

CROSS-CURRENTS  
  
EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

**Knowing Society, Cultivating Citizens, and Making the State in Post-Imperial China**

Robert Culp, Bard College

Tong Lam. *A Passion for Facts: Social Surveys and the Construction of the Chinese Nation-State, 1900–1949*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. 280 pp. \$60 (cloth).

Janet Y. Chen. *Guilty of Indigence: The Urban Poor in China, 1900–1953*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012. 320 pp. \$45 (cloth/eBook).

Understanding society and building the national community were, in many ways, paired common goals for China’s intellectuals and political leaders during the first half of the twentieth century. Complementary new books by Tong Lam and Janet Chen illuminate key dynamics of those processes. Lam’s *A Passion for Facts: Social Surveys and the Construction of the Chinese Nation-State, 1900–1949* tracks the development of the social survey movement (*shehui diaocha yundong*) during the first half of the twentieth century. Chen’s *Guilty of Indigence: The Urban Poor in China, 1900–1953* analyzes efforts to explain poverty, categorize the poor, and extend to the needy “active relief,” which was meant to transform them from “parasites” into productive citizens. Together the books demonstrate how new systems of knowledge served to map the social field and how institutions of governance defined and reshaped social groups for the project of national mobilization, with Lam concentrating more on the development of modern technologies of knowledge and Chen focusing more on the development of governmental institutions and the imposition of social discipline. Through their analyses these books help to explain the process whereby abstract academic fields and research methodologies, along with theories and techniques of social governance, had material effects that transformed millions of

people's daily lives. They provide, in other words, striking examples of what Wen-hsin Yeh, Eddy U, and I have elsewhere characterized as "organized knowledge in action" (Culp, U, and Yeh n.d.).

At the same time, these books reconstruct the birth of the modern state during the last decade of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) and track its continuous development over the first half of the twentieth century. They describe consistent efforts by the Chinese state, regardless of political formation or regime type, to constitute and mobilize the national people, a pattern that has continued through 1949 and up to the present. Such efforts at "political tutelage," to use Sun Yat-sen's term, served to rationalize and legitimize the modern bureaucratic state itself. Projects of organization and mobilization also effectively made the state by spawning new tiers of state functionaries—such as survey researchers, beat cops, and social bureaucrats—that became the face of institutions and agents of governance in local communities. As a result, Lam and Chen, who aim primarily to capture efforts by Chinese elites to characterize and cultivate society, also uncover and explain important dynamics of state making.

Tong Lam's *A Passion for Facts* focuses on the introduction of the social survey as a novel technology of knowledge that Chinese intellectuals expected to generate accurate facts about society, thus making it legible to the state and susceptible to new forms of management and organization. During the nineteenth century, foreign observers criticized Qing officials and scholars for lacking basic, verifiable knowledge about Chinese society. In a dynamic that is now familiar from studies of the introduction of Western conceptions of national character, hygiene, and civility, Chinese intellectuals' perception of deficiencies in indigenous forms of social knowledge drove their embrace of foreign social science methods starting in the first decade of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> According to Lam, social surveys and statistics emerged as privileged methods for producing empirical knowledge about society and reenvisioning how it was constituted: "social surveys became a political necessity in this context not only because they produced empirical knowledge of the social world for the state, but also because they provided

new specifications for how individuals and groups should relate to the state and to one another” (49).

In the core chapters of the book, Lam assesses a succession of social survey projects undertaken during the first half of the twentieth century. First, and in many ways most interesting, is his thoughtful account of the late Qing census, which was conducted between 1909 and 1912. Lam argues persuasively that the New Policy (Xinzheng) project of a national census represented an effort to constitute Qing sovereignty on a new basis. By comprehensively counting the whole population, the state intended to represent a unified national community, corresponding to a territorial geobody, in contrast to the plural populations of Han, banner, and border communities that had characterized the Qing empire at its height. This undifferentiated national community—counted as individuals (*kou*) who were not distinguished by gender (*nanding, nukou*), ethnicity, language, or religious group—would constitute the citizenry for a new constitutional order. In Lam’s terms, “[b]y insisting on counting each individual and household directly using the same set of methods and categories, the new census essentially replaced the old hierarchical order with a new social order in which men, women, children, Han, Manchu, and so forth were *all treated as equal and autonomous enumerative units that constituted the social body*” (74, emphasis added).

In many ways, the social surveys conducted by intellectuals and state agents during the subsequent decades can all be viewed as efforts to elaborate and add substance and nuance to this statistical picture of the national community. Next Lam describes archeological digs, rural surveys, and ethnographic studies of the border regions conducted by scholars from Academia Sinica’s Institute of History and Philology (IHP) and the Central Political Institute’s Research Institute of Land Economics (RILE). He then assesses the Nationalist government’s much less successful efforts gathering census data during the Nanjing decade (1927-1937). In the final substantive chapter, Lam traces the influence of American social science paradigms on China’s

liberal social scientists and describes their turn toward the study of rural communities during the 1920s and 1930s.

Although *A Passion for Facts* focuses on the first half of the twentieth century, Lam carefully considers continuities and discontinuities between late imperial and foreign-influenced early twentieth-century practices. For instance, he distinguishes between Qing-era textual empiricism, which used philological methods to locate a universal and transhistorical moral ground in canonical texts, and modern social survey research, which explored existing social conditions to establish facts about society and nation in a specific geopolitical and temporal context (2–3, 19–20). Even in instances where late imperial practices provided precedents for new research techniques, as with the census and ethnographic surveys, novel methodologies and approaches differentiated the current scholarship from the old. Whereas the Qing banner census was a genealogical project that mapped networks of relations through history, and the Ming-era census counted tax units more than people, the late Qing census used census agents to count directly each household and individual (54–69). Similarly, Lam effectively uses correspondence between IHP director Fu Sinian and ethnographic researcher Li Guangming, when the latter was conducting field research in Sichuan, to illustrate shifting expectations about the nature of scholarship. Fu repeatedly emphasized firsthand empirical observation of the language, physiology, and customs of local communities, instead of reliance on texts and unsystematic, impressionistic observation—“appreciating flowers from horseback” (103–106).

At the same time, Lam demonstrates how late imperial patterns of empiricism continued to haunt the modern social scientific enterprise, as with Fu Sinian’s own incorporation of philology as an area of study in the Academia Sinica’s IHP. This example and others (such as the growing rural focus of survey research discussed in chapter 6) suggest ways in which foreign paradigms of social science were adapted to Chinese conditions and, in various ways, indigenized. Yet Lam also argues quite forcefully that most Chinese intellectuals never questioned the value of modern Western science as a whole. Because China was never directly

and fully colonized, Lam suggests, Chinese intellectuals were “less ambivalent about European scientific knowledge” than, say, their counterparts in India. They were more willing to use that knowledge in nation-building projects to transform China in ways analogous to European colonizers’ actions elsewhere (115).

Significantly, Lam documents noteworthy examples of popular Chinese resistance to the application of Western “scientific” methods for collecting social knowledge during the early twentieth century, which echoed reactions to colonial governance throughout the world. Specifically, in chapter 3 he explores a series of protests focused on rumors of “soulstealing” that erupted in response to the late Qing census. Building on Philip Kuhn’s interpretation of such protests as reactions to broader sociopolitical dynamics,<sup>2</sup> Lam convincingly portrays accusations of soulstealing leveled against census data collectors in places like rural Anhui or Guangdong as incipient popular resistance to the whole range of modernizing state initiatives condensed in the Qing government’s New Policies initiatives.

This interface between state- and elite-run governmental institutions and the Chinese people is, in many ways, the primary focus of Janet Chen’s *Guilty of Indigence*. But she launches her study by portraying how modern Chinese intellectuals came to know society in new ways, through thoughtful analysis of their efforts to conceptualize poverty and the poor. Modern intellectuals’ focus on poverty differed markedly from the late imperial period, during which, Chen observes, “wealth and poverty remained relatively weak markers of social differentiation in Chinese society” (6). Chen masterfully surveys how late Qing social theorists and officials came to view poverty as a key factor in the Qing empire’s decline in relation to impinging global powers and as a limit on national development (14–19). Later she analyzes how the modern academic discipline of sociology shifted from trying to draw an absolute numerical poverty line based on level of family income to focusing on degrees of dependency and productive labor, identifying poverty most closely with “parasitism,” or consuming without producing (46–60). “As May Fourth intellectuals and sociologists pondered its causes and consequences for the

nation's future," Chen writes, "they used the idea of the parasite to describe the nonworking poor. Juxtaposed against an emerging left-wing discourse sanctifying labor, the notion of the 'social parasite' delineated the boundaries of social citizenship based on an individual's 'productive contribution'" (47). Through this analysis, Chen explains how new systems of knowledge, especially sociology, worked to create "the poor" as a relevant, marginal social category while equating citizenship with active contribution to the nation through labor. Consequently, discourse about and policies related to the marginal poor played a significant role in normalizing a mainstream conception of social citizenship that equated it with productive contributions to the nation. Sociological analysis and social policy that distinguished between a majority of productive contributors and a minority of "parasitic," dependent poor helped configure the Chinese national community and define its legitimate members, as did Lam's census and social surveys.

Much of *Guilty of Indigence* explores how states and social elites created institutions for poverty relief that had the practical effect of delineating particular social groups as "the poor" and exposing them to new regimes of incarceration, discipline, and labor. Chen's incisive analysis of how abstract concepts and categories from social science were reified in institutions and applied to different sectors of Chinese society is one of the great achievements of this book. Insofar as intellectuals and state agents identified poverty as a "social problem" because it meant that significant segments of the population were consuming but not producing for the nation, antipoverty programs from the late Qing into the early People's Republic of China (PRC) period focused on training and mobilizing the poor for productive labor. One of the striking findings of this study is the remarkable continuity in strategies for poverty relief over this fifty-year period. In chapters that successively focus by turns on Beijing and Shanghai during the late Qing New Policy period (1902–1912), the early Republic (1912–1927), the Nanjing decade (1927–1937), wartime occupation (1937–1945), the civil war period (1946–1949), and the early PRC (1949–1953), Chen shows that state agents and social philanthropists consistently prioritized what the

Nationalist government came to call “active relief” (*jiji jiuji*) (92). Such programs sought to teach skills of a basic trade and instill habits of diligence through institutionally imposed discipline rather than breeding dependency through dispensing handouts. However, Chen demonstrates that in practice the combined effects of growing numbers of poor and displaced people, limited state resources, organizational inefficiencies, and widespread corruption often led to those identified as “poor” being exposed to incarceration and discipline while receiving minimal relief and few opportunities to work themselves out of poverty.

Drawing on extensive archival research, Chen illustrates vividly how campaigns against poverty affected the daily lives of individuals designated as poor. Starting with the book’s opening pages, which document police taking in a homeless boy and entrusting him to a workhouse instead of the streets, the reader learns about the sometimes serendipitous mechanisms by which individuals were identified as one or another category of poor—beggar or working poor, refugee or vagrant—and how encounters with the staff and routines of particular institutions could shape their life trajectories. Chen describes police forces, workhouses, orphanages, and poorhouses that came to have significant power to define subjects in particular ways and to impose specific patterns of behavior on them.

Yet she also captures remarkable instances of resistance, where people actively claimed social citizenship using the terms and categories introduced through social science research and instituted by the state. Through a series of examples from Shanghai, in particular, Chen demonstrates how working poor aggressively petitioned the Shanghai Municipal Council and Nationalist government, claiming full social citizenship on the basis of their productive labor and their residence in shack settlements (81–84, 116–127, 202–210). Chen’s precise framing and parsing of poor people’s petitions allow us to hear the voices of the urban underclass and have some understanding of their life experience without ever feeling that she is overreaching or speculating. Shack settlers’ ability to push back against eviction drives and to maintain a foothold in the city illustrates how designations of social citizenship were negotiated and not

simply imposed by the state or social elites on non-elite social groups. At the same time, shack settlers' invocation of productive labor and the payment of rent as the grounds for claims to urban residence and basic subsistence indicates the extent to which productive contribution to the nation became a hegemonic basis for social citizenship in China during the first half of the twentieth century.

Through analysis of new knowledge systems introduced to grasp society and new institutions intended to define social groups and shape citizens, both of these books also contribute to our understanding of the modern Chinese state. They do so in many ways, but I will highlight two aspects that have particular relevance to the study of twentieth-century China. First, they explain the process by which the modern Chinese state came to be abstracted from society as a set of structures and institutions governing the population, which Lam, following Timothy Mitchell, calls the "state effect." Second, they describe the emergence of a whole range of functionaries—census takers and social bureaucrats, beat cops and guards—with varying degrees of technical knowledge and specialized roles that came to lead or operate those institutions. Better understanding these two dynamics helps us grasp how the modern Chinese state has established itself since the start of the twentieth century as such a powerful governor of the population.

By the "state effect," Mitchell means how "mundane processes of spatial organization, temporal arrangement, functional specification, supervision and surveillance, and representation . . . create the effect of the state not only as an entity set apart from economy or society, but as a distinct dimension of structure, framework, codification, expertise, information, planning, and intentionality" (1999, 95). Lam, invoking Mitchell, argues that "[t]he practices of censuses and social surveys, and especially their emphasis on the observer versus the observed, produced a new, heightened, and oppositional state and society relationship in which the abstract structure [that] came to be understood as the state was increasingly seen as an object standing apart from the social world" (141). The state here emerges through the practice of new technologies of

knowledge designed to map and organize the national population as a whole. Specific practices of counting, categorizing, and calculating fostered the experience of the state as an abstracted entity capable of creating and possessing knowledge about society.<sup>3</sup>

Powerful state effects are also captured in Chen's analysis of institutions for poverty relief. In her account the state effect was generated through municipal systems that worked to differentiate among categories of poor, institutionalize those designated as vagrant and indigent, and impose various kinds of discipline and cultivation on them. These effects may have been clearest in the Nanjing decade, during which, "[i]n the arena of charity and punishment, newly constituted local governments interjected their resources, policing mechanisms, and disciplinary powers into the lives of the urban poor in new ways" (87). The fact that effective social relief came to be viewed as a key barometer of the validity of Nationalist government claims to sovereignty and legitimacy (91–92) indicates the extent to which social management was a vital element of modern state formation.

Just as important as these books' analyses of how the modern Chinese state emerged as an abstraction standing apart from society are their careful accounts of the many agents that ran the state's systems and managed its institutions. In terms of social surveys, Lam points out that although research studies might have been planned by social scientists or leading government officials, "more often than not they were carried out by specially trained fieldworkers, census takers, police officers, student trainees, health officers, and even bureaucrats" (6). For the late Qing census, for example, the government appointed a whole new category of "investigative supervisors" (*diaochezhang*), who oversaw "investigators" (*diaochayuan*), made up mostly of police officers or local elites, who actually carried out the census (69). Implementing the census and other social surveys created a veritable army of new state functionaries empowered to carry out specific tasks of governance. We later learn, for instance, that the 1928 municipal census in Nanjing alone entailed the mobilization of more than eight thousand census takers to simultaneously canvass all the homes in the city (121). These groups served as the concrete point

of interface between the abstractions of state and society.

Chen's analysis of systems for poverty relief and reform through labor reveal involvement by an even broader spectrum of state functionaries, ranging from social bureaucrats to workhouse guards, who played key roles in each aspect of poverty management. Perhaps most fascinating is the fact that initial distinctions among various categories of the poor were almost always made by police on the street. Repeatedly throughout *Guilty of Indigence*, we see instances where police decided on the spot whether particular individuals were legitimate working poor, career beggars, dangerous vagrants, or pitiful refugees (1, 33–34, 62–63, 100, 114, 139, 162, 184–185). However refined and systematic social scientific categories of urban poverty might have been, in practice they were often applied first by beat cops and police detectives. Though these groups had only limited social scientific training, if any, they were key agents in implementing these new systems of categorization. In the workhouses and relief homes we encounter many other state agents, ranging from a growing cadre of social bureaucrats in the Nationalist Party's Social Affairs Bureaus, to each institution's directors, social workers, administrative staffs, and guards. During periods of relative state stability, such as the Nanjing decade, we see systematic application of new social research techniques by social bureaucrats and more professionalized management of relief institutions (e.g., 93–96, 99), with Social Affairs Bureau staff in one instance even arranging marriages and adoptions (182–184). But in periods of turmoil and limited state resources, patterns of neglect and malfeasance were more likely (140, 195–196).

The importance of this tier of low-level state agents comes through clearly in Chen's remarkable account of early PRC efforts by the new Chinese Communist Party government to build a "New People's Village" on reclaimed land in Taibei County near Yancheng in Subei, from where many of Shanghai's poor came. Low-level cadres involved with managing the project resisted relocating to Subei from Shanghai, mismanaged the facility, and engaged in systematic corruption (219–221). These cadres' reluctance and resistance contributed in part to

the failure of this experiment, suggesting how essential willing and active participation by basic state functionaries was to effective state governance of the population.

Besides illuminating how the emergent state functioned on the ground, Chen's and Lam's careful tracking of the activities of these state functionaries has important implications for historical understanding of cultural and social developments in modern China. On the cultural or intellectual side, they remind us that new systems of knowledge may have been introduced by leading intellectuals and foreign-trained scholars, but they depended for their dissemination, implementation, and institutionalization on a much broader group of minor functionaries. These groups, Chen and Lam show us, had limited education or specialized training, yet they served as the main foot soldiers of new processes of social research and state governance. On the social side, these low-ranking functionaries—census takers, police, social bureaucrats, guards, and managers—formed a significant subset of the emergent class of “petty urbanites” (*xiao shimin*) that constituted a growing tier in modern Chinese cities.<sup>4</sup> Along with bank clerks, teachers, copy editors, and journalists, they helped form an emergent white-collar class that, as Chen demonstrates, sometimes hovered just above the working poor that they worked to regulate.

Although both of these books cover the tumultuous period of rapid change from the end of the Qing to the early PRC period, they emphasize the continuity of patterns set in the late Qing that persisted deep into the twentieth century. Chen demonstrates that regimes and social elites from the late Qing onward lamented the “parasitism” of the indigent poor and sought to transform them into productive citizens through enforced labor, contributing to a normative conception of social citizenship that equated it with positive contributions to the nation (228–230). Lam, for his part, suggests that a commitment to factual accuracy established through firsthand observation—“seeking truth from facts” (*shishi qiushi*)—characterized most approaches to social analysis, regardless of political persuasion, from the late Qing through the Republican period. Certainly, a governmental state abstracted from the society that it manages seems to have become a permanent feature of modern Chinese life. Whereas Chen makes

concrete and convincing connections between the Republican period and PRC patterns by extending her analysis in the epilogue into the first decade of the PRC, Lam is more suggestive and impressionistic about post-1949 dynamics.

Yet both volumes raise fascinating questions for the Maoist and post-Mao periods, questions that are too complex and challenging for either of these authors to have engaged fully in their respective books given their focus on the early twentieth century. For instance, one wonders about the fate of American-inspired social survey and statistical methods in the early PRC, as well as the long-term impact of Soviet-style social science research methods on Chinese scholarship. Similarly, how did the PRC state confront chronic urban poverty as it evolved over time and had to be seen as a structural feature of state socialism rather than as an unfortunate hangover from the “feudal past”? Perhaps most intriguing, how might the state conceived as a governmental agent abstracted from society have been affected by twenty-five years of Maoist mass mobilization that injected politics into all aspects of social life and promoted popular activism? In fact, could we see the Cultural Revolution in part as a mass political critique of and attack on the “state effect”? In their emphasis on long-term structural shifts in China’s knowledge culture, social governance, and state formation, these rich, persuasive studies on late Qing and Republican China open new avenues of inquiry for the second half of the twentieth century.

*Rob Culp is associate professor of history at Bard College. The author would like to thank Sherman Cochran, Tze-ki Hon, and Eugenia Lean for their thoughtful comments on earlier versions of this essay.*

### **Notes**

1. See, for instance, Liu (1995) and Rogaski (2004).
2. See Kuhn (1990).
3. Because he sees American influence on China’s emergent social sciences as being far more important than that of Japanese scholarship, Lam does not systematically analyze the role of Japanese social scientists working in China during the 1930s and 1940s (144). Yet it

seems possible that the extensive ethnographic research of the South Manchuria Railway Company (Mantetsu) in Manchuria and north China might have generated its own colonial “state effect.”

4. For the definitive characterization of “petty urbanites,” see Yeh (1992, 191–205; 2007, 101–151).

### *References*

- Culp, Robert, Eddy U, and Wen-hsin Yeh, eds. n.d. *Organized Knowledge in Action: Ideas, Institutions, and Identities in Modern China* (manuscript under review).
- Kuhn, Philip A. 1990. *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Liu, Lydia H. 1995. *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity, 1900–1937*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Mitchell, Timothy. 1999. “Society, Economy, and the State Effect.” In *State/Culture: State Formation after the Cultural Turn*, edited by George Steinmetz, 76–97. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Rogaski, Ruth. 2004. *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Yeh, Wen-hsin. 1992. “Progressive Journalism and Shanghai’s Petty Urbanites: Zou Taofen and the Shenghuo Enterprise, 1926–1945.” In *Shanghai Sojourners*, edited by Frederic Wakeman Jr. and Wen-hsin Yeh, 186–238. Berkeley: Institute for East Asian Studies and Center for Chinese Studies, University of California.
- . 2007. *Shanghai Splendor: Economic Sentiments and the Making of Modern China, 1843–1949*. Berkeley: University of California Press.