

Call for Papers: Biographies of Numbers

Throughout the twentieth century, Chinese intellectuals, politicians, and scientists were obsessed with the population number of their country. From the late nineteenth century to the foundation of the People's Republic (PRC) in 1949, without being able to rely on entirely accurate census surveys, they alleged that China had 400 million inhabitants (Bréard 2019). Consequently, the narrative goes, this made the world's most populous country hard to govern, but also one of the most important countries in the world which eventually deserved a leading role in international politics. Governing and controlling the population arguably has been and is one of the most fundamental concerns of the government of the PRC, spawning numerous social engineering projects such as the one-child policy or the social credit system.

Biographies of Numbers will explore the life of numerically framed knowledge, such as the population of China, from a global historical perspective on quantification, regarded as one of the most pervasive practices of the modern world. This conference is based on the assumption that numbers have their own biographies: they come into being, lead a life of their own, travel in time and space, have a career, and eventually fall into oblivion. That numbers are not simply the objective reflection of reality but socially, politically, culturally, and historically constructed knowledge has been shown extensively for the case of statistics in the Western world (Desrosières 1993, Porter 2020). At the same time, numbers are powerful agents which represent, transform, and recreate individual lives, social worlds, political spheres, nature, or other entities that are taken for granted. Statistical and other numbers, invoking mathematical reason and scientific truth, often claim universal validity and thus circulate easily from one site to another. By following the global trajectory of a single number from its production and global dissemination to the divergent narratives surrounding its numerical value, we can analyze the stabilizing and destabilizing impact of numbers on individual and collective practices and imaginaries. The aim of the conference is to trace the biographies of specific numbers. Although we will limit ourselves to "scientific numbers", i.e. those that are grounded on quantitative knowledge and method, our notion of "number" is to be understood more broadly, including indicators, formulas, and statistics as well.

By focusing on the historical emergence and circulation of numbers and on patterns of argumentation and narration with these numbers, this conference also aims to contribute to historical epistemology and the global history of science. Rather than pursuing a realist approach that focuses on the alleged scientific "discovery" of numbers or claiming that they are mere "inventions" in the constructivist sense, we see to follow the argument that numbers as (scientific) objects can be "simultaneously real and historical" (Daston 2000:3).

Possible questions to be addressed might include: How do certain numbers or indicators become objects of scientific inquiry or scientific entities themselves? What debates are they surrounded by, how and when do they become entrenched in scientific practices, and how do they disappear from the consciousness of the public or scientific experts? What powers and agency do we attribute to numbers? What are the sources of their power? How do numbers interact with other forms of authority, for example law, to create trust? How have instruments of quantification altered the modalities of governing and forms of personhood and subjectivity? Who writes the biography of a number?

Although some of these questions have been examined partially in a Western European or North American context, they have been largely ignored regarding other regions. We welcome contributions that deal with the historical and cultural role of numbers particularly in China but also more generally in other East Asian countries. While papers may be situated in a local context, they are welcome to chart developments that occurred in many areas and over longer time periods.

Contributions might address the following topics:

- biomedical numbers and indicators as ideals or thresholds (such as the 7-day incidence in the context of COVID)
- the cross-cultural dissemination and adaptation of an indicator
- governing individuals and populations by body measurements and biometrical data
- the political life of social numbers and their effect on categories such as family, gender balance, etc. (e.g. China's "One-Child")
- the role of ideology in the construction and application of quantitative knowledge
- numbers as authoritative entity justifying policies
- numbers as cultural, social or political icons
- delegation processes that contribute to the fame and persistence of a numerical entity
- the dichotomy between the absolute (universal, eternal) value of a number and its narratives or degrees of realism (variable, manipulable, etc.).

Practicalities and timeframe:

The Conference is organized with the generous support of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation within the framework of the [sin-aps](#) project at the [Chair for Sinology with a focus on the Intellectual and Cultural History of China](#), University of Erlangen-Nuremberg. It will take place July 7-9, 2022, in the city of Erlangen. Please send an abstract of no longer than one page and a short, one-paragraph biographical statement to Prof. Andrea Bréard andrea.breard@fau.de and Dr. Nicolas Schillinger nicolas.schillinger@fau.de by February 28, 2022.

Selected participants are expected to send in an unpublished paper draft by the end of May 2022, since we will have discussion and reading groups based on participants' submissions and envision a publication after the conference.

References

- Bréard, Andrea. "400 Millionen - Globale Wirkungen einer mächtigen Zahl." in N. Bilo, S. Haas and M. C. Schneider, eds., *Kulturgeschichte der Statistik*, Steiner Verlag (2019), 215–232.
- Daston, Lorraine, ed. *Biographies of Scientific Objects*. University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Desrosières, Alain. *La politique des grands nombres : une histoire de la raison statistique*. Paris: La Découverte, 1993.
- Porter, Ted. *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*. Princeton University Press, 2020 (2nd ed.).

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