Asian Legal Studies Workshop

Mass Digitization of Chinese Court Decisions: How to Use Text as Data in the Field of Chinese Law

Over the past five years, Chinese courts have placed tens of millions of court judgments online. We analyze the promise and pitfalls of using this remarkable new data source through the construction and examination of a dataset of 678,161 documents from Henan province. Courts post judgments in roughly half of all cases, and thus the single biggest greatest challenge facing researchers is documenting gaps in the data. We find that missing data varies widely by court. Intermediate courts generally disclose greater percentages of their total dockets than do basic level courts. But court level, GDP per capita, population, and mediation rates are insufficient to fully explain variation in disclosure rates. We suggest that the possibility of resource bias and incentive bias in the data require further attention. Despite missing data, however, a topic model of 20,321 administrative court judgments demonstrates how mass digitization of court decisions opens a new window into the practice of everyday law. Unsupervised machine learning combined with close reading of selected cases reveals both surprising trends in administrative disputes and also important research questions. Taken together, our analysis of what is missing and illustration of the value of computational social science suggests the need for humility and methodological pluralism among scholars seeking to use large-scale data from Chinese courts. The vast amount of incomplete data now available may frustrate attempts to find quick answers to existing questions, but the data excel at generating new research pathways and at adding nuance to existing assumptions about the role of courts in Chinese society.

Presented by

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Attendance is by RSVP only. Please RSVP to cals@allard.ubc.ca

CENTRE FOR ASIAN LEGAL STUDIES

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Wednesday

2:30pm – 3:30 pm

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