Gender, the Popular Press and the Digital Humanities: Developing an "Intelligent Archive"—From WoMag (Chinese Women's Magazines in the Late Qing and Early Republican Period) to ECPO (Early Chinese Periodicals Online) and beyond

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This presentation introduces findings from a multi-year, interdisciplinary, international project on gender and the popular press in Republican China. The project, begun in 2008, combines new methodological approaches to the periodical press with the creation of what we call an "intelligent archive", i.e. a sophisticated database—ECPO (Early Chinese Periodicals Online)—which facilitates research on these rich, complex, and voluminous materials by making several databases of women's magazines and entertainment newspapers held in the libraries of Heidelberg University and Academia Sinica in Taipei accessible online within one (search-) structure, and by seeking to create comprehensive linked metadata on these various materials.

The database is one outcome from an onging research project that engages in a systematic examination of the Chinese periodical press as a means of transforming our understanding of the profound changes China experienced during the first four decades of the 20th century. Chinese periodicals present researchers with a number of challenges: They are 1. physically dispersed and often poorly preserved, 2. voluminous, 3. multi-generic. In this project, our answers to these challenges have been, first, to establish the "intelligent archive" and, second, to form an interdisciplinary research team engaged in the process of building this archive and in research based on the archive to test and improve its use. The project focuses on heretofore undervalued but rich materials—women's and entertainment magazines, and is, in a next step, now also moving into literary magazines. It is creating searchable data, both in English and in Chinese, which makes the task of working with such media manageable and which renders these materials accessible even to scholars who have no skills in reading Chinese.

My presentation will introduce the workings of the database and its several prototypes, especially WoMag (Women's magazines in late Qing and early Republican China). I will argue that to build such an intelligent archive requires the participation of scholars actively involved in research using the materials contained in the digital archive. Taking my book manuscript Portrait(s) of a Trope: New Women and New Men in Chinese Women's Magazines, 1898-2008 as an example, I will show how working with the database has expanded and changed the kinds of research questions I was able to ask while at the same time allowing for more efficient and more extensive searches of the primary materials which helped me to answer my original questions in a more sophisticated and well-informed manner than would have been possible without the use of the intelligent archive. I will also show, how, not only in media studies, a database can help trace connections between people and events that one would otherwise not have found and how such a database enables research with a transcultural focus, in particular, which is difficult to engage in without such a database. Ultimately, I thus argue that, digital tools such as the intelligent archive developed in collaboration between Heidelberg and the Academia Sinica's Digital Center are able to play a pivotal role in research on the early Chinese periodical press.