"Digitization of Memory" by Prof. Dr. Maximilian Mayer and Frederik Schmitz

This TRA5-funded project explores the interactions between the digitization of memory and the collective identity of societies. The list of actors is long: museums, memorials, political parties, and marginalized groups use digital methods to preserve and disseminate memory. Cultural heritage is an exciting focus of investigation as a link between the past, the present, and the future. Four aspects are in our interest: *power* mechanism by the selectiveness of memory, new *distribution* opportunities through digital infrastructure, facilitating *access* for otherwise excluded groups, and *consequences* for individual and collective memory.

Our research initiative is an integral part of the research project "Infrastructures of China's Modernity and their Global Constitutive Effects," funded by the Ministry of Culture and Science of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia. Under the direction of Prof. Dr. Maximilian Mayer and Frederik Schmitz, the project focuses on "infrastructures of memory," understood as a heterogeneous, temporal arena for the construction of collective identities. Focusing on China, we are particularly interested in how different Chinese actors use digitalized memory for their interests.

The relationship between memory and power has changed as multiple actors can interact in digital space. This has massive implications for China, where digitization is remarkably rapid. Digital tools challenge the aspect of power over memory by allowing contesting narratives. Memory's value is remembering the past and considering its implications for the present and future. That this is especially true for political actors was demonstrated by Chinese government spokesperson Hua Chunying during a press conference in 2020. She emphasized that "[t]he history of the struggle against the pandemic should not be tainted by lies and misleading information; it should be recorded with the correct collective memory of all mankind."

Focusing on China, an international workshop was held in Bonn on September 21-22, 2023. The workshop "Digitization of Memory in China" explored the impact of digitization on memory practices in China. A group of international scholars explored this topic from interdisciplinary perspectives.

We concluded that digitizing memories enables new spaces and ways of communicating memory. The workshop highlighted that different actors have different goals in digitizing memories. Whether they use it for political purposes, as in the case of the CCP, or for civil society groups to prevent their memory and cultural heritage from being forgotten or to connect with like-minded people. While shrinking spaces are often documented in authoritarian regimes,

digitization is a way to find new possibilities for groups whose memory is marginalized in the official memory account. This group of actors ranges from members of national minorities, the queer community and individuals who use digital tools to secure and disseminate their stories. This results in fragmented memories that can also challenge state-curated memories.

The workshop was closed with an evening event: "New Cultural Technologies? Multi-cultural Perspectives on the Digitization of Memory Cultures". After two days of focusing on China, we tried to broaden our horizons. We were happy to welcome Prof. Dr. Yang Guobin (University of Pennsylvania), Prof. Dr. Paul Basu (University of Bonn), and Lydia Leipert (SWR). They contributed their perspectives on China, the African continent, and the multimedia project "I am Sophie Scholl" (Ich bin Sophie Scholl). In addition to the generous support of TRA 5, the workshop and the evening event were sponsored by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the Academy of International Affairs NRW.

The participants' responses in both formats and the high level of support showed that the connection between memory and digitalization is highly relevant and worth discussing in a broader and interdisciplinary context.

As the second part of the project, we organized a very successful and well-attended lecture series for the summer semester of 2023. This was run under the title "Digitalization of Memory Practices and Heritage in Global Perspectives," organised together with Prof. Dr. Carla Jaimes Betancourt (University of Bonn), Prof. Dr. Sophie Elpers (University of Antwerp/ Meertens Institute) and Prof. Dr. Lewis Doney (University of Bonn). We brought together a rich mix of different perspectives and opened the talks to the public, scholars and students (the latter who could gain credit for attending and critically reflecting on the series). Various area experts with different methodological, theoretical, and empirical backgrounds were into mutually beneficial dialogue with researchers from the University of Bonn, which made for lively exchanges and wide-ranging question-and-answer sessions.

We were particularly interested in how the intersection of technologies and cultures could best be discussed by comparing memory and heritage practices in different societies and world regions. Are their relationships significantly different or similar in African, American, European, and Asian countries? What influence do platforms and social media have in shaping perceptions of colonialism, climate change, and geopolitics in Latin America, hyper-urban China, or Tibet? The talks and responses brought out compelling concrete examples to mull over, such as the systems behind what you see on your smartphone, the possibilities and pitfalls of doing fieldwork from afar by means of social media, the politicisation and racism involved in bridge building, and how our views of concentration camps are unconsciously influenced by film. They also focused on the power of our senses in and beyond the digital realm, whether we can capture ineffable like the power of metaphor with the aid of computers or how cultural tourism feeds and is fed by media and its complex relations with emotions and affect in Asia and elsewhere. Together, they strongly indicated to what extent personal and institutional capacities to remember are changing today and shed important light on what materials are becoming new and differently accessible for remembering through the digital.

The immense interest in this research project and the many positive responses show that this is an important and forward-looking topic. The digitization of memory must be discussed and investigated in an interdisciplinary way and with different regional expertise. This is the only way to ensure a holistic approach sufficiently reflecting regional and thematic specificities.

In the spirit of the TRA idea, we have created a platform for exchange within TRA5 and the University of Bonn and beyond. This is important in developing and realizing further research cooperation. The lecture series has shown that this is a worldwide phenomenon that needs to be explored. China certainly plays a unique role because of its growing geopolitical importance. We wanted to address this phenomenon in the first part of the project.