

Historical Anthropology – A View from »South China«

Helen Siu*

This note summarizes key analytical themes that a group of us who works on Chinese culture and history have given much thought. They are 1) text and life worlds, 2) local and translocality, 3) the past in the present, 4) unity and diversity in Chinese culture, 5) structuring and human agency.¹

In 1985, David Faure and I bonded with young historians from Guangzhou, China. At the time, we were concerned with the link between historical texts and their meaningful contexts. 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 multi-scalar factors in economy, society and culture that underlay the unfolding of historical events, anthropologists were moving away from evolutionary, functional or structuralist views of culture. These scholars began to stress culture's processual, negotiated construction in time and space. Anticipating synergy, we increasingly focused on purposeful, meaningful actions of individuals and groups who make history as they make their life-worlds.

Over the years, we have exposed our China colleagues to classic works in European historiography (Jacques Le Goff, Georges Duby, E. P. Thompson, Natalie Zemon Davis, among others). The works cover topics ranging from economy and class to contested worlds of meaning and moral imagination. We also explored works by social scientists who appreciate the interpretive and historically contingent nature of culture, power, and place. Their analytical lenses extend from individual human agents to non-Eurocentric world systems.²

Synergizing their insights, our historical anthropology combines critical social theories with careful scrutiny of ethnographic encounters and archival texts. We sleuth the marginalized and silenced voices hidden between the lines of seemingly hegemonic frames of mind and matter. A critical reading of texts helps us uncover multiple meanings in the narratives we come across in archives and in fieldwork.

Our walking the field in South China has earned us a label, the South China Gang. We have never identified ourselves as such because our work intentionally reaches far beyond a regional identity. We are deeply engaged with local history. However, we do not stop at pursuing micro empirical details of a particular place or event. Instead, we meticulously glean information from varying sources, be they official or popular, local or translocal, to illustrate the narrative

* Correspondence details: Professor Helen Siu, Department of Anthropology, Yale University, 10 Sachem Street, Room 112, New Haven, CT 06511, helen.siu@yale.edu

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2 See works by Clifford Geertz; Abu Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*; Goody, *Theft of History*; Trouillot, *Global Transformations*.

strategies and power play of actors occupying multi-scalar positions. Our understanding of local culture and society hinges on broad historical processes that constitute them.

In an essay entitled »The Original Translocal Society and its Modern Fate: Historical and Post-Reform South China«,³ David Faure and I argue that village China was structured in layers of institutions and cultural ethos associated with the evolution of hierarchies of regional systems,⁴ territorial lineage organizations,⁵ popular religion and rituals,⁶ and fluid ethnic identities.⁷

However, »the rural« (*nong*) was severed from towns and cities in the long twentieth century, and eventually »othered« by urbanized elites. Rural inhabitants were then 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, folk and elite cultures as relational rather than dichotomous. These entities were mutually constitutive even when their separation was stark in empirical and discursive terms, and reached its height in the Maoist period.⁸

A historically sensitive analysis is useful to detect the past in the present. In the late 1970s, I was among a handful of social scientists who started fieldwork in rural China. The villages we saw were poor, isolated, with their residents administratively and physically »grounded«. One could easily be led to believe that village China had remained untouched by modernity or revolution. However, they were in sharp contrast to my historical knowledge of rural localities which had been connected to translocal institutions and rich cultural resources through marketing networks, kinship groups, popular rituals, and community festivals. In my subsequent monograph on rural revolution, I argued that socialist revolution under Mao had stripped village life-worlds down to a bare existence. What we saw were results of the socialist revolution, not an untouched primordial form. Decades of political campaigns turned local leaders from community patrons to agents of a powerful state, and villagers were complicit in the process.⁹

The point to highlight is that the socialist state apparatus and ideology gradually became the dominant language to define identity and life-chances, experienced as the social and cultural »normal«. 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 still dominate mindsets and strategies today. This unintentionally reproduces the very structures of power that market reforms have tried to challenge. For scholars of contemporary China, historical anthropology should not just add a chapter as »historical background«, or uncritically glean historical documents for data. It is cultivating a keen sense of past processes to understand the ethnographic present.¹⁰

Our analytical efforts to connect locality with translocal forces has to do with understanding unity and diversity in China's long cultural, political history – intense identification with a »center«, but with deep-rooted regional diversity of cultural practices and values.

3 Faure and Siu, *Down to Earth*.

4 Skinner, Presidential Address.

5 Freedman, *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China*; Cohen, *Lineage Organization in North China*.

6 Wolf, *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*; Feuchtwang, *Imperial Metaphor*; Watson, Standardizing the Gods.

7 Ward, *Through Other Eyes*; Siu, Cultural Identity and the Politics of Difference; Siu and Zhiwei, *Lineage, Market, Pirate and Dan*.

8 Faure and Siu, *Original Translocal Society*.

9 Siu, *Agents and Victims*.

10 Siu, *China's Century*; Siu, *Grounding Displacement*.

We acknowledge the overall impact of a political center with a civilizing mission,¹¹ but we also view the pre-modern state as a malleable cultural idea from the ground up – through the lenses of popular religious rituals, lineage building narratives, community festivals, and other »soft« arenas as the imperial metaphor percolated downwards and upwards, and circulated across conscious regional constructs. We highlight local initiatives and cultural inventions that dovetailed with imperial prerogatives at crucial junctures in the history of the empire when South China was rapidly incorporated. These were processes of synergy and fusion rather than stark oppositions. We stress fluidity and ambiguity rather than hard boundaries and static conceptual categories.¹²

To illustrate the point, I would briefly mention two works I have written over a period of fifteen years. One focuses on the rich ritual complex surrounding a community-wide chrysanthemum festival staged every sixty years since the late eighteenth century. Comparing documentations of the festivals staged in 1814, 1864, 1934, and various small occasions after 1949, we were able to decipher the initiatives of local stake-holders in a maturing delta economy in the Qing, who shrewdly used what they imagined to be symbols of cultural authority to sink territorial anchors. After the Communist revolution, the festivals showed a different kind of state-making, with an increasingly dominant party-state imposing its own top-down agenda and organizational structure. Local residents were but passive and cynical observers.¹³

In a volume *Empire at the Margins*,¹⁴ historian Liu Zhiwei and I examine »ethnicity« in the Pearl River delta.¹⁵ The river marshes, known as *sha* (sands), were rapidly converted into polders during the Ming and Qing. The operations were funded by lineage and merchant capital in county capitals. Boat-dwelling inhabitants of the sands were labeled as »dan«, and treated as a lowly social category and cultural aliens. In peaceful times, they could be the skilled boat-masters in river transport, but in times of dynastic decline, they were often portrayed in official and lineage documents as bandits and pirates. However, the ecology of the sands made it possible for those labeled as »dan« to take off with the harvests and accumulate their own wealth in commerce. They too acquired village land, had lineage genealogies compiled and built ancestral halls, and turned the discriminating gaze against another floating population on the edge of the sands. We argue that ethnicity was a fluid happening in the delta ecology. Hard ethnic labels were imposed by the powerful precisely when physical mobility was the norm and social boundaries were easily transgressed. In the pursuit of upward mobility by diverse groups, a unifying cultural nexus of power was reproduced.

In our engagement with critical social theories, the late twentieth century was inspirational for rethinking the positivist social science frameworks. To appreciate local agencies and processes, we have moved away from »structure and process« to »structuring«,¹⁶ »practice«,¹⁷ and the actor-network-theory of Bruno Latour. Rather than starting our analysis with established conceptual categories (social, political, ethnic, and more) and observing their interactions, we examine fluid processes out of which hardened boundaries, institutional structures

11 Hsiao, *Rural China*; Lewis, *Construction of Space*.

12 Faure and Siu, *Down to Earth*; Faure, *Emperor and Ancestor*.

13 Siu, *Recycling Tradition*; Siu, *Redefining the Market Town*.

14 Crossley *et al.*, *Empire at the Margins*.

15 Siu and Zhiwei, *Lineage, Market, Pirate and Dan*.

16 Abrams, *Historical Sociology*.

17 Ortner, *Theories in Anthropology*.

and identities emerge. At the center are human agents who are economically interested, politically shrewd, socially positioned, culturally meaningful, and historically specific. They are analytically different from the rational, self-interested and atomistic individuals that have dominated social science analyses.

Although cognizant of Durkheimian social structure and Marxist ideas on political economy and dependency, David Faure and I have long embraced a Weberian turn in anthropology. Culture is not essentialized as timeless, quantifiable and empirically »out there« to be recorded. It is lived and communicated, made significant by human agents who act from different positions of power and vulnerability.¹⁸

Similarly, we have viewed history in non-linear 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 resourcefulness. »Tradition« is not a thing of the past but invented for the present by various stake-holders.¹⁹ David Faure's study of lineage formations in the New Territories of Hong Kong is worth mentioning.²⁰ He pushes Maurice Freedman's structural-functionalist lineage paradigm beyond kinship and descent to focus on a language of lineage shrewdly used to claim settlement rights at a particular juncture in time and place.

If history is made by winners and losers, we see the need to identify who embodies the institutions and the languages of power. Power can be exercised by political machineries and their representatives, and embraced and resisted.²¹ In Foucauldian terms, power can also be internalized and located in our bodies, language, forms of knowledge and subjectivity. The works by Michel Foucault, Raymond Williams, Bernard Cohn,²² and Nicholas Rose are notable examples. 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*²³ and *Furrows: Peasants, Intellectuals and the State*²⁴ were my initial attempts to understand complicity and »state involution«.

Where is the arena of contest and engagement? Critical human geography, historical and post-modern views of world systems have long viewed »space« and »place« as constructed category.²⁵ These concepts seem innocuous and often treated as material receptacles of human life. But they can be imagined, negotiated and lived with rich historical meanings.²⁶ As some of our recent works on inter-Asian connections show, deconstructing definitive spatial boundaries may help uncover hidden landscapes and unexpected intellectual directions.²⁷

18 Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*; Dirks et al., *Culture/Power/History*; Keyes, Weber and Anthropology.

19 See the works of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, Partha Chattjee and Nicholas Dirks.

20 Faure, *Structure of Chinese Rural Society*.

21 See works by Benedict Andersen; Scott, *Moral Economy of the Peasant*; Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*; Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance*; Scott, *Seeing Like a State*; Scott, *Art of NOT Being Governed*.

22 Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*.

23 Siu, *Agents and Victims*.

24 Siu, *Furrows*.

25 See works by Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey.

26 Gupta and Ferguson, *Beyond Culture*; Balakrishnan and Anderson, *Mapping the Nation*.

27 Lewis and Wigen, *Myth of Continents*; Scott, *The Art of NOT Being Governed*; Tagliacozzo et al., *Asia Inside Out*.

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 developed over the years. Initially labeled the »South China Gang«, we have traversed 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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