

CHINAMADE BRIEF



**“Keywords for Infrastructure and Media:
Social Lives and Material Effects”**

Workshop, Denver, March 24-5, 2019

Alessandro Rippa, April 25, 2019



As Wittgenstein once put it, "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" – that is, it emerges out of its particular social life. How to, then, capture the evolving meanings of a word and how to translate its manifold meanings and usages across different linguistic and cultural settings? And how to look through those words as lenses onto the societies in which they are used?

Questions such as these ones are at the core of the **Chinese-English Keywords Project (CEKP)** led by Prof. Louisa Schein. The CEKP is a global network of scholars in different disciplines of the humanities and social sciences addressing the particular incommensurabilities that are generated as key words and concepts migrate between Chinese and English. The aim of the project is to "capture heterogeneity," that is, to pay attention to the different usages of a word –

official, academic, mass media and everyday vernacular, among others – and account for its evolving social life. The CEKP project was formed in 2016 and has since then held several meetings across different countries, centered around particular clusters of words.

The most recent CEKP-related event took place in conjunction with the Denver meetings of the Association for Asian Studies, March 24-25, and focused on keywords for **infrastructure** and **media**. The workshop was co-organized by the CEKP project, particularly by **Louisa Schein** (Rutgers University) and **Fan Yang** (UMBC), and by the **China Made Project**, funded by the Henry Luce Foundation, led by **Tim Oakes** (CU Boulder) and with the help of **Alessandro Ripa** (CU Boulder). One of the overall aims of China Made is to develop a finer grained analysis of infrastructure projects themselves, and to address the cultural, social, and political relations that are formed around and through these infrastructures. A keywords approach proved itself, in the course of the workshop, extremely helpful in identifying how infrastructures are productive of social and cultural changes. Many of the keywords discussed in the course of the workshop, as will be briefly discussed below, speak to the socio-cultural and political dimensions of China's infrastructural development, and are thus of core interest for the China Made project agenda.

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Ten scholars convened in Denver for the workshop, discussing a wide range of words and two keywords (*wenhua* 文化, by Louisa Schein, and *difang* 地方, by Tim Oakes) that will be



included in the first themed volume that the CEKP will produce. Each participant brought 1-2 Chinese words relevant for their research and that they found hard to convey in or translate into English. In connection to each word, participants told a story or two encapsulating some of its different meanings and usages. Each word generated a lively discussion, spawning connections and particular constellations – or clusters – of words and stories.

One such word was 通道 *tongdao*, which is generally translated as passage, passageway, or channel. The word is used in an academic context to refer to particular trade routes and channels of exchange. One frequently mentioned on the backdrop of China's Belt and Road Initiative is the Silk Road – 丝绸之路 (*sichouzhilu*) – as an exchange (*jiaoliu* 交流) passage. Tim Oakes suggested another usage of the word in the context of Guizhou, that of 通道文化, or “tongdao culture.” As he elaborated, according to Guizhou scholars, the province has traditionally been characterized by multiple influences and by its particular role as transit for, and passage of, different cultural and political institutions. As such, “tongdao” has become a key part of Guizhou identity. In the context of the China-Myanmar borderlands, Alessandro Rippa pointed out, the word *tongdao* is used to identify non-official routes of exchange, through which smuggling occurs. Moving to another usage of the word, several participants pointed to the use of the word “tongdao” in places such as airports and train stations, to indicate fast routes through security. Rather than a passage of exchange, in this context *tongdao* identifies a smooth connection that avoids local frictions. Darren Byler, an expert on securitization and technology in Xinjiang, pointed to yet another usage of the word *tongdao* in the context of security checkpoints in Xinjiang. A Shenzhen-based company is even advertising a state-of-the-art security gate with the name “[Xinjiang tongdao](#).”

Other clusters of words formed around the terms *pingtai* 平台, platform, and *sudu*, 速度, speed. Both words lie at the intersection of infrastructure and media, pointing to new constellations of Chinese economic development and society centered around particular networks and distribution practices. In conjunction to both *pingtai* and *sudu*, for instance, participants discussed the ways in which the high-speed railway (*gaotie* 高铁) transformed urban landscapes in China, re-configuring the (dis)connections between the rural and the urban by juxtaposing a completely new transportation network to an existing system of railways and highways. *Wangge* 网格, grid, and *wuliu* 物流, logistics, also emerged as key components of a platform economy that involves a degree of data gathering, surveillance, and high-efficiency connections. The example of *kuaidi* 快递, or delivery services, and its pervasiveness across China today, anchored such discussions into several first-hand experiences that the participants relayed.

As a last example of the workshop's lively discussion, the commonly used word *fangbian* 方便, convenient, was brought forward by Darren Byler in order to discuss the “convenience police station” that has become a ubiquitous sight across Xinjiang since 2016. In the course of the discussion, several examples emerged of usages of the word *fangbian* in semi-official contexts, particularly in the negative form “*bu fangbian*” – not convenient. This, some of the participants noted, was a standard justification that officials in different contexts would give in order to not answer a particular question, or to prevent access to a particular area. What is convenient, and for whom, seems to be a question central to the ways in which the word *fangbian* can be translated and understood across different linguistic and cultural settings.

As an important follow-up to the workshop, some of the most relevant words that were discussed in Denver will appear on the **ChinaMade website** in the form of short reviews discussing some of their meanings and usages. In particular: 通道 (tongdao); 区 (qu); 物流 (wuliu); 速度 (sudu); 安置 (anzhi); 方便 (fangbian); and 设计 (sheji).



Participants: **Darren Byler** (University of Washington), **Carolyn Cartier** (University of Technology Sydney), **Silvia Lindtner** (University of Michigan), **Tim Oakes** (University of Colorado Boulder), **Lina Qu** (Rutgers University), **Alessandro Rippa** (University of Colorado Boulder), **Louisa Schein** (Rutgers University), **Tomonori Sugimoto** (Stanford University), **Fan Yang** (University of Maryland Baltimore County) **Lu Zhang** (Temple University).