

# **“Innovating Chinese Business History”**

**The University of Hong Kong, 18-19 October 2023**

## **Workshop Program**

**18 October**

### **Visit to the Hong Kong University Library: 11am-12pm**

Introduction to the Hong Kong Chinese Merchants Collection (in-person attendees only)

(Catalogue: <https://archivespace.lib.hku.hk/repositories/2/resources/17Digital>;

Digitised Items: <https://digitalrepository.lib.hku.hk/hkcmc>)

### **Panel 1: 2-4pm:**

**Chair:** Ghassan Moazzin (The University of Hong Kong)

**Location:** Lecture Hall, May Hall, The University of Hong Kong

Thomas Larkin (University of Bristol/Lingnan University) - Augustine Heard & Co: The Anatomy of a Bankruptcy in Nineteenth-Century China

While the writing had been on the wall for some time, Augustine Heard & Co.'s 1875 bankruptcy had reverberations throughout the China Coast and the United States. Among the Heard brothers, George had passed away months prior, Albert was headed to America (wife and possessions in tow), and John and Augustine Jr. were rushing the other direction to Hong Kong in a misguided attempt to resurrect the firm under the shortened moniker 'Heard & Co.' The bankruptcy and their efforts to salvage something profitable were commented on in letters and news, satirised in *China Punch*, gossiped about on the streets of Hong Kong and Boston, and recorded in legal proceedings and debtors' claims. But it had a wider and long-lasting significance, too. Employees marooned in China sought new opportunities throughout East Asia, competing businesses moved in on the firm's territory, efforts to appease creditors saw hundreds of curios auctioned to American buyers in the metropole, and repatriated merchants shared their experience of trading in China. Chasing up these threads, this paper analyses the 'anatomy' of the company's bankruptcy to reflect upon the opportunities the crisis generated both for a new generation of China traders, and for the diffusion of materials, capital, and knowledge acquired in China and repatriated – by necessity of circumstance – to the United States.

Nathanael Lai (University of Cambridge) - In Support of the *Zhongzhen*: Loans, Textbooks, and the Cold War in 1950s Southeast Asia and Hong Kong

This paper historicises ties that stretched across Thailand and Hong Kong: a set of connections bearing as importantly on the long-standing struggle between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China as on other parts of Southeast Asia like

Singapore. It examines the interaction of Chinese communities throughout these spaces during the early Cold War, when their links were as contested as conceptions about China and Chineseness. It highlights how such inter-Asian connections unfolded not only in terms of cultural production, as existing studies have demonstrated. But they also figured across other settings and via another array of commodities: from banking agencies to schools, from financial assistance to educational materials. By way of illustration, the paper centres on a loan programme of the Taipei-controlled Bangkok branch of the Bank of China (BOC). In its bid to strive for Thailand's overseas Chinese loyalties, the branch extended credits to *zhongzhen* (resolutely loyal) Chinese schools on the condition that they adopted textbooks published by a Hong Kong instead of Singapore bookstore. Drawing upon sources from Taipei, Bangkok, Hong Kong, and Singapore, the paper argues that the politics of the Cold War cultivated linkages spanning these places, even though they backfired, in turn, on the very undertaking of the conflict.

Jackie Wang (University of Chinese Academy of Sciences) - Engendered Entrepreneur: Women and the Politics of Business in Modern China

This paper sheds light on the role of women in business amidst political change. Studies on gender and business of twentieth-century China have illuminated the changing roles of Chinese women outside the home. This paper adds another dimension to the narrative of early twentieth-century Chinese women to investigate an understudied aspect of women's careers: entrepreneurship. Focusing on Dong Zhujun and her business endeavours, this paper gives agency to the individual in contributing to our understandings of female entrepreneurship. It shows how Dong bridged politics and business to expand her connections and build her ventures to argue that her vast political and commercial network allowed her to ably intersect these fields as a female entrepreneur. By analysing the actions of female entrepreneurs, this paper comments on the intersections of gender, business, and politics in discussions of national identity and women's labour.

**19 October**

**Panel 2: 10am-12pm**

**Chair:** Li Ji (The University of Hong Kong)

**Location:** Lecture Hall, May Hall, The University of Hong Kong

Matthew Lowenstein (Stanford University) - "Popular Sources" (民间资料): opportunities, challenges, and methodologies

This talk discusses the new opportunities presented by "popular sources" available to scholars of business and economic activity in Qing and Republican-era China. These sources, consisting broadly of historical material not held in any state archives, are becoming increasingly available to scholars in the form of published collections as well as through informal circulation on WeChat and other forms of social media. I introduce several exceptionally useful collections of popular sources. I discuss their provenance, content, and how we can use them to further our understanding of Chinese social and business history. Most importantly, I walk through different methodologies for

interpreting this historical material. Many of these documents defy easy analysis. Some are written in nearly illegible cursive, employ sophisticated industry jargon or make sense only if one understands the format of the document itself. Other documents are even less accessible; they require at least some familiarity with traditional Chinese accounting or bookkeeping norms. Fortunately, Professor Meng Wei of Shanxi University has elaborated a relatively simple methodological framework for accessing these sources. I will walk through Professor Meng's framework, and show how to apply them to the material, as well as how to acquire the skills needed to read the more challenging documents.

### Bill Kelson (University of Georgia) - A Proto-Developmental State? Revisiting the Mines of the Late-Qing Self-Strengthening Movement

Scholars often portray the late-Qing Self-Strengthening Movement (1861-93) as primarily a military modernization scheme. Less well-appreciated is the extent to which official advocates of Self-Strengthening in Qing China also envisioned their movement as an energy-intensive industrialization drive. Under the banner of *qifu* (or "striving for wealth"), as well as *kaikuang* (or "opening mines"), Qing reformers formed equity-financed, merchant-run collieries in Zhili, Taiwan, Anhui, and Hubei. And the output of these earliest deep underground mines in China was meant to replace imports of coal and iron with domestically produced metals and fossil fuels. Historians have researched certain late-Qing mines in their local contexts but have yet to fully appreciate that—together—these pilot projects were intended to initiate an economy-wide energy transition. This talk thus revisits the theory and practice of *kaikuang*, framing Self-Strengthening initiatives as the work of a proto-developmental state actively engaged in "striving for wealth."

### Adam Frost (Copenhagen Business School) - Selective Deinstitutionalization: The Dialectics of Institutional Transformation in Maoist China

When institutions are created to reshape, rather than reflect, socio-cultural norms, they exist in a state of tense disequilibrium. Institution builders must expend effort and resources to maintain said institutions in the face of persistent pressures to dismantle them. Institutional transformation unfolds as a result of a dialectical struggle between these institutionalizing efforts and deinstitutionalizing pressures. This article explores the hotly contested nature of institutional transformation in Maoist China (1949–1978), an extreme context where the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) attempted to carry out the wholesale "socialist transformation" of the Chinese economy. It does so through the development and analysis of a novel historical dataset—thousands of case files of "speculators and profiteers" who were prosecuted by Maoist state agencies between 1964 and 1978. We find strong evidence that cadres employed at the lowest level of state agencies played a critical role in resolving incongruencies between institutional rules and social norms by engaging in "selective deinstitutionalization," i.e. a process wherein they upheld certain central government mandates while tacitly ignoring others. We argue that such agentic behavior, over time, led to *de facto* institutional transformation (even in the absence of *de jure* change). Finally, we develop a model of selective deinstitutionalization that highlights both the contested nature of institutional transformation and the mediating role of bureaucratic functionaries as agents of change.

**Lunch (May Hall; all registered participants): 12pm-2pm**

**Panel 3: 2pm-3pm:**

**Chair:** Li Yiwen (City University of Hong Kong)

**Location:** Lecture Hall, May Hall, The University of Hong Kong

Puk Wing Kin (Chinese University of Hong Kong) - Licking blood at the blade?: Dispute over lead and zinc mining contracts between the Hunan Mining Bureau and the Carlowitz & Co. (1914-1920)

Between 1911 and 1912, Hunan provincial government solicited loans from Carlowitz & Co. by selling lead and zinc from the Shuikoushan 水口山 mine. The two contracts were concluded such that, with hindsight, Carlowitz & Co. enjoyed unfair advantages. With the outbreak of WWI, Carlowitz & Co. and Deutsch-Asiatische Bank (DAB) were in grave danger, as they could be, by wartime international law, confiscated by belligerents like Britain. However, with the two contracts and intriguing loan arrangement, Carlowitz & Co and DAB managed to rid themselves of the danger with incredibly excellent timing, so that they “licked the blood at the blade” without hurting themselves, while the Hunan authority suffered heavy losses. Chinese sources give the impression that it was the corruption of Hunan entrepreneurs and officials and the treachery of Carlowitz & Co that caused the fiasco. This paper tries to reconstruct the case and hopefully to shed light on an interesting and complex aspect of local governance and international finance in the early Republican era.

Billy So (The University of Hong Kong) and Sufumi So (The University of Hong Kong) - The Corporate Governance of the Shanghai Commercial Press in Historical and Comparative Perspective

The idea of limited liability and monetary incentives accelerated the incorporation of companies in Britain in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Two hundred years later, the Shanghai Commercial Press (SCP) as well as the three major publishing companies outside China—Macmillan & Co., Ltd., of London, the Macmillan Company in New York, and Kinkōdō in Tokyo—were each incorporated. SCP was considered the largest corporation in China’s book industry in the 1920s and has been most resilient and vibrant to this day unlike the other three that lost their dominance in the industry or changed hands by the mid-twentieth century. With a particular focus on SCP, this study analyzes the ownership structures and governance institutions of the four corporations, using a dataset collected from the corporate charters and other primary sources in order to address the overarching question of what forces might explain the corporate structure and shareholder behaviour. Our study reveals that SCP started as the “most” open corporation among the four and its company culture and directions were much closer to those of Macmillan Company in New York and very different from the much closely-held Macmillan & Co., Ltd., of London and Kinkōdō, even though they all shared the overriding goal of promoting the best interests of the corporation and its shareholders.

**Roundtable: New Directions in Chinese Business History : 3pm-4pm**

**Moderator:** John Wong (The University of Hong Kong)

**Location:** Lecture Hall, May Hall, The University of Hong Kong

Elisabeth Köll (Notre Dame University)

Billy So (The University of Hong Kong)

Ghassan Moazzin (The University of Hong Kong)

**Tea Break: 4pm-4:30pm (May Hall; all registered participants)**

**Keynote Lecture: 4.30pm-6pm**

**Location:** Lecture Hall, May Hall, The University of Hong Kong

Elisabeth Köll (University of Notre Dame) - A History of Pawnbroking in China across the 20th Century: Examples of Opportunities for and Challenges in Business History Research

Prof. Elisabeth Köll will introduce her current book project on the business history of pawnbroking institutions and their managerial and financial roles in China's economy and society from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the post-Mao reforms. Including case studies from Hong Kong in the 1930s and Shanghai in the early 1950s, her presentation will address the challenges of how to explore a vast conceptual topic across a wider chronological and geographical scope and how it relates to the research of business historians working on China past and present.

**Dinner: 6pm (by invitation)**