Thinking Standards: Planning “commonly used furniture” in Socialist China

What role did standards play in furniture design and production in the People’s Republic of China after 1949? How were they connected to the global history of post-war standardization and material life? This talk explores how Chinese state planners, architects, designers, and woodworkers connected questions of standardisation to the management of the everyday, economic planning, and the organisation of people, labour, and space between the 1950s and the 1980s. Furniture standards – in discourse and practice – became part of the party’s promise of giving, or at least striving to give, “the masses” equal access to living standards. The project to build socialism, in this case through design, did not equate to a formalised or total vision for material life, however. Instead, debates about and shifts in techniques and strategies to standardise furniture reveal diverse ideas about what a socialist society and its material culture might look like, from the early years of state socialism to the first decade of economic reforms.

Bio:

Jennifer Altehenger is associate professor of Chinese History and Jessica Rawson Fellow in Modern Asian History at the University of Oxford and Merton College. Her research focuses on the social and cultural history of modern China. She is the author of *Legal Lessons: Popularizing Laws in the People’s Republic of China, 1949-1989* (2018). She has also edited *Material Contradictions in Mao’s China* (2022, with Denise Y. Ho) and *How Maoism Was Made* (2025, with Aaron W. Moore) and is the editor of the online resource “The Mao Era in Objects” (<https://maoeraobjects.ac.uk/>). At present, she is completing a book on the history of furniture design and mass production in the People’s Republic of China.