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EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Key Issues in Historical Anthropology: A View from “South China”

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I was asked by Professor David Faure, the organizer of a panel on the historical anthropology of Chinese society at the AAS-in-Asia conference held in Singapore (July 17–19, 2014), to briefly provide a framework for the papers. This brief essay organizes and summarizes the analytical themes about which a group of us who work on Chinese history and culture have given much thought.

Texts and Lifeworlds

In 1985, David Faure and I bonded with young historians from Zhongshan University (later renamed Sun Yat-sen University) in Guangzhou, China. At the time, we were inspired by the French Annales School of historical research, in particular the anthropologically oriented work of Marc Bloch. Just as French historians were exploring the multiscalar factors in economy, society, and culture that underlay the unfolding of historical events, anthropologists were moving away from evolutionary, functional, and structuralist views of culture. These scholars began to stress culture’s processual, negotiated construction in time and space. Anticipating synergy, we focused on the purposeful, meaningful actions of individuals and groups who make history as they make their lifeworlds.

Over the years, we have exposed our China colleagues to classic works in European historiography. These works (by such scholars as Fernand Braudel, Jacques Le Goff, Georges Duby, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Karl Polanyi, Peter Burke, Carlo Ginzburg, Natalie Davis, David Sabeau, William Sewell, Lawrence Stone, Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, and Alan MacFarlane) cover topics ranging from economy and demography to gender, class, contested worlds of meaning, and moral imagination. We have also paid attention to social scientists who appreciate the interpretive and historically contingent nature of culture, power, and placemaking (including Philip Abrams, Clifford Geertz, James Scott, Eric Wolf,

Bernard Cohn, Janet Abu-Lughod, Jack Goody, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Akhil Gupta, and James Ferguson). Their works extend analytical lenses on topics ranging from individual human agents to non-Eurocentric world systems.

These scholarly works have guided our pursuits in historical anthropology. We connect the scrutiny of ethnographic encounters and archival texts with critical social theories. Considering that “the past is a foreign country” (Lowenthal 1985), we position culture-making in precise historical context. In our view, cultural traditions are repeatedly staged and reinvented for particular purposes, and memories are selective. One should sleuth out the marginalized and silenced voices hidden between the lines of seemingly hegemonic frames of mind and matter. What is said, what is left unsaid, how knowledge is recognized and conveyed, and how researchers are positioned are equally important questions in analytical terms. By engaging in self-reflective musing and critical reading of “texts,” we are able to uncover multiple meanings in the narratives we encounter in archives and in fieldwork.¹

Historicizing Locality and Translocality

As we “walked the field” in South China in the past decades, our interdisciplinary approach to Chinese culture and history earned us a nickname—the “South China Gang.” We have never identified ourselves as such, because our work intentionally reaches far beyond a regional identity. We are, indeed, deeply interested in local history, but our explorations do not stop at the empirical details of a place or event. Instead, we triangulate information from varied sources, be they official or popular, local or translocal, to illustrate the narrative strategies and power play of actors occupying multiscalar positions and to articulate the structuring dynamics between human actors and the larger environments in which they find themselves. We infuse in-depth understandings of microdynamics with an appreciation for resources embedded in broad political economies, such as regional ecologies, dynastic fortunes, nation-state formation, and global flows of capital. Ultimately, our understanding of local culture and society hinges on the historical junctures that constitute them.

In an essay titled “The Original Translocal Society and Its Modern Fate: Historical and Post-Reform South China” (2003), David Faure and I argue that village China was structured in layers of institutions and cultural ethoses associated with hierarchies of regional systems (Skinner 1985), territorial lineage organizations (Freedman 1958; Cohen 1990), popular religion

and rituals (A. Wolf 1974; Feuchtwang 1992; Watson 1985), and fluid ethnic identities (Ward 1985; Siu 1993; Siu and Liu 2006). That said, the nature and form of translocal linkages are historically specific, and their interpretation needs to be precise. For over a millennium, rural economy and village life (*wuben*) were integral to the substance and ideology of imperial governance and culturally connected to sojourning merchants and officials in trading nodes and administrative seats. These linkages were articulated through a comprehensive civil service examination system (Elman 1991) and through merchant charities whose beneficiaries were often the rural native places of their founders and managers. Many officials would also retire to their home villages. Furthermore, to secure settlement rights in frontier ecologies, localized lineage organizations in South China would claim to have migrated from political centers and flaunt genealogical pedigrees with literati pretensions (Faure 2007).

However, “the rural” (*nong*) was severed from towns and cities in the long twentieth century and eventually “othered” by urbanized elites. Rural inhabitants were subsequently seen as economically primitive, culturally backward, and politically unenlightened, thus marking them as targets for modern reform or revolution. Our perspective treats rural and urban communities, local and imperial institutions, and folk and elite cultures as relational, rather than dichotomous. These entities were mutually constitutive even when their separation became stark in empirical and discursive terms, starting in the early twentieth century and reaching its height in the Maoist period (Faure and Siu 2003).

The Past in the Present

In the late 1970s, I was among a handful of social scientists who undertook fieldwork in rural China. A historicized view of village China might have set me apart from those who held a more linear view of rural transformation and social change. The villages my colleagues and I saw were poor and isolated from cities, with populations that were administratively and physically “grounded.” One could easily be led to believe that village China had remained in a primordial state of backwardness, shielded by local leaders and untouched by modernity or revolution. I was, on the other hand, quite taken aback by the villages I observed in South China. Their cellularized existence was in sharp contrast to my historical knowledge of rural localities that had been connected to translocal institutions and cultural resources through marketing networks, kinship groups, popular rituals, and community festivals. In my monograph on rural revolution (Siu

1989), I argued that socialist revolution under Mao had stripped village lifeworlds down to a bare existence. The revolution bureaucratized village economies, destroyed rural commerce, dwarfed market towns, and restricted rural-to-urban mobility by establishing a draconian *hukou* (household registration) system. Repeated political campaigns turned local leaders from community patrons into agents of a powerful state, but villagers were complicit in the process (Siu 1989). Chinese cities underwent their own version of socialist regimentation, although life in the state sector was more secure.

The point to highlight is that the socialist state ideology gradually became the dominant language to define identity and life chances, naturalized as the social and cultural “normal.” Post-Mao reforms and partial introduction of the market have produced a subtler form of state language, but such language continues to structure the divergent life chances of villagers and urban residents. Today, almost instinctively, urbanites set themselves apart from those with rural status. The institutions and language framing the divide are often assumed even among those actively working to bridge the gap. Similarly, migrant workers and their children, numbering over two hundred million today, maneuver to get around the worst abuses without challenging the structure of power that has reduced them to such bare existence. Although physically mobile, villagers continue to carry their rural status and localized orientations on their backs. The social “incarceration” is being passed on to millions of migrant children who might have come of age in cities with their parents. I have analyzed this deepening of the rural-urban divide as “state involution” (Siu 2006, 2007).

It may seem counterintuitive to argue that, to appreciate emergent mobilities on the ground, one should begin by pinpointing when particular cultural formations assumed naturalized significance in people’s lives, consciousnesses, and emotions. What the Chinese people experienced during the Maoist revolution cannot be analytically relegated to history and ignored after thirty years of government-initiated economic reforms. Experiences in the socialist period continue to dominate mind-sets and strategies today, perhaps unintentionally reproducing the very structures of power that market reforms have tried to challenge. For scholars of contemporary China, historical anthropology means not just adding a chapter as “historical background” or uncritically gleaning through historical documents for data. More importantly, it involves cultivating a keen sense of past processes to understand the ethnographic present.

Unity and Diversity: A Cultural Nexus of Power

Our analytical efforts to connect locality with translocal forces, be they real or imaginary for the historical agents, has to do with understanding unity and diversity in China's long history until the mid-twentieth century: intense identification with a "center," but with deep-rooted regional diversity of cultural practices and values. These themes have been explored by prominent China anthropologists. Allow me to quote my summary of their contributions:

Few would deny the unity and diversity embedded in the historical evolution of Chinese civilization. However, various disciplines have approached this process with different emphases. Philosophers may see the continuity of a cultural core, and political scientists may stress integrative administrative mechanisms. Anthropologists and historians, on the other hand, focus more on differentiating folkways and localized events. Professor William Skinner and some of his most noted peers have provided various models with their own theoretical assumptions. If one creatively combines their subjects and conceptual schemas—hierarchies of marketing structures and the formation of regional systems (Skinner); popular perceptions of gods, ghosts, and ancestors and their corporeal equivalents in officialdom, community, and kin (Arthur Wolf); kinship, descent, and contract and their territorial manifestations (Maurice Freedman, Myron Cohen); imperial metaphor in popular drama and ritual practices (James Watson, Stephan Feuchtwang)—one may find dynamic lifeworlds linking villagers to a translocal cultural nexus of power, interest, and authority. Together, these societal structures form an organic "civil society" from which individuals and groups have drawn their identities. They relate to this cultural, historical repertoire in symbolic and instrumental terms. Through such layered interactive processes, the imperial state reached out to local subjects. (Siu 2010, 66, slightly revised)

The scholars I mention in this summary have blazed the trail. However, my colleagues and I have attempted to move beyond their largely functionalist and structuralist assumptions by highlighting issues of power and representation in the historical unfolding of a diverse cultural complex. We engage intellectual and political historians whose research foci are drawn from official documents with imperial civilizing missions (Hsiao 1960; Mark Lewis 2006). The instrumental and symbolic use of resources from the political center was undoubtedly an important part of cultural and social reproduction. Moreover, we view the state as a cultural idea from the ground up—through the lenses of popular religious rituals, lineage-building narratives, community festivals, and other "soft" arenas—to uncover how the imperial metaphor percolated downward and upward, and circulated across conscious regional constructs.

With our attention to empirical details, we are able to highlight local initiatives and cultural inventions that dovetailed with imperial prerogatives at crucial moments in the Ming and Qing when South China was rapidly incorporated into the empire. We highlight processes of synergy and fusion, rather than stark oppositions. We stress fluidity and ambiguity instead of hard boundaries and static conceptual categories (Faure and Siu 1995; Faure 2007). Three works I have written over a period of almost twenty years illustrate this point.

In 1986, I spent a year in Xiaolan, a market town in the heart of the Pearl River Delta. My intent was to study small-scale township enterprises in the post-Mao era. During my fieldwork in Xiaolan, I noticed the physical traces of hundreds of ancestral halls, temples, and neighborhood shrines. Town cadres also showed an eagerness to reconstruct a community-wide chrysanthemum festival that had been staged every sixty years since the late eighteenth century. With the help of historians David Faure and Liu Zhiwei, I scrutinized a variety of lineage and communal documents to supplement our conversations with local historians. In 1994 Liu Zhiwei and I participated in one of the grandest chrysanthemum festivals that the town cadres had ever organized. Comparing documentation of the festivals staged in 1814 and 1864, we deciphered the initiatives of local stakeholders in a maturing delta economy in the Qing, who had shrewdly used what they imagined to be symbols of cultural authority to sink territorial anchors. These efforts continued into the twentieth century, when cultural symbolism shifted with political vicissitudes. My essay on recycling tradition ends with the festival in 1994, when party cadres reinvented the festive “tradition” to attract overseas investments during the reform era. The festivals revealed a dynamic process of regional state-making in the late imperial and Republican periods, when the political center was a pervasive, but malleable, cultural idea, rather than organized political machinery. A “soft” mode of governance allowed local elites to engage on their own terms. However, the festivals after the Communist revolution showed the dominant party-state imposing its political agenda and organizational structure from the top down. Local residents were merely passive observers (Siu 1990b, 2002).

Empire at the Margins (Crossley, Siu, and Sutton 2006) is a book project I put together with historians and anthropologists who work on regions such as Yunnan, Manchuria, and Xinjiang. Our aim was to challenge established assumptions about “center” and “periphery.” When the legitimacy of the political center was contingent, as in the Ming-Qing transition, the meaning of the terms *frontier*, *ethnicity*, and *cultural margin* needed to be redefined. In the

volume, Liu Zhiwei and I examined the concept of “ethnicity” in the Pearl River Delta, where the vast and expanding river marshes, known as *sha* (sands), were rapidly converted into polders during the Ming and Qing. Lineage trusts and merchant capital in the market towns and county capitals funded the operations. Boat-dwelling fisherfolk, indigenous inhabitants of the sands, were labeled as *dan* (a lowly social category) and treated almost as cultural aliens. Although the *dan* formed the core of the hands hired to build the polders, and eventually became tenant farmers, they were denied settlement rights, access to education, and participation in community rituals, despite an edict by Emperor Yongzheng in 1729 to grant better treatment. In peaceful times, they could be the skilled boatmasters in river transport. During dynastic decline, they were portrayed in official and lineage documents as bandits and pirates. Nonetheless, the ecology of the sands made it hard for townspeople to exert effective control. Those labeled as *dan* often took off with the harvests and accumulated their own wealth in commerce. They followed the established strategies of upward mobility—acquiring village land, compiling lineage genealogies, and building ancestral halls. They then turned a discriminating gaze against another group of boat-dwelling fishermen on the edge of the sands. We argued that in the open ecologies of the delta, ethnicity was a fluid happening. Hard ethnic labels were imposed by the powerful precisely when physical mobility was the norm and social boundaries were easily transgressed. In the process, a unifying cultural nexus of power was reproduced.

Moving forward, I have teamed up with two historians to apply similar analytical thinking to a continental-scale entity we call “Asia.” *Asia Inside Out* (Tagliacozzo, Siu, and Perdue, 2015) is a set of three volumes designed to challenge established conceptual categories of culture, economy, and polity in time and space. Volume 1 (2015), *Changing Times*, focuses on moments of connection across a space we termed Asia. The second volume, *Connected Places*, highlights crucial sites and spatial assemblages. The third volume turns to mobile people and the institutions they circulate in across a variegated landscape. The following is a short description of our themes in volume 2 by the editors of Harvard University Press. The key concept underlying these spatial moments is “process”:

Asia Inside Out reveals the dynamic forces that have linked regions of the world’s largest continent, stretching from Japan and Korea to the Indian Ocean and the Middle East. *Connected Places*, the second installment in this three-volume survey, highlights the transregional flows of goods, ideas, and people across

natural and political boundaries—sea routes and mountain passes, ports, oasis towns and hill settlements, imperial capitals, colonial spaces and postmodern cities. It challenges the conventional idea that defined geo-political regions as land-based, state-centered and possessing linear histories. Exploring themes of maritime connections, mobile landscapes, and spatial moments, the authors examine significant sites of linkage and disjuncture from the early modern period to the present. Readers discover how eighteenth-century pirates shaped the interregional networks of Vietnam’s Tonkin Gulf, how settlers pursued land- and sea-based cultural strategies in the delta ecologies of South China and Chittagong, how Kashmiri merchants provided intelligence of remote Himalayan territories to competing empires, and how for centuries a vibrant trade in horses and elephants fueled the Indian Ocean economy. *Connected Places* shows the constant fluctuations over many centuries in the making of Asian territories and illustrates the confluence of factors in the historical construction of place and space. (description of Tagliacozzo, Siu, and Perdue, (2015))

My chapter in the second volume focuses on a 1946 township gazetteer (*Chaolian Xiangzhi*) written by one of the last literati of the Qing dynasty, Lu Zijun. Lu was a native of the Chaolian township that emerged from river marshes over the centuries as a community in the Pearl River Delta, but he migrated to Hong Kong in the early twentieth century. According to him, migrants from Zhongyuan (the Central Plains) had built a local community with farming settlements, lineages, and elaborate ritual complexes. However, a critical reading of the gazetteer and associated documents shows a creative fusion of two worlds. A vibrant and diverse maritime trade was conducted by boat-dwelling populations in the delta and brought wealth to native sons who established wholesale businesses in the county capital. But this population was largely unrecognized by literati historians like Lu, who paid meticulous attention to the emergence of a land-based farming economy that was buttressed by unifying cultural resources adopted from an imaginary literati “center.” In the fluidity of a delta always in the process of becoming land, generations of indigenous peoples had, in fact, used multiple translocal resources to redefine power relationships and livelihoods. Prosperous farming and trading communities arose from a “no-man’s-land” as a large river system meandered its way into the South China Sea. In these open ecologies, where “the sky was high and the emperor [was] far away” (Siu and Liu, forthcoming), state-making saw minimal institutional presence of officials. However, an improvised language of empire and authority prevailed.

Structuring and Human Agency

In our engagement with social theories, the late twentieth century was inspirational for rethinking the positivist social science framework. To appreciate local agencies and processes, we moved away from “structure and process” to “structuring” (Giddens 1979; Bourdieu 1972), “practice” (Ortner 1984) and the actor-network theory of Bruno Latour (2005). Rather than starting our analysis with static conceptual categories (social, political, ethnic, and more) and observing their interactions, we examine fluid processes out of which hardened boundaries, institutional structures, and identities emerge. At the center are human agents who are economically interested, politically shrewd, socially positioned, culturally meaningful, and historically specific (Abrams 1982). They are analytically different from the rational, self-interested, and atomistic individuals that have dominated social science analyses in the past century.

It was in the 1970s that anthropology began to highlight the meaningful practice of social actors (Ortner 1984). As graduate students, David Faure and I were cognizant of Durkheimian social structure and Marxist ideas on political economy, but we embraced a Weberian turn in anthropology (Keyes 2002). In Clifford Geertz’s interpretive framework, culture is no longer essentialized as timeless, quantifiable, and empirically “out there” to be recorded through material objects and practices (Geertz 1973). It is lived and communicated, made significant by human agents who act from different positions of power and vulnerability (Dirks, Eley, and Ortner 1994). *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976) is an attempt by James Scott to move from a Marxist idea of class struggle and rebellion to a Weberian one involving multiple meanings with regard to legitimacy and excess.

Similarly, as stated earlier in the essay, our group began to view history in nonlinear terms, marking continuity with disjuncture and contest. Historical events are infinite, but how they become history involves their being selectively remembered, recorded, and reinterpreted by human agents with different degrees of resourcefulness. “Tradition” is not a thing of the past, but is invented for the present by various stakeholders (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Chatterjee 1993; Dirks 2001). In his study of lineage formation in the New Territories of Hong Kong, David Faure (1986) uses a Weberian perspective to push Maurice Freedman’s structural-functionalist lineage paradigm beyond kinship and descent. Behind the powerful presence of territorial lineages, their ancestral estates, ornate halls, and ritual complexes were discursive strategies for

settlement rights at crucial historical junctures in the Ming and Qing. Liu Zhiwei's study "Lineage on the Sands" (1995) continues such thinking by highlighting the languages of lineage and territorial cults, which provided symbolic and instrumental means to establish social and economic hierarchy in the relatively open frontier of the imperial empire.

If history is presented according to winners and losers (Scott 1985), it is necessary to identify who embodies the institutions and the languages of power. Power can be exercised by political machineries and their institutional representatives and resisted at different historical junctures (Eley and Suny 1996; Anderson [1983] 1991; Scott 1990, 1998). In Foucauldian terms, power can also be internalized and located in our bodies, language, forms of knowledge, and subjectivity (Foucault [1969] 1972; Williams [1958] 1983; Rose 1989). I began my own fieldwork in China in the late 1970s intellectually armed with a hard, externalized concept of state power. Over the years I have come to appreciate how the language of class, politics, and revolution has become the ordering frame for subjectivity and strategy. *Agents and Victims in South China: Accomplices in Rural Revolution* (1989) and *Furrows: Peasants, Intellectuals and the State* (1990a) were my initial attempts to understand complicity and "state involution." Allow me to include short paragraphs from both to illustrate the paradox of human agency. As I wrote in *Agents and Victims in South China*:

Social change must be seen as the working and reworking of culture and political economy through the creative, conscious actions of human beings. Human behavior is neither entirely programmed by an infinite variety of cultural rules, nor compelled by externalized political and economic forces. If it were, literature would have great difficulty in sustaining a sense of tragedy.... By focusing on the dilemmas of political agents who maneuvered within structures that they had helped to create, my account raises a general question in the study of peasants. In complex agrarian societies where distinct hierarchies of power and ideological domination exist, to what extent have peasants contributed to making their world and to shaping its historical process? Were they mere spectators watching political dramas unfold from afar, or were they inevitably drawn into these dramas to become part of their unfolding? What follows are the stories of some Chinese peasants in the twentieth century, who, as Richard Madsen says (1984, 30), have made themselves as they made history. (Siu 1989, 13–14)

In *Furrows*, I parallel the complicity of peasants and intellectuals in making the Chinese Communist movement:

This anthology focuses on the changing images of peasants created by writers from the 1930s to the 1980s who consciously used the peasantry to condemn or support the political authorities... Whether objects of abuse in traditional society or objects of transformation in the decades of socialism, the peasants have been, in the eyes of these writers, as much a political and moral metaphor as living, suffering, and functioning human beings. However unreal these literary images of peasants may be, they reveal the evolution of the writers' fitful, ambivalent, but compelling relationships with the peasantry on the one hand and with state-building efforts on the other hand. In a sense, this anthology uses literature on the peasants to describe the odyssey of modern Chinese intellectuals, an odyssey that illustrates the larger processes of cultural, historical, and political changes to whose creation intellectuals and peasants have contributed with a desperate energy. (Siu 1990a)

Where is the arena of contest and engagement? Critical human geography and historical and postmodern views of world systems have long viewed “space” and “place” as constructed categories (Lefebvre 1992; Harvey 1990; Lewis and Wigen 1997). These concepts seem innocuous and are often taken for granted as material receptacles of human life. But they can be imagined, negotiated, and lived with rich historical meanings (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Balakrishnan 1996). As some of our recent works on inter-Asian connections show, deconstructing definitive spatial boundaries may help uncover hidden landscapes and unexpected intellectual directions (Scott 2009; Tagliacozzo, Siu, and Perdue, 2015)

In sum, our group approaches a wide range of topics in Chinese culture and history. We are fortunate to have a shared repertoire of analytical themes and field experiences refined over the years. Initially labeled the “South China Gang,” we have traversed far beyond the regional construct. We started our intellectual quest inspired by the critical thinking of Euro-American scholars. Hopefully, we can share our “history-in-the-field” perspectives with a younger generation eager to engage an Asian renaissance.

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Notes

- 1 This essay is a summary of a paper original published in Chinese (Siu 2009). The ideas presented here are organized very differently and new substance has been added.

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