

Chinese Scientism and Political Rituals in Leprosy Control

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This article examines why and how China achieved an internationally acclaimed success in leprosy control within 25 years when this gigantic country was undergoing the close-door policy and was economically underdeveloped during its collectivization era (1950s-early 1980s). By viewing Marxist scientism as the national ethos in contemporary China's nation-building, this article reveals how the so-called scientific objectivity suppressed the involved individuals' subjectivities and emotions throughout the disease control campaign. However, in the meantime, those objectified individuals were mobilized to express their agency in internalizing and strengthening their beliefs and practices under the state-sanctioned ideological rubric. Leprosy was on the newly established socialist China's priority list of epidemics to be eliminated. The state engaged in this grand hygienic campaign in which state agents were mobilized to hunt for germs and their victims, all in the name of scientism and patriotism. This grand campaign was full of beliefs and myths surrounding science, ritualized moral persuasion and stigma, all of which were complicated and sometimes paradoxical in nature and constituted the fabric of China's leprosy control during the collectivization era. The case of China's leprosy control illustrates the fact that in evaluating disease control, we often emphasize the scientific achievement over the symbolic forces of human actors and their perceived values. This article sheds light on the non-scientific ideals and emotions in disease control that might have been the more critical factors in determining the success or failure of disease governance than we previously thought.

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