

Surveying for Salvation: The Social Survey Movement in China, 1900-1940

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In May 1930, Mao Zedong, then Secretary of the Frontline Committee of the Fourth Army of the Chinese Red Army, wrote an influential essay opposing dogmatist thinking among his comrades. Titled *Oppose Book Worship*, the essay opens with a now-famous subtitle: “No investigation, no right to speak” (Mao 1971: 40). “Is it too harsh?” Mao asks in his characteristic hypophoric style. “Not in the least,” he immediately answers, asserting that without investigation, one can only talk nonsense—and talking nonsense does nothing to solve problems. He continues in his impassioned tone: “How can a Communist keep his eyes shut and talk nonsense? It won’t do! It won’t do! You must investigate! You must not talk nonsense!” (ibid.).

But how should a Communist conduct an investigation? Mao emphasized the importance of employing appropriate methods to study socioeconomic conditions. He warned against superficial approaches, cautioning that investigations should not resemble “a grocer’s accounts,” the assembly of “many strange tales a country bumpkin hears when he comes to town,” or “a distant view of a populous city from a mountain top.” Instead, effective investigation, he argued, must examine “the present situation of each class and the ups and downs of its development” (Mao 1971: 44). According to Mao, the purpose of investigation is to understand interclass relationships, thereby expanding the revolutionary force by securing the support of revolutionary and pro-revolutionary classes. This process requires specific techniques. In the final section of his essay, he outlined several methods, including holding fact-finding meetings with individuals familiar with political and economic conditions, preparing detailed outlines to guide the investigation, personally participating in fieldwork, and diligently taking notes.

Mao’s approach to social investigation and research (*diaocha yanjiu*) is now upheld in China as one of the most valuable traditions of the Chinese Communist Party (CPC). However, this so-called treasured tradition may have deeper historical roots. A decade before Mao wrote this essay, Chinese social scientists had already employed social surveys as a means to rebuild and rejuvenate the Chinese nation. Li Jinghan (Franklin Ching-han Lee), a key advocate of social surveys, stated in his book on survey methods that their purpose was to “recover the true face of China”—a nation distinct from others in its culture, national spirit, and social structures—while also proposing a path for “national salvation” (Li 1933: 4). Even the methods Mao proposed can

be traced back to the development of social sciences in the early twentieth century. What he referred to as fact-finding meetings were known to sociologists as focus groups. His emphasis on personal involvement, detailed note-taking, and structured survey outlines closely mirrored the standard practices of Chinese survey experts at the time.

Social surveys were not exclusively regarded by Chinese intellectuals as a reformatory or revolutionary tool. In the early twentieth century, they were also widely employed in the United States as a means of identifying and addressing social problems. Unlike nationwide censuses—designed, organized, and implemented primarily by the state—American social surveys of this period were largely conducted by non-state actors, including academics (sociologists and other social scientists), social workers, and charitable organizations. These surveys often focused on the living conditions of specific groups within particular cities or regions, with the Pittsburgh Surveys of 1907–1908 being among the most notable examples.

In fact, both China and the United States experienced an unprecedented enthusiasm for collecting societal data through surveys in the first three decades of the twentieth century. This fervor was reflected in the term used to describe the surveyors' activities: *the Social Survey Movement*, a phrase coincidentally shared by both countries. It was not merely an intellectual or scientific movement confined to academia (Frickel and Gross 2005), but a social movement with significant political implications, as survey organizers and researchers understood that their data served not only as a tool for research and problem-solving but also as a means for reforming—and even reconstructing—the state and society. The sheer number of social surveys conducted during these three decades further underscores their social and political influence. By 1928, over 2,775 social surveys had been conducted in the United States (Eaton and Harrison 1930), while in China, 9,127 surveys were carried out between 1927 and 1935 (Lam 2011). Most of these survey reports were accessible to academics, government officials, and even the general public (through newspapers or other social media). Their responses often shaped the direction of both the survey movement and national politics.

Despite its achievements in political and academic spheres, the Social Survey Movement in both countries lost momentum by the 1930s. However, unlike in the United States, where local social surveys were replaced by large-scale probability sample surveys, making governments, universities, and corporations as the primary survey institutions (Bulmer et al. 1991), the Chinese survey movement evolved in a different direction, emphasizing qualitative methods instead. As

Chinese survey researchers increasingly turned their attention to rural areas, driven in part by the worsening rural economic conditions and growing political instability, ethnographic approaches and community studies gradually became the dominant methods of social investigation.

Building on these parallels and divergences in the survey movements, this article seeks to address the following questions: Why did various types of nonstate researchers emerge as key producers of social survey data in early twentieth-century China? Why, compared to the more quantitative turn of the survey movement in the United States, were social surveys replaced in China by decentralized qualitative studies? What are the lasting impacts of the Social Survey Movement on Chinese academia, politics, and society?

To explore these questions, this article engages with three main bodies of literature: the history of sociology, the sociology of professions and expertise, and state-society relations. Only a handful of books and articles focus on the trajectory of these survey movements, and most frame the movement as merely an episode in the history of American or Chinese sociology. For example, Bulmer, Bales, and Sklar (1991) examined the role of survey techniques in the development of the survey movement. They argue that social surveys acted as transformative tools that enabled sociologists to quantitatively observe social facts. However, the application of such techniques also triggered debates over whether social surveys should be more scientific or problem-solving oriented, ultimately leading to the bifurcation between academic and policy-related surveys in the U.S. Bulmer et al.'s analysis of the survey movement aligns with what Frickel and Gross (2005: 206) call an "intellectual/scientific movement," defined as "collective efforts to pursue research programs or projects for thought in the face of resistance from others in the scientific or intellectual community." However, it would be one-sided to focus solely on the connection between social scientists and surveys, as many surveys were organized and conducted by non-academic reformers and revolutionaries whose political ideals should not be downplayed.

The literature on the sociology of professions and knowledge may offer a complementary perspective for understanding this dynamic. As survey organizers had to mediate between state officials, the media, reform foundations, and local community members to conduct their research or advance their political ideals, one may ask whether these surveyors leveraged their brokerage position to become free-floating intellectuals, a class-in-itself, or professionals. The sociology of professions and expertise helps address this question by examining the expertise these survey organizers acquired, the resources they mobilized, and the institutions they occupied (Medvetz

2012; Kellogg 2014; de Souza Leão and Eyal 2019). It also explains why this group faded away in the 1930s by analyzing intergroup competition and cooperation across multiple social arenas (Eyal 2013; Abbott 1988, 1995, 2005).

The third body of literature focuses on state-society relations. Data collection is often viewed as part of the state's capacity to penetrate into society (Scott 1998), but the response from society has largely been overlooked. Recent studies on surveys and censuses challenge this state-centered perspective, emphasizing the importance of consent-building and cooperation between state and social actors in generating census data (Emigh, Riley and Ahmed 2015). However, such consensus and cooperation occur only within specific sociopolitical contexts. Tong Lam's study on Chinese social surveys suggests that the fragmented Chinese state in the early 20th century provided intellectuals with greater autonomy to explore and experiment with various reformist plans, using the data they collected as a foundation (Lam 2011)

The data for this research can be classified into three categories based on their sources and content. The first category consists of social survey reports, typically published in journals and newspapers or compiled into books in the early twentieth century. The second category includes biographies of individuals who designed, organized, and conducted social surveys, such as government officials, university professors, social reformers, and revolutionaries. It also encompasses archival materials related to the research institutes and social organizations involved in the survey movements. The third category comprises government documents related to social surveys in the first three decades of the twentieth century, including records from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) archives.

This article takes a processual and relational approach to exploring the development of the Chinese survey movement. It first analyzes different groups and generations of social survey experts, with a particular focus on their network structures to identify patterns of conflict and collaboration among them. It also emphasizes the importance of the sequence of events in the history of Chinese survey movement and, drawing upon Haydu's (1998) problem-solving perspective, frame them as efforts to address recurring social problems. Additionally, it seeks to overcome the "correspondence problem" in Haydu's framework—the challenge of aligning the social problems identified by scholars with those experienced by social actors (who, in my case, include scholars themselves). To address this issue, my research integrates a pragmatist

perspective, focusing on “existing human communities” where problems and solutions emerge through discussion processes (Prasad 2021: 151).

My preliminary findings suggest that survey expertise in China underwent significant transformations over three decades, as different groups of survey experts—ranging from academic sociologists to political activists—drew upon and adapted investigative methods from both Western sociological and anthropological traditions as well as Chinese intellectual legacies. This evolution in survey practices was shaped not only by methodological shifts but also by broader political and ideological currents. At the same time, competition and collaboration among various survey organizers, along with their interactions with the state and foreign institutions, extended the influence of the survey movement beyond academia and into political and public spheres. These interactions likely played a role in shaping Mao’s understanding of social surveys, as he refined survey techniques to mobilize and organize the masses for revolutionary purposes. The emergence of non-state actors as primary data collectors further underscores a distinct pattern of state-society relations in early twentieth-century China. The expansion of the survey movement beyond formal state institutions highlights both the fragmented state's limited capacity to systematically gather societal data and the contested nature of knowledge production and policy-making during this period.

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