Friedrich-Alexander-Universität
Faculty of Humanities,
Social Sciences, and Theology

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Call for Papers
Data as Heuristic: Toward a Chinese History of Data

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Convenors: Chun Xu and Sijia Cheng

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As "data" comes to saturate our everyday language, historians of China have begun, almost without noticing, to apply the word to the Chinese past, to things that historical actors themselves handled. We now read of the "fiscal data" of the Song court or the "administrative data" of a Ming-Qing prefecture. Such usage invites an obvious charge: anachronism. "Data" is a historically specific and culturally contingent concept, rooted in Western history. From its Latin origin as "things given," through its mathematical usage in the early modern period, to its present ubiquity in popular discourse, its meanings, material forms, and epistemic functions have shifted profoundly. Premodern China possessed no lexical equivalent and, arguably, no conceptual one either. To speak of "data" in Chinese history is therefore, inevitably, to project our own concerns and preoccupations backwards onto people who did not share them.

Instead of brushing this objection aside by resorting to whataboutism—that "the economy" and "society" are just as anachronistic and are now indispensable to Chinese history—this workshop invites participants to put the question squarely:

> **Can "data" serve as a useful heuristic for the study of the Chinese past, from premodern times to the twentieth century?**

We welcome contributions along three broad lines of inquiry.

Data as word, concept, or category: The European career of "data" is one history among others. Chinese terms with comparable work to do, such as *shu* 數, *ji* 計 and *jizhang* 籍帳, have long histories of their own. We would like to follow these terms over the *longue durée*:

- How did they make things operable: countable, comparable, actionable?
- Which aspects—given-ness, factness, instrumentality, or regulation—did they bring forward or leave in the dark?

Data practices: history of collecting, tabulating, storing, and moving records is far older than the concept of data and proceeds quite happily without it. Here we are interested in the technologies of registration—paper, print, standard forms, bookkeeping, archives, clerks—through which the Chinese state and other institutions made the world legible to themselves.

- How were observations, reports, objects, or persons collected, classified, organized, stored, processed, and represented?
- What technologies, institutions, and forms of labor sustained these practices? Who, from the village headman to the Board of Revenue clerk, actually did the work?

- Through what processes of classification, abstraction, standardization, and aggregation were heterogeneous persons, places, commodities, or events made commensurable? What was lost, excluded, or reconfigured along the way?

Data functions: *data* is not a stable object. Things become data-esque when they are made to serve as givens, evidence, grounds, records, measurements, or supports for argument in particular settings.

- What did particular records, numbers, observations, images, cases, citations, or classifications do within specific Chinese knowledge practices?
- What agendas and interests are folded into them? What patterns and structures did historical actors infer from them, or impose through them?
- When and how did numbers, statistical objects, and other representations, as well as patterns extracted from collections of data, come to be accepted as valid representations of reality and as grounds for social, economic, and political intervention?

The advent of modern statistics. We are particularly interested in the emergence of modern statistics in China as one historically specific reconfiguration of data practices. From the late Qing onward, censuses, surveys, standardized forms and tables, and increasingly specialized institutions of quantification brought new technologies, material infrastructures, labor regimes, and administrative logics to bear on the production, processing, circulation, and use of information. Rather than narrating these developments as straightforward passage from "records" to modern "data," we ask what was genuinely new, what persisted from earlier practices of registration and accounting, and how these changes altered what could count as a fact and serve as authoritative grounds for action.

Misfits interest us quite as much as fits. The moments when the heuristic fails to accommodate the Chinese evidence are precisely those that oblige us to refine both the heuristic and our understanding of what, anywhere, counts as data.

Submissions

If you are interested in participating, please send us a provisional title, an abstract (250–300 words) and a brief biographical note by **30 November 2026**. We will confirm participation in early December 2026. Confirmed participants will also be asked to submit a draft paper of approximately 4,000-6,000 words in advance of the workshop. These papers will be circulated among the group beforehand.

This workshop is organized as part of the research project *Towards a Chinese History of Data*, funded by the Volkswagen Foundation. Reasonable travel and accommodation expenses for invited participants will be reimbursed in accordance with the applicable funding guidelines.

Please send your submissions and any inquiries to: Chun Xu chun.xu@fau.de and Sijia Cheng sijia.cheng@fau.de.