

Elites, networks, and power in modern urban China (1830-1949). Historical “big data” in modern Chinese history

ENPMUC



Proposal summary: This project proposes a step-change in the study of modern China reliant upon scalable data-rich history. It will deliver precise historical information at an unprecedented scale from heretofore untapped sources - as well as reshaping the analysis of existing sources - to create a new dimension in the study of the transformation of elites in modern China. It will deploy an array of cutting-edge digital methods — including data mining, sampling, and analysis within an integrated virtual research environment. To establish the validity of this approach, the project focuses on the three urban areas (Shanghai, Beijing/Tianjin, Canton/Hong Kong) that had the most profound impact on the course of modern Chinese history. Starting from the mid-19th century, the narrow elite of Confucian-trained scholar-officials that had ruled the country for a millenium was finally swept away. Power and social prestige shifted to socially more diversified groups of Chinese and foreigners who operated within interlocked transnational networks. The project will challenge the China-centered and group-based approach dominant in the historical literature of the past two decades. The project envisions elites in urban China as *actors* whose status, position, and practices were shaped by the power configurations that developed over time and whose actions through institutions and informal/formal networks in turn were a determining factor in redrawing social and political boundaries. The project will place the emphasis on the networks through which information, capital, and individuals circulated. It will investigate the transnationalization of elites as a process that overstepped the limits of institutions and nation states. The key issue that the project will address is breaking through existing limits of access to historical information that is embedded in complex sources and its transformation into refined, re-usable and sustainable data for contemporary and future study of modern China.

Interdisciplinarity: The study of elites is inherently interdisciplinary. This project is rooted in historical research, but it borrows substantially from the concepts and methods, especially quantitative methods and network analysis from sociology and political science. For the analysis of textual corpora, it draws on the procedures and applications developed in linguistics and literary studies to explore large corpora of unstructured texts. Finally, it implements the most advanced tools and methods designed in computing, especially data mining and machine learning. All the source materials are examined within the social fields where they were produced and from the point of view of their circulation. The project should be considered primarily within the field of social history/elite studies/China studies. Aix-Marseille University, as a strongly interdisciplinary institution, with first-rate research centers in history, social sciences, linguistics, and computing, is particularly well-suited to host it.