

Cultural Anthropology and the Social Reforms in China (Wesleyan University, Feb. 15, 1996)
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Cultural anthropology is a broad topic; the problem of Chinese social reforms is an even broader one. It is impossible in an hour's time to analyze clearly even one of these topics. Therefore, today I will not be discussing any profound or complex problems, but rather will introduce my own experience. The reason I have chosen to approach the question in this manner is because I am one of the few scholars who researches and teaches cultural anthropology in China. My analysis, from what may appear to be a limited point of view, will in fact give a focused and valid account of the development of cultural anthropology in China and will suggest its potential influence on current social reforms.

The term cultural anthropology occurred in the United States in 1903. In 1916, a book entitled *An Introduction to Anthropology* was published in China. This was the first time the term anthropology had been used as part of a published title. During the 1930's and 40's cultural anthropology developed very rapidly in China. Courses in anthropology were offered in more than ten universities, and several departments were established. This produced a group of scholars who published works on cultural anthropology. However, by 1949, after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, cultural anthropology was labeled a "bourgeois social science" and thus was eliminated as an academic field of study. From then on there were only archaeology, ethnology, and linguistics, there was no study of cultural anthropology.

In 1978 as slight changes and reforms to be evident, there was some lifting of restrictions and less necessity to conform to the established ideology. The first university to restore its anthropology department was Zhongshan University in Guangzhou. Later, Xiamen University in Fujian also restored its major. Sichuan University began to offer a course in cultural anthropology taught by myself. If we look closely at a map of China, it is immediately apparent that these three universities are all located in southern China, and all are close to China's borders. In the north, particularly in Beijing, the academic center of China, there were no courses in cultural anthropology, and the term "cultural anthropology" was not even used. Even to the present, among the disciplines designated by the Ministry of Education and the Academia Sinica in Beijing, "cultural anthropology" has never been included. Therefore, the legal status of this discipline of cultural anthropology is still a question.

I was trained as an archaeologist in China and taught archaeology there for more than twenty years. But from 1981, after my first visit to the United States, my interest turned toward cultural anthropology. I insisted that I be allowed to offer courses in this discipline and to educate graduate students for this field of study. During this decade, I have given lecture on cultural anthropology and China's reforms in several universities in China. Because archaeology is a science that deals with antiquities, it is a "safe" science in China. But cultural anthropology deals with social realities. Under the political circumstances in China, to take this path is a way fraught with difficulty and danger. In spite of this, I still chose to pursue this way and have never regretted my choice. The reason is I know that the rise or fall of Chinese society depends on whether or not reform is adopted. If China is to be reformed, it needs knowledge and ideas that come only from cultural anthropology.

The influence of cultural anthropology on reform in China can be observed from several aspects. Today, I will mention four areas.

1. A new model of social development is a pre-condition for China's reform

The evolutionary process of human society was synthesized as a simple and unilinear model by Stalin. That is, primitive bands, matrilineal clan, patrilineal clan, slave society, feudal society, capitalist society, and finally, socialist society. The succession of these stages is similar to natural phenomenon, and thus as objective law can not be changed by human intervention. If "socialism" is the final end-result of human society, consequently people have no choice but to tolerate the control of the Communist Party and all its policies, carried out, as they are, under the banner of "socialism." Naturally, this model became the basic legitimacy for the political ideology of all communist regimes.

However, the purpose of cultural anthropology is to research the origin, evolution, and various forms of human society. On the basis of numerous facts, current cultural anthropology can prove that the process of the development of human society definitely did not occur in the simple way as Stalin described. But rather had several different processes and models. If one admits the varieties of social evolution of humans, this in fact would break the shackles which have bound the minds of the 'Chinese people for these past forty years. It would allow the Chinese people to get rid of the so called "socialism" created by Stalin and Mao. Then, they could have the possibility of seeking a new model that would make the country stronger and allow for true democracy and freedom. The pre-condition for social reform is the liberation of the mind. When we considering that Chinese population consists primarily of poorly educated peasants, this liberation of the mind becomes even more critical. The majority of peasants tend to believe in "fatalism or determinism." After a long period of repeated propaganda by the Communist Party, the existence of this so called "socialism" represents a kind of an inexorable historical law. This concept is not significantly different from the old concept of "the mandate of heaven". In their minds this is something that cannot be resisted or changed. No matter what suffering it brings, they can do nothing but endure it. If the concepts of cultural anthropology could be popularized, people would understand that there is no such fixed social law, then there would be a solid base for China's social reforms.

Why are the leaders in China particularly sensitive to this question of social evolution? It is precisely because it raises the issue: "Is socialism the inevitable form of Chinese society, or is there an alternative?" So it is easy for us to understand why they do not accept the basic concept of cultural anthropology. From 1988-1989 I published two papers in China, criticized Henry Morgan's model of primitive society.¹ Even though the criticism was very mild and was based on Marxist doctrines, after the June 4th Incident in 1989, these two papers were denounced as representative works of bourgeoisie liberalism. Obviously, the opposition to the papers is based on political rather than scholarly motives.

2. Chinese reform requires a holistic methodology

One of the most fundamental principles of cultural anthropology is that it is holistic. It studies a society as a whole and from a variety of disciplines. Human society is somewhat like a living

organism. When it becomes ill, the entire body must be analyzed before it can be cured. Consequently, if we observe some social phenomenon from the point of view of a single discipline in a superficial manner, the findings will be distorted, and the judgment will be wrong. Several examples will make my point clear.

Prior to 1980, China's economic policy was a highly centrally planned policy. That means the government controlled all industrial and agricultural business. It used political power to interfere with the economy. The shortcoming of this model has been proven by the historical events in the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and even China itself. But even so today inside the Chinese Communist Party there are many conservative leaders they still emphasized their determination to continue with centralized economic planning. Why has it been so difficult to change the practice of "government serving as the business working unit?" To answer this question, we need to analyze the origin of the idea of centralized economic plan in China. Most scholars say that China's centralized economy originated from Marxist theory and the practice of the Soviet Union in the 1930s. While this is reasonable, if we compare China with the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, it is clear that China has its special characteristics.

Historically, the Chinese government has used political power to repress the development of market economy, and has directly controlled the important economic sectors. This policy was apparent as early as the Qin dynasty (the third century B.C.). At that time, the government held all land and controlled all major commercial enterprise and handicraft industrials. In the Han dynasty (the second century B.C.), Emperor Han Wu used his absolute authority to totally control the important commercial and craft activities. In addition to the salt and iron monopoly, the court levied high taxes to repress the development of commerce. The sumptuary laws restricting merchants use of chariots and silk clothing were another form of repression of the commercial class.

During the Tang and Song dynasties (from seventh to twelfth century), the government had various restrictions on the development of cities and commercial activities while promoting the government controlled handicraft industries. In the Yuan dynasty of Mongol control (the fourteenth century), laws restricted the activities of the artisans and allowed the court to plunder the normal commercial enterprises.

In the Ming dynasty (fourteenth century to seventeenth century), the court monopolized mining as well as the salt and tea trade. It also restricted all individuals from conducting maritime trade. In the Qing dynasty (seventeenth century to twentieth century), the government adopted a policy of isolationism, both political and economical.

In sum, the practice of the restriction on market economy which lasted more than 2,000 years in China, could not but have a strong influence on the Chinese psychology and way of thinking. The reason the current Chinese government persists in its control of commercial activities, and the reason Chinese intellectuals are biased those engaged in business in China, both have some connection with this historical tradition.²

Historically, China has been an agricultural society. The peasant economy lasted for 3,000 years. This kind of economy bound the peasants to a small parcel of land where they maintained self-

sufficiency. In this society there was no need for exchange, communication, travel or change of profession. Production meant repetition, year after year of the same actions of planting and harvesting. From the archaeology of the Han dynasty, we have discovered that the agriculture tools, the arrangement of housings the species of domestic animals and fowls are all similar to those in the country-side during the first half of this century. This type of economy left its imprint on the way of thinking of the whole nation. First of all, they tolerated and even wanted a totalitarian policy. Secondly, they were suspicious and fearful of the outside world, their capacity to accept new and different things was very limited. The reason the Chinese Communist Party insists on a single party rule and the reason people tolerate it are related to this social and historical background.

Because the Chinese leadership lacks holistic research of the society, the policies it determines always lack a sufficient scientific basis. For example, theoretically "freedom of religion" is protected by the constitution. In fact, there is yet no scientific definition of "religion." As a result, the Chinese government recognizes only Taoism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity as religions. The others, such as the various religions of different ethnic groups and the folk religion of the Han people, have all been prohibited. One of the major reasons the Chinese government made a series of mistakes in policy and practice after 1949 was because they lacked a holistic study of objective realities.

3. Reform needs a dynamic perspective

Another characteristic of cultural anthropology is its recognition of the necessity for social change. This means that in this world nothing is static and absolute. We must recognize reform and evolution as a universal principle. It also means one should renounce all static doctrine which is no longer suitable in the current changing situation. If nothing in the world remains unchanging, then there is no principle that is unchanging. Obviously, the Communist Party of China is not guided by a dynamic perspective when they "insist on the four cardinal principles," namely, insist on Marxism and Mao Zedong's thought; insist on socialism; insist on the leadership of the communist party; insist on proletarian dictatorship.

In ancient China there was no cultural anthropology, but the scientific thought of cultural anthropology actually existed. For example, in the "Fanluxun" chapter of Huai Nan Zi (compiled in the second century B.C.) there is a passage:

The law used today must be modified to suit the current situation, and the norms have to be set to accommodate the customs of the society. Nevertheless, some scholars accept the teachings indicated in ancient texts without reservation and they believe that these teachings are the only ones applicable for the current society. This is like trying to fit a square peg into a circular hole.

Although the Chinese government has not changed its principles, it changes its policies frequently. Because the making of the government policy always lacks scientific grounds. It is based on orthodox ideology rather than on objective reality. It has been difficult to carry out the policies, or if they are carried out, they often cause great harm. Thus the policy frequently changes, it even changes at will, and the people have lost a sense of confidence. There is a popular folk song in China in 1950's. It said:

The party is like the sun so bright;
Everywhere it shines, there is light!

Now, in 1990's, it goes like this:
The party is like the moon in change;
As it waxes and wanes, it's not the same!

Their changing policies contrast sharply with something Lao Zi pointed out more than 2,000 years ago, "To govern a large country is like cooking a small fish." It means don't stir the fish too often. I could summarize the situation in China as follows: Things the Party should change, they don't; what it should not change, it changes randomly. This is an important reason for the current political confusion in China.

4. The ecological crisis in China

The difference between cultural anthropology and the other social sciences is that it observes the society in the context of a certain ecological environment. In addition to analyzing the social relationships among people, it also researches the relationship between humans and nature. From this aspect we can see that hidden behind all the political and social crises in China, there is another most fearful shadow. It influences and shapes the development of the social crisis. This is the crisis of ecology.

There are two characteristics of Mao Zedong's thought. The first is his theory of class struggle. The second is his theory of determinism of human will. When dealing with social problems, he used the class struggle as the basic principle. No matter what problem was encountered, he met it with coercion and force. As Mao said, "Class struggle will be effective in every case." From 1949 to 1976 there were 15 major political campaigns in China. The purpose of these campaigns were all to try to settle some social difficulties. In dealing with nature, Mao Zedong believed in determinism of human will. As he said, "Man can overcome heaven." What does this mean? It means if man relies on his individual subjective initiation, he can accomplish any miracle. According to this way of thinking, the only conclusion is "the more population, the more national strength." Under the influence of Mao Zedong's thought, during past 40 years, Chinese population increased from 500 million to more than 1200 million. In addition, the incompetent communist bureaucrats ordered, sometimes even compelled people to do many stupid things. They cut down the forests, plundered the natural resources, ruined the soil, and destroyed the grassland. This has resulted in an unprecedented ecological crisis.

First we can consider the conflict between man and the land. In 1995' the population of China was near 1200 million. Each year it increases by 17 million, more than the whole population in Australia. But China's total cultivated land area is 106,700,000 acres. The average for each person is only 0.08 acre (for Americans it is more than 2 acres). This small portion of arable land decreases every year because of various causes: the expansion of deserts; the silting of rivers; alkalization of land; pollution from chemical fertilizer; and use of land for building roads, houses and factories. Every year there is decrease of 530,000 acres. Given the increase in population and the decrease in arable land, within 20 years, China's land will not be able to support its great

population. And if this situation continues, two hundred years later, there will be no arable land in China at all. In 1955, two American professors, Tom Dale and Vernon Carter wrote a book entitled *Topsoil and Civilization*. In this book they argued that the rise and fall of human civilization are determined largely by the way the land was used. This is a common sense but unfortunately it is ignored by the Chinese government.

The forest area in China only covers 12.5% of the entire territory. In the United States it is 33% and in former Soviet Union it is 34%. Following along with the increase in population, the need for lumber and fuel has increased. Thus the remaining forests are now rapidly disappearing. China's greatest forest area, Chang Bai Shan Forest Area in Hei Long Jiang province, will be depleted within ten years. Another important forest area in eastern Tibet and western Sichuan province, will be depleted in 13 years. Deforestation has resulted in serious eroding of the topsoil. Each year 5 billion tons of soil are washed to the sea. The areas where erosion is a serious problem cover 580,000 square miles. This constituted 1/6 of the total land of China. Of the chemical fertilizer produced in China, 1/2 is washed away with the soil. Already China has 127,400 square miles of land became desert. Each year more than 600 square miles of land are continually swallowed by the desert. The causes of deforestation are numerous, but government's lack of scientific knowledge and its bureaucracy are significant factors.

The third problem is that China is a country that lacks fresh water. According to statistics of 1985, there were 183 big cities that had a serious lack of water; these included both Beijing and Shanghai. In the countryside, there is 1/3 of the land that lacks sufficient water. There are 40 million people and more 30 million domestic animals that do not even have enough water to drink. By the year of 2,000 the demand for water will increase by more than 50%. But there is no new water resource to meet this demand. Consequently, the simple element water will become one of the serious hindrances to China's economic progress.

The fourth problem is pollution. Because of the outmoded equipment in the industrial sector and the neglect of the government in protecting the ecology, each year more than 7,000 billion square meters of poisonous or harmful gases are released into the air. Each year 60 billion tons of polluted water are drained into the rivers and lakes. Furthermore, China will soon be inundated by garbage. Each year China produce 100,000,000 tons of garbage. More than 2/3 of the cities are surrounded by garbage. Only 3.6% of the country's garbage is treated. The rest is piled up outside the cities. For example, inside Beijing city limit there are 5,000 garbage mounds occupying 1485 acres of land. According to the scientists' research, one mound of garbage can pollute the water sources within 31 miles and Beijing has 5,000 mounds. That means the entire city of Beijing has been polluted by the garbage around it.

The pressure of China's population and its ecological crises have intensified its social crises. And the social crises has negatively affected the ecological crises. But even in the face of these crises, the government will not permit the intellectuals to survey social crises and has even restricted the publication and open discussion of these ecological problems. For example, in 1988 He Bo Chuan in Zhongshan University published his work, *China On A Mountain Ridge*. This book analyzed the problems China faced from the various aspects, including history, culture, politics, education and ecological environment. As a result, shortly after this book was published, it was prohibited. In January of 1989, I myself gave a talk at the Sichuan Provincial Political

Consultative Meeting. The title was Chinese Need To Develop A Sense of Crisis. The government would not allow the newspapers, radio stations, TV stations to spread the views in my talk.

During the student protests of the spring of 1989, most Western observers noticed only the social crises. In fact, the students had no confidence in a government would not face and seemed unable to solve the ecological crises. In May 1989, a writer named Xu Gang wrote a report entitled "The Sinking Country." In which he described all the ecological crises in China. At the end of the article, he encouraged the students, saying, "You students who are demonstrating on the street, you are hungry, tired and accept the burden of being misunderstood. But I hope you will not stop crying out. If you are silent, China will have no voice."

I have just spoken of the grave crises China faces. However, do not misunderstand me. I am not a member of that group of pessimists who say that China is surely doomed. On the contrary, my purpose in researching these problems, in talking about these problems, is so that all people take note of them, especially the Chinese people, so that together we may actively work to resolve the problems. Because, in order to resolve any crisis, the prerequisites are: acknowledgment of the crisis, analysis of the crisis.

From what I have discussed today, you will understand why I am interested in cultural anthropology and why the Chinese Communist Party reject this science. What I have said today is only the result of academic research, while it may contain some errors, it is free from political prejudice. Logically speaking, I should be making these remarks in China. But because I unable to do so, I have to said them here. This is a tragic fact.

However, to discuss China's problems here in the United States still has its significance. We humans are all on the same earth planet. I used to compared. our planet to a space ship and people on it are passengers on the ship. The spaceship has two characteristics: The first is that it is crowded; the spaceship cannot add to its space. The population on our earth is more than 5 billion and is continuing to increase. Compared with the limited natural resources on the earth, it is getting more and more crowded. The second characteristic of the spaceship is that it is very delicate. Thus every passenger must obey certain rules and avoid doing anything that might harm the spaceship. As our science and technology advance, the ecological environment of the earth also becomes very delicate. So every country and every nation must protect the ecological environment and regard this as the basic condition for the continued existence of ourselves and our descendants. Human beings will either live together peacefully and cooperate with each other or they will be exterminated together on this delicate spaceship. There is no other choice. Considering the Chininese occupies more than 1/5 of the world's population, the problems that exit in China are not hers alone, but are connected with the future of our world.



1. Henry Morgan was a American cultural anthropologist in the middle of 19th century. He suggested a model of social evolution in primitive society. That is: band, matrilineal clan, patrilineal clan. This model was borrowed by Engles, who wrote a book entitled The Origin of

the Family, Private Property and the State. Thus in China, Morgan's model was regarded as one of the principles of Marxism and should not be challenged.

2. At the time of the Democracy Movement in 1989, the group that gave great support to the students was the new merchant class, those engaged in business. And yet the intellectuals did not give them credit for their participation. The government, if it had any tolerance for the student demonstrators, never even considered that this social group had any right to demand democracy and freedom. When the persecution came, many of these people were arrested and some executed, perhaps not as political dissidents, but as general criminals. Even now we do not know how many of them suffered, nor does the government feel compelled to discuss their fate. This is an example of the traditional Chinese attitude toward the commercial class.