Vaccinating the Nation: Immunology and Public Health in Twentieth-Century China

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5pm, Oct 28 (Wed), 2015; Rooms 8 & 9, FAMES

Abstract: The Second World War made vaccination a cornerstone of public health in China. When Japan invaded eastern China in 1937, the Nationalist government moved its wartime capital to Chongqing, in Sichuan. Physicians and biomedical researchers fled with the Nationalists to China’s southwest borderlands. Many found refuge in Kunming, capital of Yunnan province. There, a biomedical community emerged whose members sought to control epidemics by developing vaccines. Their work enfolded Yunnan and most of western China into a global medical supply network that reached as far as Buenos Aires, Bucharest, and Cairo. I argue that the gathering of biomedical professionals in China’s wartime southwest gave vaccination new meaning as an essential practice in twentieth-century China. It also permitted the post-1949 development of large-scale health programs that immunized at least eighty-five percent of the Chinese population against smallpox and other diseases. New archival sources from Yunnan demonstrate the extent to which vaccination became a basic responsibility of local government and an emergent feature of citizenship in the early People’s Republic. The origin of modern universal immunization practices in wartime epidemic control therefore represents a significant legacy of the Nationalist state in the early PRC.
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Mary Augusta Brazelton is a University Lecturer in History and Philosophy of Science at Cambridge. A historian of science and medicine in modern China, she is currently completing a book manuscript on the history of vaccination and immunology in China entitled *Enduring Immunizations: Public Health and Biomedicine in Chinese War and Revolution*. Her research interests lie broadly in historical intersections of clinical medicine, the life sciences, and public health around the world. She earned her doctorate at Yale in the history of science and medicine. She has taught at Tufts University and published in the journal *Twentieth Century China*.