

Workshop Report: The 2025 “Iserlohner Kreis”

Workshop in Schwerte, July 26–27, 2025.

Report by Matthias Hackler

The “Iserlohner Kreis,” a network of social science researchers focusing on China, once again held a workshop this year at Haus Villigst in the North Rhine-Westphalian city of Schwerte. The 2025 workshop was supported by the Institut für Kirche und Gesellschaft and the Heinrich Böll Foundation. The “Iserlohner Kreis” serves as an interdisciplinary platform for researchers from fields such as Sinology, political science, and sociology, aiming to present current research findings and foster networking among early-career scholars. Titled “New Issues and Challenges in Chinese Studies,” this year’s workshop provided insights through four thematic panels on topics including China’s strategic communication and global reputation, discourses on technology and politics, the rewriting of intellectual and institutional history, and ideology and practice in China’s past and present. The event brought together researchers from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Australia, Mongolia, and Germany.

The first panel, addressing China’s narrative power and communication strategies, included a presentation by Zachary Lowell (University of Melbourne) on Chinese resettlement studies stemming from experiences with large-scale infrastructure projects in China. His work explored how these Chinese concepts and standards are transferred to the Global South as the field becomes more internationalized. Notably, China’s training programs appear less focused on promoting Chinese policies and more on fostering a global academic community. Manlai Nyamdorj (University of Trier) discussed China’s influence on Mongolia’s media system. He noted that China is increasingly gaining influence in Mongolia through cultural and media channels, reflecting a new form of geopolitical rivalry where China seeks to expand its “discursive power” and shape the global information order. The third presentation by Leung Tin Ching (University of Würzburg) analyzed China’s influence in Germany through an economic-political model. Tin Ching demonstrated that China’s influence primarily operates through economic incentives and informal channels, though since 2019, it has faced growing resistance as Germany recognizes its structural vulnerabilities.

The second panel, “Knowledge Transfer & Perceptions,” included contributions on China’s AI discourse, perceptions of Chinese electric vehicles, and Taiwan crisis scenarios. Liu Chuyu (University of Amsterdam) presented on “The Politics of

China's Official AI Discourse," illustrating how China's government legitimizes AI as an instrument of national modernization. The discourse serves political control rather than technological debate, portraying AI as a tool for modernization and sovereignty while marginalizing critical voices. Zhang Jerry Jiarui (University of Amsterdam) examined the perception of Chinese electric vehicles by experts in Germany, particularly bicultural experts capable of assessing vehicle quality based on their expertise. He revealed that, despite technological advancements and competitive pricing, Chinese electric vehicles in Germany face "country-of-origin" biases, including doubts about quality, weak brand reputation, and inadequate after-sales structures. This shows that success depends not only on technology but also on building trust and adapting to local conditions. Josie-Marie Perkuhn (University of Trier) delivered the final presentation of the day, focusing on the China-Taiwan conflict and the broader "Zeitenwende" debate. After a pause following the Cold War, wargaming is experiencing a revival in international relations. The presentation addressed the question of whether re-engaging with scenario-based gaming could be valuable for teaching purposes.

The second day of the workshop began with a panel on "Rewriting China in Intellectual and Institutional Histories." Du Zeyu (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg) presented research on the emotional history of Chinese exile intellectuals from 1949 to 1989, using concepts like "emotional community" and "structure of feeling" to analyze transnational exile experiences. The analysis showed that exiled Chinese intellectuals created a "sentimental China" that profoundly shaped their identity and collective memory. Xu Rongshao (FU Berlin) examined periodization in Chinese historiography, arguing that new temporal experiences in China facilitated the emergence of a "New Historiography" influenced by Western historical concepts. Xu Rongshao analyzed Liang Qichao's "New Historiography" as a synthesis of Western and Chinese traditions, representing not mere imitation but a creative reinterpretation.

The final panel addressed ideology and practice in China's past and present. Wang Shengshuang (Johns Hopkins University) explored Lu Xun's critique of the belief in progress, bridging the two panels. Lu Xun's ambivalent stance toward science and progress, and his rejection of the idea that science alone drives historical progress, distinguished him from contemporaries like Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi and shows parallels to Zhang Junmai's "metaphysical" views. Lu Xun's perspective highlights the complex tensions between radicalism and cultural conservatism in Chinese intellectual history. Katrin Bonarens (University of Würzburg) examined the Digital Silk Road, a sub-initiative of China's Belt and Road Initiative, focusing on its economic impacts in Laos. The Digital Silk Road promotes digital economic growth in Laos, though its long-term effects remain unclear. The study used various methods to assess economic impacts, emphasizing the strategic importance and potential challenges of digital transformation. The concluding presentation by Sophia Schnermann (University of Würzburg) contributed to governance theory by applying actor-centered institutionalism to economic relations between China and

Latin America from 2012 to 2024. Sophia Schnermann analyzed political governance and cooperation in these relations, aiming to address gaps in governance theory. She demonstrated how China expands its political influence in Latin America through economic partnerships.

While during the day, participants presented completed dissertations, ongoing projects, or initial explorations in new research fields, in a relaxed evening session in the historic main building of the venue, participants discussed the research landscape in China and shared insights from their fieldwork. Topics such as China expertise and access to information in China were central to the discussions. These stimulating conversations helped to highlight shared experiences. Notably, a high number of international researchers presented their work this year. The organizing team, which was expanded this year, would like to thank all participants and supporting organizations. The workshop was organized by RYanne Flock, Felix Brender, Grete Schönebeck, and Matthias Hackler.

Matthias Hackler

Accredited Parliamentary Assistant to MEP, European Parliament.