



OUT OF FOCUS: QUANTIFICATION
AND THE SPECTER OF PROGRESS
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Tong Lam received his Ph.D. in History at the University of Chicago in 2003 and is Associate Professor of History at the University of Toronto. His research covers modern and contemporary China, with special focuses on empire and nation, science and technology, and urban space. His first book, *A Passion for Facts: Social Surveys and the Construction of the Chinese Nation-State, 1900–1949* (2011), analyzes the profound consequences of the emergence of the “social fact” and social survey research in modern China. Currently, he is conducting research on the global history of Chinese science and technology parks that examines especially the interweaving history of science and technology, economic development and urban governance. Another of his new projects, called “The Qing Empire Strikes Back”, is a study of late Qing China’s ambitious attempt to transform itself into a modern colonial power in an era of intense imperialist rivalries. Lam has exhibited his work in the United States, China, and Germany. His photo essay book, *Abandoned Futures: A Journey to the Posthuman World* (2013), is an intellectual provocation based on post-apocalyptic landscapes from around the world. At present, he is centrally involved in a collaborative multimedia project that examines the relationship between outdoor film projections, media technologies, and spectacle in post-socialist China. – Address: Department of History, University of Toronto, Sidney Smith Hall, Room 2074, 100 St. George Street, Toronto, ON M5S 3G3, Canada. E-mail: tong.lam@utoronto.ca

China’s economic growth in the past few decades has been unprecedented. However, much of this material progress has so far been measured only in numerical terms. For example, the size of mega-cities, the height of skyscrapers, and the length of high-speed

rails are often cited as indicators of the country's urbanization and economic progress. Many observers have even used the concept of the "Chinese speed" to characterize the country's staggering growth, suggesting that China's heightened path of development can be quantified objectively, particularly in terms of the linear, secular, and industrial time.

Indeed, in so far as the linear progressive time is concerned, Chinese mega-cities have arguably surpassed New York, London, Tokyo, and other leading cities in the developed world as the site to imagine the excitement and unease of the future. Few visitors to China today would disagree that Chinese cities seem to simultaneously define the dreamworld and dystopia in the most extreme way. Amid the nonstop construction of some of the world's most spectacular architecture are the dreadful urban renewals that entail forced relocation, dispossession, and violent displacement that are driven by the collusion of local and global forces.

It was in this sense that I found Berlin an unusually inspiring place to contemplate the history of quantification as well as the unquantifiable spectral world. As a member of the Quantification Focus Group this year, I certainly benefited greatly from conversations with other Fellows inside and outside of the group. This was particularly the case since one of my new book-length projects is about the history of Chinese science and technology parks, officially known as high-tech innovation zones. While the emergence of these exclusive zones is at least partially linked to the history of exemplary spaces and mass mobilization (i.e., communes, gated factory compounds, etc.) from the Communist era, the management and productivity of these zones are almost always gauged by quantifiable performance indicators. My ongoing research, in short, intersects productively with the works by other members of the focus group. Those ongoing projects of our group members include, but are not limited to, critical studies of the use of accounting practices in prison management in the UK, the emergence of the national economy in India, the rise of insanity as a statistical category in Europe, and the history of credit rating in the United States.

Meanwhile, being in Berlin also allowed me to turn the city into a laboratory for historical thinking, chiefly in the sense of what the German philosopher Walter Benjamin has come to call allegorical thinking. For instance, the construction cranes that dot Berlin's skyline not only represent anticipation, but also violence and destruction. Likewise, the absence and emptiness inhabited by these machines not only invoke a profound sense of loss, they also remind the historian of his or her responsibility to rescue the stories that have been repressed, silenced, and erased by progress. As Benjamin noted, "there is no document of civilization that is not simultaneously a document of barbarism". In a

sense, if the construction cranes in Mitte and Potsdamer Platz entail hope and anticipation, the crumbled or neglected structures from the former GDR are the underside of the very same process.

Precisely for this reason, I set out to visually document the ruins of the GDR, including the remnant of former Soviet and East German military bases around Berlin that are outside of mainstream scholarly focus. Buried deep in the forests, the debris of history as such reveals a glimpse into the past that has not been examined adequately. Indeed, twenty-five years after 1989, we have now increasingly realized that the end of the Cold War marks not the end of history, but the beginning of a new era of global conflicts, violence, and economic extraction.

There is no surprise that 1989 was also a watershed year for China. As the former Wiko Fellow Wang Hui has argued, the events in the Tiananmen Square in 1989 were not so much a Communist regime crushing a democratic uprising, as has often been misread in the mainstream media. Rather, it was an emerging neoliberal regime fighting for its survival after a decade of privatization. The success of the military crackdown on the social movement in 1989 has therefore effectively silenced and foreclosed any viable or even imaginary alternatives to global capitalism in China.

This explains why it was in the early 1990s that China's spectacular economic growth began to take off. Since then, science and technology parks have increasingly become a major engine for economic transformation and development. Significantly, it was also precisely in the 1990s that socialist and post-socialist ruins of all kinds – derelict factories, outdated amusement parks, empty shopping malls, unoccupied instant cities, and environmentally hazardous wastelands – began to mushroom all over China. If China's new skyscrapers and construction sites are like Berlin's construction cranes, encapsulating aspirations and visions of progress, then Chinese socialist and post-socialist ruins and wastelands are similar to those GDR ruins, representing historical debris and the ghosts of history. Unlike those legible and quantifiable new buildings, ruins are the specter of growth and progress that has been rendered invisible, unquantifiable, and forgotten.

Ultimately, with Wiko's generous support, some of my projections (photographs and video installations) were exhibited at Wiko. All in all, in a very productive way, my residence in Berlin compelled me to further contemplate the connection between my different projects, especially the relationship between scholarship and art. It also propelled me to think creatively about how art could be used to engage research questions and vice versa.



Statistics 1: The Haus der Statistik once used by the Ministry for State Security (Stasi) in Mitte, Berlin.



Statistics 2: A commemoration wall in the Haus der Offiziere in the former Soviet military base in Wünsdorf, Brandenburg.