

Chinese standards from the ground up

Workshop
University of Cambridge
23-25 June, 2022



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Standards
Oil on canvas

Standards are omnipresent, yet often invisible. They undergird and regulate everyday life. They facilitate as much as inhibit social practice. Standards and standardisation are closely intertwined with power, norms, and processes of inclusion and exclusion. The creation, implementation, and outcomes of standards are marked by tensions between theory and practice, uniformity and diversity, and formality and informality.

China has assumed growing importance in global standardisation over the past decades. However, its role as a standard-setter and a standard-practitioner has not gone uncontested. Chinese encounters with divergent interest groups across the world have given rise to debates about China's compliance with global standards, with some critics accusing Chinese firms of ignoring standards altogether, and others lauding China's efforts to improve technological and environmental standards.

Recent discussions largely focus on China's domestic standardisation policies and strategies regarding technological innovation, the diffusion of Chinese standards abroad, and the key roles played by Chinese experts in international standards bodies, such as the International Organization for Standardisation (ISO). In this workshop, we assess China's changing role in global

standardisation from the bottom up and zoom in on the tensions that are intrinsic to Chinese standards and standardisation. How does China fashion itself as a standard-setter? And how is it contested on the ground?

Departing from the general assumption that sees standards as by-products of globalization imposed on societies, we call for empirically grounded analysis of standards in specific and potentially unexpected social circumstances. We will consider a wide range of realms, including, but not restricted to, manufacturing, ICT, media, law, governance, health, environment, art, religion, and ethics/morality. The workshop revolves around three interconnected stages in the life of standards, starting from their creation to implementation and outcomes. Contributions can address one or more of these stages.

Creation

Manufacturers, designers, consumers, government bodies, and activists all have a stake in the creation of standards. Standards can induce competition and collaboration among actors at various levels. What roles do Chinese actors play in the development of local, national, and international standards? Whose interests do standards represent and fail to represent?

Implementation

Despite the aspiration to harmonise dissonances inherent in standardisation, standards can be adjusted, bent, and transformed when they are put to practice. To what extent have Chinese actors been able to promote and implement standards? How have Chinese standards been received? Who supervises standards implementation and who holds standard-setters and implementers accountable?

Outcomes

Apart from the creation and implementation of standards, we will also consider the reception of standards and their effects on social life, and the standardisation process itself. Who benefits from standards and who is disadvantaged by them? Do standards induce value change? And if so, in what ways?

Workshop details

The workshop will be held online between 23 and 25 June 2022. We will circulate papers (circa 9,000 words, including footnotes and references) prior to the workshop. Presentations will be kept short to allow ample time for discussion. Please note that we intend to work towards the publication of a special issue or an edited volume.

We hope to stimulate interdisciplinary debate and invite historians, sociologists, political scientists, geographers, anthropologists, and scholars from cognate disciplines who work on China to participate. Please send your abstract (ca. 250 words), along with a short bio, to ChinaStandardsWorkshop@protonmail.com by 15 December 2021. If you have questions, please contact one of the organizers, Ruiyi Zhu (rz285@cam.ac.uk). Selected participants will be notified by 23 December 2021.

Timeline

15 December 2021	Abstract submission deadline
27 May 2022	Paper submission deadline
23-25 June 2022	Workshop

For updates on the workshop and more, follow us on Twitter: @ChinaStandards