari emphasised that MERICS already has a tangible impact on policy debates, providing input at multiple levels, such as contributions to Germany's China Strategy. At the same time, he pointed out that attempts at structural knowledge transfer still do not function well, partly because of institutional silos and mismatched rhythms. According to him, more revolving doors between think tanks, academia, and government are necessary to improve China policy.

Julia Gurol-Haller (GIGA Institute Hamburg) and Stefan Messingschlager (Helmut-Schmidt University Hamburg) added the academic perspective. They emphasized that demand for academic expertise is largely policymaker-driven, with only a few cases in which research itself triggers outreach. Most requests for input are ad hoc, relying heavily on personal trust and networks rather than institutionalised channels. Both scholars argued that meaningful policy engagement often lies outside conventional academic evaluation criteria.

The panelists concluded that more resources are needed to produce policy-relevant research and to improve absorption capacity.

Panel 2

The second panel, chaired by Genia Kostka (Free University of Berlin), addressed China in the international realm. The paper by Ilker Gündoğan (Ruhr University Bochum) and Jörn-Carsten Gottwald (Ruhr University Bochum), co-authored with Niall Duggan (University College Cork), on “The Geopolitical and Geoeconomic Implications of China’s Central Bank Digital Currency e-CNY for the European Union” was discussed by Hannes Gohli (University of Würzburg). Using Political Steering Theory (PST), the authors examine how the e-CNY is emerging as a tool to bolster China’s financial sovereignty, reduce reliance on the US-led financial system, and promote the internationalisation of the RMB. This dynamic has prompted the EU to accelerate the development of a digital euro in pursuit of monetary autonomy and to partake in shaping the new global digital monetary order in line with European norms.

Panel 3

The following panel, chaired by Katja Levy (Norwegian University of Science and Technology), discussed two papers on Chinese governance. In her paper, “Public Perceptions of Moral Governance in China: Evidence from a National Survey”, Xue Gong (University of Vienna) investigates public attitudes towards the Chinese state’s inclusion of morality into governance practices. The research establishes that this governance model receives substantial public support, even for “intrusive” practices that prioritise moral regulation over legal frameworks. Key findings indicate that support is strongest among individuals with higher socioeconomic status and strong traditional orientations, contradicting standard modernisation theories. The paper was discussed by Sarah Eaton (Humboldt University Berlin).

The second paper, titled “Quantifying the Population’s Scientific Quality: The Evolution of China’s Scientific Literacy Survey” was contributed by Franziska M. Fröhlich and discussed by Christoph Steinhardt. The paper analyses the historical transformation of China’s citizen scientific literacy (CSL) surveys. Initially an academic project, the quantification of CSL became a central political target after 2006, functioning as a key indicator for national planning and science popularization. The main argument of the paper is that the evolution of the concept and its measurement reflect changing conceptualizations within China about the country’s scientific needs and what constitutes desirable citizenship.

Panel 4

The final panel, on “contentious politics” was chaired by Franziska M. Fröhlich. It opened with a paper by Christian Göbel (University of Vienna) and Wang Hao (City University of Hong Kong), titled “When Do Protests End Political Careers? Grievance Escalation and Termination Risk Among Chinese Local Officials” and was discussed by Anton Bogs (Free University of Berlin). The authors challenge the

prevailing “stability veto” hypothesis, which assumes that protests carry steep career costs, by using a dataset that combines online citizen complaints, micro protests, and career records of officials between 2012 and 2022. Their analysis reveals that the volume of routine grievances and the baseline frequency of micro protests have no statistically significant link to career termination when controlling for political factors. The findings also suggest that China’s sophisticated feedback institutions serve primarily as mechanisms for information gathering rather than functioning as a system of meaningful public accountability.

The last paper was authored by Björn Alpermann, Vivien Markert (University of Tübingen), and Lallu N. Prathapan (University of Würzburg), titled “Remote Ethnography of *bingtuan* Urbanization in Southern Xinjiang: Through the Looking Glass, Darkly?”. The study offers two contributions. First, it examines how the *bingtuan* has changed as a consequence of the Southward Development Strategy and subsequent urbanization efforts. Second, it proposes “Remote Ethnography” as an approach to conduct research on politically “closed regions”. This approach uses a triangulation of diverse, opportunistically collected data such as policy documents, social media content, and satellite imagery. The paper was discussed by David O’Brien (Jagiellonian University) and concluded the 25th Annual Meeting of the ASC.

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