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## Book Review: *A Passion for Facts* by Tong Lam

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## Book Review: *A Passion for Facts*

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Lam, Tong. *A Passion for Facts: Social Surveys and the Construction of the Chinese Nation State, 1900-1949*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. xiii, 263 pp., \$60.00 (cloth).

By Maggie Clinton



Tong Lam’s engaging new study *A Passion for Facts* analyzes the processes by which modern modes of apprehending and ordering the social world were forced upon and ultimately embraced by Chinese political and intellectual elites during the late Qing and Republican periods. Lam focuses on the rise of the “social survey” (*shehui diaocha*) as a means of knowing and constituting a new object called “society” (*shehui*), as well as the epistemological violence of imperialism that rendered the social survey a seemingly natural way of investigating the world. By the time the Nationalists assumed state power in 1927, Lam argues, “seeking truth from facts” (*shishi qiushi*) gathered via empirical observation of social phenomena had supplanted the methods of text-oriented evidential scholarship prevalent during the Qing. *A Passion for Facts* explicates this paradigm shift in terms of the forms of imperialism to which China was subjected, resulting in a novel and compelling contribution to studies of colonialism, knowledge production, and state-society relations in modern China.

Lam pursues three primary lines of argument. Although these lines do not always successfully intersect, each is provocative and unfolds with illuminating detail. First, the book addresses how nineteenth-century colonialist discourse, epitomized by the writings of Arthur Smith, disparaged

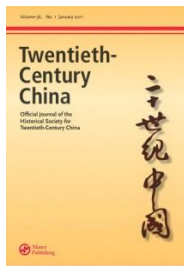
Chinese people for disregarding time and concrete particulars, and for generally lacking facts about themselves. As China was subjected to imperialist violence that rendered it commensurate with global capitalism, the concomitant invalidation of indigenous forms of knowledge collectively traumatized Chinese intellectual and political elites and charted the winding road by which they came to embrace the social fact as a “medium for discerning the truth about the human world” (p. 6). Second, the book traces how the adoption of new enumerative modalities (in particular a revamped census) by the late Qing and Republican states not only rendered society legible to the state in new ways, but also disciplined citizens to recognize themselves as members of a coeval national community. By the 1930s, this generated what Lam, following Timothy Mitchell, calls the “state effect” by which social surveys, as well as state-affiliated surveyors, effectively conjured the state into being as an entity apparently distinct from society. Third, as per the word “passion” in the book’s title, Lam argues that objective facts gathered by social surveyors inevitably contained traces of sentiment. These extra-scientific traces, which became manifest in surveyors’ narratives of hardship and sacrifice, had to be locked away in what Bruno Latour has called a “black box” if facts so gathered were to successfully assume the position of authoritative truth.

The six chapters plus introduction and epilogue that comprise Lam’s study develop these points and many others. The introduction and Chapter 1 establish the historical and theoretical stakes of the project. Chapters 2 and 3 chart transformations in Qing state methods for knowing and tabulating Qing subjects. These chapters pivot around a fascinating analysis of the 1909 census that attempted to collect population data “using a singular enumerative framework,” as well as the anti-census riots that revealed popular dissatisfaction with the invasive, homogenizing efforts of the modernizing state (p. 63). Chapters 4 through 6 turn to the 1920s and 1930s, highlighting the ways in which the by-now widespread practice of social survey research functioned to gather “empirical evidence of the nation,” in particular at the hands of surveyors employed by the Nationalist state and affiliated research institutes (p. 93). Here, Lam elaborates on how Nationalist-sponsored surveys and censuses graphed Chinese society as uneven and heterogeneous, blighted by “backwards” and “immoral” populations, which in turn prepared the ground for state expansion and biopolitical intervention. Lam also sheds light on the ways in which researchers, many of them trained in methods of American positivist social science, came to see the endurance of hardship and toil as a necessary precondition for the production of truthful facts. Particularly telling are elite characterizations of life among the impoverished, such as researcher Li Jinghan’s exhortation to investigators to accustom themselves to “the peasants’ smell, their disgusting food, and their unhygienic condition” (p. 163).

The book’s insights are too numerous to summarize here, but an important one involves Lam’s attention to the speed and enthusiasm with which certain liberal intellectuals turned colonial derision of China’s ostensible factual deficiencies and general “backwardness” against fellow nationals, in particular subaltern populations. Lam presents Hu Shi’s character “Mr. *Chabuduo*,” who supposedly embodied Chinese imprecision, in this light, as well as James Yen’s frustration with Ding county peasants who refused to yield the kind of factual information he desired. Much of Chapter 6 discusses liberal researchers who criticized the urban bias of the Nationalist state that provided an umbrella for their own endeavors, and who also characterized the peasantry as ignorant and uncivilized. This chapter is careful to note that Republican-period social scientific practice was neither standardized nor politically univocal; investigators worked with “different

assumptions, methods, theories, and conceptual categories,” and society itself was “far from a stable and well-defined object” (p. 142). In this vein, Lam discusses the rural surveys of Mao Zedong and Marxist Chen Hansheng, but the overarching point is to underscore Republican-period struggles between “which vision of truth ... would be elevated and implemented” and which vision would be “delegitimized and suppressed” (p. 143). Although this was certainly at issue, Lam might have reflected more deeply on the ways in which certain methodologies and social perspectives countered rather than facilitated capitalistic development and hierarchical national integration, and how the plurality of approaches to “the social” suggest fissures in the Nationalist “state effect.”

Lastly, Lam might have pushed his conclusions about the role of affect in the production of objective truth a bit further, in particular regarding its gendered implications. For instance, how did the emphasis on hardship and long hours in the field render the production of knowledge a masculine endeavor? What did this mean for truths generated about the emergent social category “women”? As these questions are intended to suggest, readers will find *A Passion for Facts* compellingly written, thoroughly researched, and thought-provoking.



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