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## SPECIAL ISSUE

# Ciphering and Ruling Modern China's Population

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The special issue "Ciphering and Ruling Modern China's Population" focuses on the increasing efforts to quantify the Chinese population beginning in the twentieth century. The introduction explains how it does not understand numbers as neutral entities reflecting objective facts but as cyphers that encode hidden realities and emerge from concrete historical contexts. Furthermore, it summarises the four contributions to the special issue: Drawing on approaches from intellectual and conceptual history as well as the sociology of science, they examine Liang Qichao's early demand for statistics, attempts to quantify China's Muslim population, Sun Yat-sen's evolving obsession with the "400 million Chinese", and the surprising wealth of statistical production in warlord-ruled Shanxi province. The authors ask why numbers, and statistical ones in particular, became so alluring and even fetishised, despite those involved in the production and use of the numbers being aware of their imprecision. Why did statistics become a *sine qua non* for governing China's population? And how did specific numbers become central political terms? The authors also explore how numbers were used to construct arguments about China's "population", "society", and "people" and how these arguments changed over time.

本專刊《近代中國人口的編碼與治理》聚焦二十世紀以來在量化中國人口方面的不懈努力。數字並非中立地反映客觀事實，而是產生於特定歷史背景、用以藏匿現實的密碼。本專刊收錄的四篇論文綜合運用思想史、概念史以及科學社會學的研究方法，分別探討了梁啟超對統計的早期需求、中國穆斯林人口量化的初步嘗試、孫中山對“四萬萬中國人”的執著探究、以及軍閥統治下山西統計工作的驚人成就。並進一步探究了為什麼數位（尤其是統計資料）明明不精確，但時人仍為之癡迷？統計資料何以成為治理中國人口的必要條件？特定數位怎樣成為核心政治術語？統計資料如何被用以建構關於中國“人口”、“社會”及“人民”的論述以及這些論述的歷時性演變。

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**Keywords:** Quantification, Statistics, Modern China, Population, Society

**關鍵詞：** 量化，統計，近代中國，人口，社會

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Numbers pertaining to the size and evolution of the population were of concern to the rulers of China throughout the imperial era. Upon entering the twentieth century, however, the urge to quantify the population increased considerably. In these times, not merely politicians and bureaucrats, but also intellectuals, scientists, and social activists, began to seek out and gather information about the population in much more detailed and diverse manners. Furthermore, in concert with all kinds of attempts to build a modern state, new methods of collecting and analysing numbers were introduced, known generally as “statistics” (*tongji* 統計). The Qing established a Bureau of Statistics in the final years of its existence (Bréard 2008), which was followed by similar institutions under various warlord regimes and the KMT central government, paving the way for a “golden age of statistics” during the Nanjing decade (Paulès 2020). Statistical numbers were seen to describe social reality in an unambiguous way and were supposed to serve as a basis for governmental measures and the determination of policy goals. However, numbers that emerged from non-scientific contexts were also alleged to be objective references and rarely underwent scrutiny after their introduction.

While countless studies deal with the composition of China’s population and demographic politics (e.g. Blayo 1997; Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005; Mullaney 2011), this special issue focuses on the intellectual, political, and social production aspects, as well as the afterlife of numbers, ratios, and quotas in relation to the Chinese population that sometimes possessed only the semblance of having been scientifically produced. Rather than simply viewing these numbers as the objective outcome of quantitative research that represented reality or shaped the nation (Patriarca 1996), numbers are and were understood by extension as cyphers that encode a hidden reality that stretches beyond their numerical actuality. Such cyphers are the central focus and the very object of historical inquiry: the contributions to this special issue tackle discourses, concepts, and practices related to the emergence, circulation, transformation, adaptation, persistence, and disposal of numerical values related to population from the late Qing period to the Republican era (i.e., 1900–1949).

Drawing on approaches from intellectual and conceptual history as well as the sociology of science, the individual articles examine how numbers are “alive” and enmeshed in specific historical contexts, repeatedly crossing functional boundaries, as they represent, influence, and transform the lives of individuals, social groups, and political concepts. The central concerns of the following articles are therefore “why” and “how”: Why do numbers become so alluring and even fetishized, despite those involved in the production and use of the numbers being aware of their imprecision? Why was it that statistics became a *sine qua non* for governing China’s population? And how did specific numbers become central political terms or even concepts? We are also interested in how numbers were used to construct arguments and establish narratives about China’s “population”, “society”, and “people”. How and why did their meanings and practical application change?

**Stefan Christ's** article "The Quantification of Chinese Society: Why Did Liang Qichao Ask for Statistics?" addresses the question of what exactly propelled the increasing urge to quantify the Chinese population in the twentieth century. He argues that this trend is inherently linked to the transition from a hierarchically stratified society to one that was more functionally differentiated, in correlation with the emergence of the new concept of *shehui* 社會 (Vogelsang 2012). He explores the relationship between social differentiation and quantification by comparing an eighteenth-century essay by Qian Weicheng (1720–1772), which presents a rather typical late imperial vision of social order, with an early twentieth-century article by Liang Qichao (1873–1929). The latter text was one of the first to express concern about the lack of numbers and statistics regarding the Chinese population. Christ illustrates how changing perceptions of social contingency, along with new forms of social self-observation, led to an increase in quantification efforts and a fundamental reconsideration of social relationships. The mere anticipation of the ability to produce more detailed and accurate statistics in the future already altered Liang Qichao's perspective on and evaluation of society; he heralded the "avalanche of numbers" (Hacking 1982) that would descend upon China in the twentieth century.

Presuming that numbers have a history of their own, much like living entities, two of the articles look at the "birth" and "life cycle" of numerical values, probing how they are created out of attempts at quantification or statistical surveys and subsequently undergo conceptual changes and developments which transcend their inception. While their precise origin was often blurred, specific numbers became standard terms (cf. Bréard 2019) that, for instance, served as a means of policy legitimisation. We also see them develop into powerful symbols or catchphrases that contributed to political and social mobilisation (cf. Merry et al. 2015). Eventually, for various reasons depending on the case at hand, they pass away into oblivion.<sup>1</sup>

**Li Gang's** article "Recognition through Numbers: Muslim Population Numbers and the Hui in Modern China" examines the efforts to quantify the Muslim population in China during the late Qing and Republican periods. He explores how various social actors—Western missionaries, Chinese scholars, and Muslim Chinese—, arrived at their population estimates and investigates their motivations for wanting to count the Muslim population in the first place. Li demonstrates immediate political reasons connected to parliamentary representation in the new Republic. However, there were also broader questions of identity at stake, particularly regarding the Hui as a distinct group within the framework of the modern Chinese nation-state, as well as issues surrounding religious revival and social reform. Li's case study

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<sup>1</sup> A biographic approach to numbers was taken in a conference on "Biographies of Numbers" organised by A. Bréard at FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg in July 2022 and financially supported by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. Two contributions in this special issue (Li; Roctus) result from this conference; four others, which lean more towards the history of science (Bréard 2025b; Gänger 2025; Ghosh 2025; Nocchi 2025), can be found in a Focus Section on "Global Life Histories of Numbers" in *ISIS* 116.1 (Bréard 2025a).

shows that not only did the state have an interest in quantifying the population, but civil society actors also undertook statistical surveys. They “questioned the unquestionable” (Desrosières 1992), that is they rejected those numbers which they deemed disconnected from reality but were employed by state actors as supposedly objective numbers. By looking at the controversies, Li traces how many different estimates converged around the figure of fifty million, which for a time was widely promoted as the definite number of Muslims in China.

**Jasper Roctus**’s article “Sun Yat-sen, ‘400 million Chinese’, and the Fear of Demographic Stagnation in Early Twentieth-century China” is the second article in this special issue that examines the origins and the political life of a cypher regarding the Chinese population. Roctus traces how and why Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), the first provisional president of the Republic of China in 1912, used the widespread trope of the “400 million Chinese” despite the lack of evidence for this alleged population number. From celebrating the size of the Chinese population and its revolutionary potential in the face of a tiny minority of foreign oppressors before the 1911 Revolution to fears about stagnation in population growth compared to the other great nations in the 1920s, Sun continually referred to the “400 million Chinese” in his speeches and writings. Ultimately, when systematising his philosophy in 1924, Sun used “400 million Chinese” to generate a sense of urgency for the implementation of his *minzu* 民族 (“Nationalism”) doctrine, the first of three doctrines constituting his chief political philosophy, the Three Principles of the People. As Roctus concludes, the vagueness surrounding this number was probably an asset in Sun’s eyes, because it allowed him to pragmatically adjust its (ethnic) definition along with his shifting political aims.

The last article, “Turning Society into Graphs: Early Twentieth-Century Statistical Undertakings in Shanxi Province”, co-written by **Andrea Bréard**, **Stefan Christ** and **Tang Lina**, investigates the statistical production under the warlord regime of Yan Xishan (1883–1960). The early Shanxi statistics are notable for their consistency, wealth of data, and pioneering experimentation in graphical representation. While no census was ever successfully completed for all of China under the Republic, the poor province of Shanxi published new population statistics every year since 1919. For the first time, this article examines the actors and institutions involved, supplies a close reading of Yan Xishan’s preface to the earliest population statistics compilation, and analyses examples of statistics and statistical graphs towards a better understanding of the reasons, circumstances, and results surrounding Shanxi’s production of statistics between 1919 and 1931. The authors focus on how these efforts figured into Yan Xishan’s modernisation and state-building endeavours and the meaning created through visualising the statistical numbers through diagrams. Their findings show that the high degree of experimentation reveals an uncertainty about graphical representation, partly explained by the fact that statistical production in Shanxi was not the outcome of long-term deliberation within an established “scientific community”. Instead, it was the product of a state bureaucracy operating under challenging circumstances and with personnel that had received a limited degree of formal training, in spite of the fact that, as the authors also reveal,

statistics occupied a prominent position in one of the provincial capital's vocational schools. The visualised statistics, in particular, manifest a political primacy in communicating about Shanxi's society and its governance. They clearly depict which aspects were of central concern to Shanxi's governor and, simultaneously, the *raisons d'être* of his statistical endeavours. What statistical tables could not accomplish, statistical graphs could at first glance: namely, ordering social and demographic categories. Ordering them symmetrically was also an expression of control and rule over the population, with the ultimate goal of enhancing state capacity and producing social progress in Shanxi.

Altogether, the four articles in this special issue demonstrate how and why the language of numbers for all or parts of China's population came to play an essential role in political and social life. They show how the construction of statistical objects—tables, diagrams, categorizations, and imagined quantities—rendered societal and demographic observations visible and debatable in numerical terms. As it turns out, ciphering the population was a crucial step in constructing—and ruling—modern Chinese society.

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