

Tracing China

A Forty-Year Ethnographic Journey

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Introduction

China as Process

This volume of essays captures my forty years of explorations in the field. It is a personal and an intellectual journey. South China has existed as an ever changing empirical experience, a kaleidoscope of events, institutions, lives, meanings and power play. Every major political turn has reconfigured it. Theoretical paradigms that have deeply shaped my thinking have also met new challenges. My efforts to engage theory with ethnography have inspired critical reflections and dialogue.

Over the decades, I have picked various analytical lenses to understand research subjects, fine-tune methodologies, and affirm social and political commitments. My teaching has triangulated with these changing consciousness and realities, a process I term “practice.” Looking into historical resources human subjects have drawn on, and reaching forward to their hopes, I uncover, scrutinize, and interpret the constraining structures and, most importantly, the differing meanings that have made up people’s lives, strategies, and narratives. Such practice has continued to shape my scholarly sensibilities.

“China as Process,” a unifying theme for this volume, is intended to use ethnographic encounters in a regional construct to challenge the static, positivist dichotomous categories that dominated 20th-century social sciences and my early education. Inspired by European cultural historians (Marc Bloch, Jacques Le Goff, George Duby), British Marxists (E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm), and an interpretative, Weberian turn in anthropology (Clifford Geertz), I have come to believe that cultures, societies, polities, populations, places, etc. are not entities with innate, pre-existing hard boundaries. Instead, they are constructed through human actions, nuanced meanings and moral imagination, and laced with economic and political interests. However, these entities have often been essentialized as bounded conceptual categories. For me to stress “process” and “practice” is to capture the humanist flux in social life that is full of agentive surprises. The issue is how to devise analytical tools to view fluidity as constant.

I am mindful of the limits to movement and contingency. To understand “structuring” is to appreciate that, at certain historical junctures, elements of these processes present themselves as powerful institutional structures with lasting significance,

and often internalized. Social life should be appropriately contextualized in these moments of entanglement and domination so that we can appreciate the ordering frames that human actions have generated and given relevant meanings. My anthropological intuitions are often triggered by such appreciation for historical precision.

Essays in this volume, written over a period of twenty-five years, are grouped under analytical concepts that illuminate a processual perspective: texts and meaningful life-worlds, moving targets, structuring and human agency, culturing power, reading history between the lines, making locality with translocality, and juxtaposing the historical global and the Asian postmodern. They highlight my attempts to bridge my interests in history and anthropology. The essays address a shared goal of the two disciplines to treat micro social dynamics in time and space as embedded in an assemblage of macro/structural processes. By stressing the making of local society with translocal imaginaries and meanings, the essays explore the distinguishing character of unity and diversity in China's long cultural history of state-making.

Moreover, I use historical sensibilities to scrutinize linear perspectives of change prevalent in the social sciences. I bring "the past" back into the ethnographic present as core to analysis rather than treat past happenings as historical background. By asking how the past has been selectively remembered, interpreted, and practiced, the essays uncover discursive strategies in both ethnographic and historical texts. These critical tools make me rethink subjectivities and institutional categories (such as geographies and social groupings) that have been asserted by research subjects and naturalized in our own conceptual schemas.

My research topics have included historical constructions of lineage, community, and ethnicity, the politics of popular rituals, and the cultural language of power in the Ming and Qing. For the 20th century, topics cover Republican social turmoil, Maoist rural transformations, post-reform urban dynamics, and China's global reach. One needs to appreciate forces that set energies "in motion." One also needs to understand the accumulated structural constraints in peoples' life-worlds. I hope to organize these diverse topics into a coherent narrative to capture the agency of situated human subjects and its nuances.

Colleagues have characterized my academic orientation as eclectic if not outright subversive. It is hard to pin down her intellectual roots, they say. Students also find my cultural ambiguity quite disconcerting. The response is straightforward: why should we be concerned with roots? Creative energies come from the ability to appreciate multiple reference points, to see through ordering frames, to de-center established categories, to cross set boundaries, and to synthesize seemingly unrelated and contingent elements.

My academic training has not been conventional. I spent early years in an American liberal arts college exploring South Asian history, American sociology, and English literature. Paul Riesman, an Africanist anthropologist trained in the

European tradition and my teacher at Carleton College, taught me to respect knowledge and sentiment. When I started graduate studies at Stanford University, I worked with John Gurley, a monetary theorist turned political economist. However much I admired Gurley as a teacher, I decided at the end that Economics as a discipline did not satisfy my curiosity in the nuanced complexities of human life. I eventually chose anthropology under the guidance of G. William Skinner and Arthur Wolf.

Professor Skinner himself was never a conventional scholar. His interests span macro and micro perspectives, and covered demography, geography, history, economics, politics, sociology, and anthropology. I have always leaned towards his analytical perspectives to cross intellectual boundaries. It is understandable that Arthur Wolf once complained that I had not learned much from him for all the years spent at Stanford!

I have crossed other boundaries. A few years back, an interviewer asked whether I considered myself a “native anthropologist,” and how that had affected my work. The answer was: I enjoy my ambiguous cultural identity. The British education system and social environment that nurtured my early years in Hong Kong were not quite “China.” I professionally matured in a Euro-American environment. Both Chinese and American colleagues see me as “other,” but if one finds oneself at the margins, one has autonomous space, gets away with irreverence, and can pursue unusual dreams.

Such opportunities came early. I was personally exposed to radical student movements in North America and Europe during college. As an Asian, canvassing anti-war sentiments in rural Minnesota in the early 1970s was no small feat. Studying world communism and meeting Han Suyin in London were also an eye-opener. I had by then forgotten the riots on the streets of Hong Kong in 1967, when the violence of the Cultural Revolution spilled across the border from Guangdong. I was politically eager to see how Marxist thought could be practiced in agrarian China. Looking from afar, the Chinese revolution appeared relevant for societies experiencing the pains of postcolonial development. As “an overseas compatriot” I was among the first to conduct fieldwork in China in the 1970s. It did not take long for me to read between the lines of ethnographic encounters to realize what revolution was about. I spent the next forty years reflecting on why I had been so “blind.”

No one could deny that the subjects of research, my moving targets, have changed with remarkable speed and human drama. Post-Mao reforms have been as tumultuous as the decades of social and political upheavals before. In the 1970s, I strolled through villages in the Pearl River Delta to understand the reach of the Maoist state. In the 1980s, I watched communes being dismantled and market towns reconstructed. In the 1990s, I felt the explosive energies unleashed by the privatization of the urban economy and the massive “floating population” as China once again became a “world factory.” Today, to appreciate China’s worldly embrace, I track the volatile emotions

and cultural styles of a rising Chinese middle class and the paths of transnational entrepreneurs to the Middle East and Africa.

Every significant historical juncture I observed has brought different human agents onto the stage who deserve analytical attention. The historical baggage they carry, their conspicuous display of ambition and resolve, the subtle institutional constraints they face, and the cultural resources they continue to reinvent present a kaleidoscope of possibilities to any researcher. I have been eager to develop an institutional framework and platform with a clear interdisciplinary intellectual agenda to capture phenomena “in motion.”

It is ironic that four decades ago, I went to China asking how the village world experienced modern, socialist transformation in the 20th century. What I found was neither village nor revolution. Instead, my research subjects were socially and politically grounded, and stripped down to a bare existence. Although the rural communities I encountered were situated in a historically commercialized and culturally rich Pearl River Delta, they seemed cellular and isolated in the 1970s. The lives of their inhabitants were one-dimensionally dictated by a weighty political bureaucracy and incarcerated in rural marginality quite contradictory to the official rhetoric. My observations led me to conclude that “everything was red, but life was colorless.” I could not apply the analytical tools I had prepared for studying traditional villages that had been embedded in dynamic layers of marketing, lineage structures, translocal community networks, religious and popular rituals. My “revolutionary” sensibilities were also severely tested.

By the first decade of the 21st century, I have moved on. I have been studying the rapidly transformed urban landscape of Guangzhou but found neither urbanity nor market. I have been drawn to the *chengzhongcun*, village enclaves at the margins and the heart of expanding municipalities in South China—socially explosive areas in the post-reform era. Maoist boundaries of rural and urban and the cultural meanings attached to these categories are being pulled in different directions by insensitive policies, official vanities and maneuvers of villagers and hundreds of thousands of migrants. Although village life is made volatile by global financial markets, and original inhabitants can acquire unimaginable real estate income, the villagers are structurally and discursively grounded, feeling marginal and displaced. They face the incongruities of everyday life with a curious mix of shrewdness, resignation, and an undeniable desperation. Some would say, “We may be rich, but our children have no future.” The grueling circumstances of those attempting to bridge the rural-urban divide are vividly portrayed in a film entitled *Bamboo Shoots* (2009). Although director Jian Yi has not produced it as a documentary film about his native place in Jiangxi, all the characters are played by villagers themselves to create a surreal sense of a historical moment they find themselves in. In the new century, as I observe energized

African traders in the village enclaves of Guangzhou, or follow the ever expanding footprints of ambitious Chinese investors in the Middle East and Africa, I see new state spaces intertwined with amoral market impulses. A serious rethinking of analytical categories and cultural empathies is necessary to appreciate how our research subjects move towards modern riches in fast-forward mode with remarkable historical baggage.

I have presented some of these self-reflections (Siu 2001) before and elaborated on the issue of positioning oneself in relation to research subjects and to the *yujing*, a larger context (Siu, Bol et al. 2007). I stress that decades of doing ethnographic fieldwork in China comprise processes that intertwine—what I, as researcher, am going through, what my research subjects are experiencing, and how our interactions and narratives are shaped by the changing circumstances of the larger society and polity. We need a comprehensive conceptual framework that takes into account the mutually constitutive processes that result in our respective positioning. Rather than using categories and labels with which our research subjects identify themselves, or uncritically employ our own conceptual categories we bring to the field to frame our research questions, we understand them as social and discursive products to be deciphered. To use critical literary language, it is an exercise in deconstruction.

Allow me to quote at length from a monograph I wrote twenty-five years ago, *Agents and Victims in South China: Accomplices in Rural Revolution* (Siu 1989a). It illustrates how I analytically chased after moving targets.

In writing this ethnography, I do not pretend to present every aspect of this complex region. In my ten years of fieldwork, I have been classified as student, compatriot, professor, party agent, as well as friend and sympathizer. What I absorbed were responses to my presence in the commune, shaped as much by the painful unraveling of ideological assumptions as the semiconscious efforts of friends to balance what I should know and what I was politically obliged to know. But the changing nature of our interaction over the years provided the meaning I was looking for. I came to know elderly villagers such as Uncle Liang and his friends, who insisted that the land in their communities was owned by the lineages of He the Minister and Mo the Eunuch. I made friends with old cadres such as Xu Decheng, who admitted that “the three red flags of Mao” swept him off his feet, Lin Qing, who declared that the grain procurement quotas were “utterly damnable,” and Chen Sheyuan, who remembered the Cultural Revolution as “the drama of the absurd.” I sympathized with Huang Youfen, who had participated in earnest in the loyalty dances for Mao during the Cultural Revolution and came to the conclusion a dozen years later that he and the socialist system had nothing left to offer each other. I sensed the hopefulness of the young party secretary, Yuan Dewei, who spoke proudly of the embankment and the wide motor-road in Huicheng as goals for modernization in the 1980s. At the same time, I appreciated the subtle nostalgia of the elderly historians who showed me around the county capital and pointed to the invisible line of ancestral halls at the southern gate of

the city that had long ago succumbed to the forces of socialism. Their stories and those of many others form the narrative of the people who were both agents and victims, accomplices in a process of change they named revolution. (p. 301)

My own part in the process was obvious, as I have said in the Prologue of the book. “In a sense, I went to South China with Marxist hopes, but I left with Max Weber’s worst fears. Writing this ethnography is a self-reflective endeavor” (p. xxii). Sustained fieldwork in China was difficult at the time due to the uncertain political environment in the wake of the Mao era. The interactive style of writing ethnography was also not mainstream. Of the numerous book reviews that followed, only one colleague noticed its “postmodern” touch!

My point is that, wherever one chooses to spend intellectual energy, it is both personal and structural. One interacts with one’s social, cultural and political environments: in the research questions one looks for answers, in the analytical tools and assumptions that shape one’s priorities, and in the political, human dramas that capture the hearts and minds of generations. I hope I have plunged in with a healthy dose of self-reflection. Over the decades since writing the monograph, I have continued to deepen my Weberian turn in anthropology and history.

Intellectual curiosity seldom ends with retirement. Nonetheless, as I am approaching that stage of my career, it seems timely to take stock of the various landscapes I have traversed. There have been clearly highs and lows in this journey, and I have not been alone. I did start in the 1970s as a solitary anthropologist testing the field in village China, but by the 1980s, David Faure, Liu Zhiwei and Chen Chunsheng had offered companionship in the archives and in fieldwork. In the 1990s, Ching May Bo, Zhao Shiyu, Zheng Zhenman, Zhang Xiaojun and Choi Chi-cheung, among others, generously offered their commitment to our shared research and teaching goals. Colleagues have occasionally labeled us the “South China Gang” (*Huanan bang* 華南幫) although we never subscribe to that identity (Siu 2014). Nevertheless, it is gratifying to see that our collective pursuits have acquired a modest institutional presence.

As in China, I have found critical intellectual companionship among colleagues at Yale University, my professional home for the past thirty-three years. Back in 1982, William Kelly, a Japan anthropologist, and I had our feet in the rice fields. This was a legacy of our positivist social science education in the 1970s. The Yale environment enabled us to start a faculty reading group with the intention to reduce the pile of unread books on our desks. James Scott in Political Science, Deborah Davis and Matt Hamabata in Sociology, Jean Agnew in American Studies, Keith Luria in French History, Susanne Wofford in Shakespearean Literature, Bridget Murnaghan in Classics were among those who joined us. For almost ten years when the reading group stayed together, we shared an appreciation for critical social theories and literary poetics as much as ethnography and historical nuances. I must have tested the Yale tenure system by compiling two volumes in literature and history when I should

have devoted attention to writing ethnography. Bonding among the group was strong. It led James Scott to declare in one of his books that if he had barked up the wrong tree, we were in it together! This reading adventure evolved into the Agrarian Studies program, a significant feature of inter-disciplinary dialogue at Yale, mischievous and irreverent at times, and exemplary in its sustained subversive intentions. Sharing this spirit was Jack Goody, a close friend, mentor, and fellow traveler along an extraordinary trajectory in anthropology. His broad historical imagination, infectious curiosity, and meticulous observation of the everyday during our search for the culture of flowers in New England, France, South China and Hong Kong have had a lasting impact on me. Without these colleagues, my intellectual development would not have taken such shape and direction.

I have also put ideals to practice. When I chaired the Council on East Asian Studies at Yale in the 1990s, and with help from my able assistants, Bee Lay Tan and Waichi Ho, I actively raised endowed funds for a broadly defined and sustainable program in Chinese Studies. In 2001, I established the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Hong Kong with the generous support of friends and colleagues across the globe. I have keenly felt that Asian Studies has been gravitating to a re-networked Asia, and we highlight an inter-disciplinary and inter-Asia agenda. Through the Institute's activities, we share the excitement of unconventional crossing of intellectual boundaries. A few names should be mentioned for their remarkable faith in this academic venture: Elizabeth Perry, Leo Ou-fan Lee, Richard Wong, Paul Tam, Angela Leung, David Faure, Elizabeth Sinn, May Bo Ching, Liu Zhiwei, Chen Chunsheng, William Kelly, K. Sivaramakrishnan, Deborah Davis, Eric Tagliacozzo, Lu Hanlong, Zhang Jishun, Kwok-leung Yu, Sun Wenbin, Emily Ip, Joan Cheng, Yan Lijun, Venus Lee, and Yvonne Chan. We now have a platform for a critical community of scholars who engage in quality inter-disciplinary research and collegiality. What follows is a truly collective testimony.

Part 1

Tracing Meaningful Life-Worlds

In 2009, I was asked by two close colleagues, David Faure and Liu Zhiwei, to clarify our research agenda on South China. It became “Reflections on Historical Anthropology,” published in Chinese by the *Journal of History and Anthropology* (2009a). I use a slightly revised version here. Tracing our intellectual roots from the classic traditions of Durkheim, Marx and Weber to critical social theories, European social and cultural history, the essay shows how we have attempted to synergize decades of methodological reflections in history and anthropology. It explores the construction of texts and meaningful life-worlds shared by the two disciplines. We sleuth archival sources and ethnographic encounters for divergent meanings within hegemonic frames of mind and matter, and we attempt to highlight the concepts of culture, history, power, and place in processual and non-binary terms. The themes in the essay frame the organization of this volume.

A section of the essay was delivered at a meeting of the East Asian Section of the American Anthropological Association in memory of my teacher G. William Skinner (Siu 2010a). I highlight the theme “Unity and Diversity” as key to understanding the evolution of Chinese culture and society. It captures the interface of local society and translocal environments by stressing the diverse strategies of human agents who were grounded in regional political economies. These local initiatives, symbolic and instrumental, dovetailed with late-imperial state-making impulses at crucial historical moments to generate a unifying cultural nexus of power.

The second essay extends the theme of unity and diversity into the late 20th century. It adds ethnographic nuance from South China to substantiate my conception of “Chineseness” as meaningful processes. Published in 1991/1993, it focuses on the remaking of cultural identity on the eve of Hong Kong’s change of sovereign status. I see the term as a malleable assemblage of primordial, historical and political qualifiers: ethnic and linguistic attributes, places of origin, cultural styles and entitlements. At crucial times, political regimes have highlighted particular attributes to define certain populations as subjects/citizens and to claim their allegiance. Local actors have actively negotiated with these state acts. Almost twenty years since the changeover, emotions attached to being Chinese or Hong Konger remain contentious.

The “Umbrella Movement” on the streets of Hong Kong in late 2014 is highly illustrative. The essay argues against analytical frameworks that essentialize culture and identity and perceive social/historical changes as linear progressions.

My treatment of history, culture and politics reflects decades of explorations in social theories and in fieldwork. To supplement the two selected essays, I list below concepts and works that have inspired my encounters with ethnographic and textual materials.

In the 1970s, I was caught up in student movements worldwide. Marxist learning was in vogue. By the time I entered Stanford University as a graduate student, I was introduced to European Neo-Marxist theories of the state and cultural production (Louis Althusser, Raymond Williams). Equally exciting were World Systems Theories (Immanuel Wallerstein), Dependent Theories on Latin America (Andre Gunder Frank), and postcolonial critiques (Frantz Fanon, Edward Said). While Hemingway and Orwell remained my favorite authors, I struggled with rudimentary French to read Sartre and Camus. In the intense political debates on American involvement in Vietnam, teachers and fellow students questioned the fundamental assumptions of modernization models based on Eurocentric experiences. To reevaluate the power relationships between the urban industrial economies and agrarian ones undergoing fitful transformations in the 20th century, we tried to go beyond linear models of development. We saw the sources of “backwardness” not rooted in the cultures of tribal or agrarian societies. Instead, we explored how centuries of colonial and postcolonial relationships had shaped their structural vulnerabilities. The fates of the industrial West and those of the ethnic/economic/political “other” were long intertwined. Intent on uncovering the agency of the marginalized and the voices of those silenced in historical records, we experimented with critical reading, turning over cultural/ethnographic and historical texts to cut through the accumulated structures of power and knowledge.

Anthropology and history, like literary studies, underwent critical reflections in these unsettling decades. Expanding on classic theorists on social change (Marx, Durkheim and Weber), the works of Anthony Giddens (1979), Pierre Bourdieu (1972/1977), and Philip Abrams (1982) have since made me appreciate the mutual constitution of human subjectivities, contingent actions and social structure. Using the term “structuring,” Abrams highlights the paradox of human agency in historical change—purposeful, meaningful human actions, and unintended structural consequences.

Culture as a concept and an empirical reality is a major concern of anthropology and Clifford Geertz (1973) has made it an interpretative exercise. He sees human action as suspended in webs of meaning and stresses culture’s malleable, negotiated qualities. The structuring process is further clarified by Sherry Ortner’s masterful summary of anthropological theories (1984) and later expositions in Dirks, Eley

and Ortner (1994). Ortner uses the term “practice” to intertwine contingent human thoughts and actions with structures of power and economic interests. She sees human subjectivities as neither entirely lodged in the mind with essentialized meanings, nor empirically quantifiable in material objects and deduced from static institutional structures. The question is how to analytically capture their formation and transformation as historically grounded processes. Renowned historian William Sewell Jr., in a recent work, similarly argues for the appreciation of “historicity of all social forms” and the necessity to combine “historians’ nuanced sense of social temporalities, anthropologists’ recognition of the power and complexity of culture, and sociologists’ commitment to explanatory rigor” (2005, p. ix).

Numerous works in the European tradition have taught me how to identify culturally significant moments in history. In *The Great Transformation*, Karl Polanyi (1944/1957) argued for appreciating social and cultural substance embedded in the operations of economic life. Even an emerging capitalist market economy, such as that of England in the 18th century, was forged with state interventions, ideologies, institutional rules and moral imaginations. My early forays into the anthropologically oriented work of Marc Bloch and Georges Duby led me further into cultural history. Jacques Le Goff, a major figure in the “New History” movement, highlights meanings of time and work in the Middle Ages. Fellow cultural historians would not view the personal motivations of “great men” as drivers of historical events, and turn to popular customs, folk tales, beliefs, rituals, and interpretations of historical experiences produced by those marginalized in historical records. They pay attention to the historiography of the everyday (Burke 1992). *Montaillou* and *Carnival of Romans* by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie are fine examples of extrapolating totalizing community structure and mindsets from ground-level economic details. Similarly, Carlo Ginsburg in *The Cheese and the Worms* outlines the intense religious contestations at the time of the Reformation by focusing on the radical philosophical claims of an Italian miller. In describing the rampage of exploited apprentices in a Paris neighborhood to exterminate its cats, Robert Darnton’s *Great Cat Massacre* almost predicts the fate of the aristocrats forty years later. Even if conventional materials such as court and family records are used, as in the works of Natalie Davis on early modern France (1975, 1987), she decodes underlying meanings of gender, self, family, and faith that ordinary people used to construct their social and moral worlds.

English social historians such as E. P. Thompson (1963), Eric Hobsbawm (1960), Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones (1982) have enlightened my understanding of how cultural meaning is intertwined with historically specific class conflict and political dissent. E. P. Thompson turns to the experiences of laboring families in 18th- and 19th-century England to write “history from below.” He examines cultural forms of “class struggle” between gentry charity and riotous plebian crowds, and how their conservative cultural strategies were gradually replaced by new class

experiences in the 19th century (1974). Although Thompson is deeply involved in a Marxist scholarly tradition, he moves the definition of class formation from static structural categories arising from production relations to a process rich with conflicting cultural symbolisms and moral contingencies. The idea that cultural traditions are malleable to support class actions leads to another inspirational work, edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terrance Ranger. *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) shows how a sense of the past and associated ceremonial symbolisms have been shrewdly deployed to confirm identity and to justify ideological positions. "Cultural tradition" is a process that can be essentialized and reinvented.

Continuing the theme of culture and power, Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer (1985), both students of Philip Abrams, have produced a brilliant rendition of English state-making, synthesizing the essence of Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Elias and Foucault. They are attentive to cultural forms naturalized in everyday life to produce complicit political subjects over the centuries.

Similar studies on the mutual constitution of culture and state as historical processes have moved to a global arena, challenging the analytical boundaries of nation-states, oceans and continents. Benedict Anderson shows how nationalisms originating from the Americas were spread to Europe, Asia and Africa via social movements and institutional powers (1983/1991). His essay "Census, Maps and Museums" decodes the ordering frame of rule and generation of political subjectivities. Census demarcates a population; maps mark territory; and museums create claims to cultural heritage. They are infrastructural elements in making nation-states.

Bernard Cohn pursues a similar analytical theme in the construction of empire. His classic work *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge* (1996) unveils how Orientalist interests helped generate linguistic expertise, photographic images, antiquarian collections, historical archives and colonial records in and of India. He argues that the codification of information and cultural imagination, together with the more administrative means in revenue collection and law, secured British colonial hegemony. Another inspiring work, *Castes of Mind* by Nicholas Dirks (2001), traces how British colonial authorities in the late 19th century, for convenience of administering a large and seemingly unintelligible sub-continent, drew together fragmented notions of "caste" and social hierarchy. Subsequently reinvented even by postcolonial nationalists in the 20th century, "caste" has been firmly established as almost the timeless, cultural essence of the Indian civilization. Partha Chatterjee, in *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993), has provided similarly brilliant arguments against timeless perceptions of culture and politics in modern India, and stresses their historically contingent, invented nature.

Some of these themes on culture, power and world history are scrutinized closer to my intellectual home in anthropology. Just as 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. Their analytical lenses on the interpretive and historically contingent nature of culture, power, and place extend from individual human agents to non-Eurocentric world systems (Siu 2014).

Eric Wolf (1982), Sidney Mintz (1985), Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003) each challenges the Euro-centric view of world cultures and histories. Similarly, Jack Goody's synthesizing approach to history and anthropology and specifically to Eurasia connections has been most inspiring (Goody 1991, 1996; Pallares-Burke 2002, pp. 8–30). They all stress the circulation of commodities and inter-cultural connections through the centuries, and reconfigure familiar conceptual categories of the ethnic and cultural other, capitalist transformations, colonial subjugation, and East-West dichotomies. They also rejuvenate cross-disciplinary dialogue among historians and ethnographers and open new ways of synthesizing local life-worlds and global processes. Their conceptual reterritorialization makes us look deeper to uncover obscured empirical data and to rethink our research subject, site, and voice. If conventional categories of populations, societies, cultures, identities, and polities have been made by historical processes of global scales loaded with power implications, how do we delineate the spatial boundaries of our analytical units (Gupta and Ferguson 1992/1997, pp. 33–51)?

The meaning and materiality of power can be nuanced. James Scott's influence on my thinking about "culturing power" has been immense. From his early work, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976) exploring why peasants rebel, to influential works such as *Weapons of the Weak* (1985) and *Domination and the Art of Resistance* (1990), he has moved from a Marxist notion of power to a Weberian one. He argues that Southeast Asian peasants rebelled not entirely based on the sheer quantity of grain extracted from their harvests but on when their subsistence ethic was violated. He thus shifts our analytical attention of class conflict from structural relations of production to victims' subjective perceptions of their plight. Both he and William Kelly (1985) stress the "hidden transcripts" of defiance in public gestures of deference when peasant communities, facing the overwhelming interventions of imperial authorities in Tokugawa Japan or modern developmental states in Southeast Asia, negotiated their precarious existence. The elites, on the other hand, were more vulnerable than they appeared in the public rituals of displaying power. How rights and legitimacy of rule are represented, performed and contested is therefore brought into sharp focus. Moreover, reading between the lines, one is sensitized to narrative strategies in historical texts, be they county gazetteers, official edicts, or lineage genealogies. Similarly, ethnographic encounters, ritual practices, ceremonies, festivals and other public events can be given interpretative readings to uncover embedded meanings.

Application of power has spatial dimensions. Scott's other important works deal with the fluid relationships between centers of political power and those "at the

margins.” *Seeing Like a State* (1998) outlines the efforts of political regimes to simplify and codify complex social realities in order to make legible the subjects to be governed. More often than not, and even with best intentions, these efforts are adopted, compromised, and subverted by local agency. This line of thinking parallels that of my South China colleagues. Giving more weight to local initiatives, *Down to Earth: The Territorial Bond in South China* (Faure and Siu 1995) highlights processes in the Ming, Qing and early 20th century, whereby indigenous populations used instrumental and symbolic means to position themselves. State-making efforts from the “center” to absorb regional society dovetailed with maneuvers of resourceful local groups to make themselves part of the empire at various historical moments. These complex and dynamic processes are brilliantly captured by David Faure’s analyses on lineage building in South China (1986) and by James Watson on the cult of Tianhou (Johnson, Nathan, and Rawski 1985, pp. 292–324). In *Emperor and Ancestor* (2007), Faure takes the research topics far beyond kinship and descent. Settlement histories, taxation regimes, land reclamations and tenure, and maturing commercial capital and literati power were intertwined with a language of lineage and coded in ritual practices to create translocal identities and imperial authority (Faure and Liu 2000). The mutual constitution of state and local society over centuries resulted in distinctive regional cultures juxtaposed with intense identification with a real and imaginary center.

The Art of NOT Being Governed (Scott 2009) returns to challenge dichotomous concepts of center and margins, of civilized societies and the ethnic other, and linear models of social change. “Zomia,” a concept introduced by historian Willem Van Schendel (2002), explores sanctuary-like ecological environments that have allowed populations in the borderlands of China, India and highland Southeast Asia to escape state control. Scott argues that, far from being “remnants” of a primitive past, these populations opted for autonomous distance from state institutions by turning “raw.” “Center” and “periphery” as mutually constituted processes is the organizing theme of a volume that engages Scott. *Empire at the Margins* (Crossley, Siu, and Sutton 2006) examines culture, ethnicity and frontier in the Ming-Qing transition. The broader question for the authors is: in historical moments when the cultural identities of imperial “centers” appeared contingent, where was the “periphery,” and how should one analytically position the ethnic other in physical and discursive landscapes?

These questions quite naturally lead to issues of place making, identity formation, and the social and political fluidities involved. Henri Lefebvre’s classic work, *The Production of Space* (1974/1991), immediately comes to mind. Rather than seeing space as a natural physical receptacle of various scales of human activities, a new generation of human geographers has since treated space as constructed with multiple meanings, sociality and political priorities. How the world has been re-territorialized

with technological innovations and emergent regimes of capital and labor is a central concern of David Harvey when he outlines time-space compressions as conditions of modernity and postmodernity in Europe (1990). Equally influential for my thinking are Saskia Sassen's analyses of world finance hubs and implications for global assemblages of economies, legal frameworks and citizenship (2006). As James Holston and Arjun Appadurai indicate (Holston 1999), the relationship of globally connected cities with their national spaces is fraught with tensions.

In the past decade, new theoretical explorations on human/material entanglement have continued earlier efforts to replace static and dichotomous spatial ontologies. Capturing the unstable and assembled qualities of their subjects, they engage topics ranging from archaeology to postmodern urbanity, STS and bioethics. Their processual and relational approach to social-material life is evidenced by the works of Neil Brenner (2013), Aihwa Ong and Stephen Collier (2005), Ignacio Farias and Thomas Bender (2009), and Ian Hodder (2012), to name a few. Driving these theories are the philosophical works of Nicholas Rose on subjectivity and political power (1989) and Actor-Network Theory of Bruno Latour (2005).

On the issue of connectedness, historians have long explored world systems models before capitalist expansions and global finance. The travels of Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta to Asia, and Zheng He's fleets that reached Africa from coastal South China revealed an energized world of traders, officials, scribes, jurists, religious pilgrims, soldiers and sailors with diverse ethnicities, linguistic skills, goods and institutions to share and exchange. In the Tang and Song periods, the Silk Road spanned continents and civilizations, linking East and South Asia to West Asia and Europe. It was lined with oasis towns, caves and grottos with monumental Buddhist statues, trade and military outposts frequented by nomadic caravans (Hansen 2012). Moving to oceanic circulations up to the 18th century, K. N. Chaudhuri (1985) provides details of multicultural encounters in the emporia trade and great port towns along the Indian Ocean routes against the background of empires and emerging nation-states. Reading six paintings by Vermeer based in Delft, the headquarters of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), Timothy Brook (2008) portrays the almost taken-for-granted cultural fusion in everyday life, tastes and perceptions. While Takeshi Hamashita (2008) maps the complicated circuits of tributary trade between the Chinese empire and its Asian partners/competitors at the time of European ascendancy from the 18th century on, Janet Abu-Lughod (1989) pushes the temporal boundaries backwards in time by adding crucial Islamic connections in the 13th century. A visit to the "China Trade" collection of the Peabody Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, makes me appreciate quality commodities such as tea and ivory, fine China, silverware, wallpaper and wood furniture. They were made by craftspeople in 18th-century Guangzhou for royalty and wealthy clients in Europe, North America, and the Arab world.

What concerns me most has been the conceptual mapping of Asia in the world. I have teamed up with like-minded colleagues to produce a three-volume set of “Asia Inside Out” (Tagliacozzo, Siu, and Perdue 2015a, 2015b) with the explicit aim to rethink territory-based concepts. Allow me to end this introduction with two interesting works that have guided my crossing of regional boundaries. Jack Goody, in *The Theft of History* (2007), challenges the deeply Eurocentric assumptions of Fernand Braudel, Norbert Elias, Moses Finlay, and Perry Anderson, scholars whom he also admires. Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen, in *The Myth of Continents* (1997), take a closer look at oceanic systems and their littoral landscapes that should not be treated as margins to land masses. Their works confront linear conceptual frameworks and rigid continental divides. Wigen observes that:

A great number of empirical puzzles, epistemological challenges, and little-explored landscapes await those who engage with this quest for a global maritime geography. To the extent that geographers become interested not just in specific oceanic connections but more fundamentally in reimagining the globe by entertaining novel spatial configurations and regional schemes, both area studies and geography may find new sources of revitalization. (Lewis and Wigen 1999, p. 168)

In sum, I am committed to locating research subjects as components of world assemblages forged in historical junctures with diverse cultural meanings and fields of power. Synergizing the insights of the numerous generations of scholars in history and anthropology, my colleagues and I who work on South China have tried to combine critical social theories with careful scrutiny of ethnographic encounters and archival texts. Highlighting human agency and structural contingency in these processes, I hope to question static, binary analytical categories that have long been naturalized in our conceptual universe.

Reflections on Historical Anthropology

This essay targets a Chinese scholarly audience, who deserves a coherent presentation of the analytical themes that my South China colleagues and I have been concerned with. One cannot ignore history when one studies the unifying and diversifying cultural processes in an entity one terms “China.” Years of field research in South China has made one appreciate the contexts when regional cultures and histories were made, and how they were represented in relation to real and imaginary political centers. Collectively, we have strived to be empirically grounded as well as informed by critical social theories. Key concepts highlighted in this essay are: analytical pursuit of moving targets, structuring, human agency, social practice, the cultural language of power, locality and translocality, and inter-Asian connectivity. We explore self-reflective field methods and apply critical reading to historical texts and cultural events. We might have started our intellectual journeys from South China, but our concerns have taken us far beyond, connecting oceans and landmasses across the globe in multi-disciplinary terms.

We avoid essentializing mindsets by viewing significant events in history as made by purposeful human actions that carry specific cultural, social, and political meanings. Whether we “read” historical materials or observe social life, we are mindful of layers of local and translocal processes in which they were constructed. We walk the field to analytically understand these contexts as structures and to appreciate the nuances in the life worlds of our informants. This, we believe, is a productive way to connect humanities and social sciences. As summarized in the introduction of this section, history is an established academic discipline in Europe and North America. Its key concerns have ranged from political history (fortunes of dynasties and individual political figures), to history of long-term, overarching economic structures (e.g., *Annales School*; representative figures Marc Bloch and Fernand Braudel) and to social histories that try to uncover voices of the marginalized (e.g., E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm). There have been efforts to integrate structural analyses in social sciences with the narrative mode in telling histories (Lawrence Stone 1979; Geoff Eley 2005). By the time historians such as Jacques Le Goff, Carlo Ginsburg and Natalie Davis

highlight cultural meanings and fields of power behind social practice of historical actors, the discipline has moved much closer to anthropology.

Anthropology has also undergone intellectual turning points. In the late 19th century, it started with evolutionary conceptual schemes to turn cultural differences observed in spatial terms into development stages in linear time (e.g., Lewis H. Morgan, Henry Maine). Reactions against such pseudo-historical approaches were variations of structural-functionalist perspectives that dominated British anthropology in the first half of the 20th century. Among the notables were Bronislaw Malinowski and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown although they might not have self-identified with the branding. French structuralism was powerfully represented by Claude Levi-Strauss, who used innate logical structures in the mind to understand almost infinite complexities of social organizations on the ground. None of these scholarly traditions engaged deeply with historical sensibilities and inquiries.

Challenged by critical social theories from Europe, anthropology since the 1970s has undergone deep soul searching (Ortner 1984). It has turned away from the static categories of defining culture and society, and instead shares concerns with history and literary studies when analyzing the “other.” It attempts to uncover meaningful practices of social actors. It highlights the narrative structures and power play that are embedded in archival documents and ethnographic accounts.

This is a significant Weberian turn (Dirks, Eley, and Ortner 1994; Keyes 2002). Culture is no longer timeless, quantifiable and empirically “out there” to be recorded through material objects and practices. History, likewise, is seen as selectively remembered, recorded, and interpreted by human agents who act from different positions of power and vulnerability. Power can be exercised by political machineries and their institutional representatives, but in Foucauldian terms, power can also be internalized and located in our bodies, language, and forms of knowledge. Space and place, concepts seemingly innocuous and often taken for granted as material receptacles of human life, can be imagined, negotiated and constructed with nuanced meanings and ambivalent emotions at different historical junctures. Good research begins with asking questions with the right mix of analytical intuitions and may not always produce clear-cut answers.

Structuring

Social scientists in the past century often start with sharply defined categories—structures in time and place that provide guiding principles for explaining human behavior. However, influenced by anthropology’s soul searching, I have avoided viewing China as a bounded land mass, a receptacle of a population with timeless culture and identity. It is easy for scholars to use terms such as “Confucian China,” or “the Chinese,” as if these entities share generalized cultural or political characteristics.

Even if these categories are empirically relevant, it is important to understand how they have come to be so. To frame research questions, I have since moved away from static concepts of structure and sociality to *process*.

Moreover, using *process* to enrich *structure* is not enough, because these two concepts can be taken as dichotomous. I have found the concept of “*structuring*” more useful (in the tradition of Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu and Philip Abrams). Abrams stresses the contingent, interactive qualities of the subject and object. Every structure has embedded processes, and every process contains structure and agency.

What makes Abrams attractive is that he grounds the concept of structuring in the social theory traditions of Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber. All three have distinct perspectives on social structure and change, with varying degrees of emphasis on the human agent. In Durkheim, I appreciate individual actors and their experiences integral to social structure. I turn to Marx to view social relationships as not integrated by a functional division of labor or an appreciation of difference. They are sustained and challenged by class-based interests and institutional power. With Weber, I see purposeful human actions and moral imaginations (such as bureaucratic rationality, legitimacy, or religious panic) that may lead to unintended structural transformations.

Inspired by such thinking, my South China colleagues and I embrace an analytical framework that assumes social life in constant flux, narrated and interpreted by economically interested, politically shrewd, and culturally creative subjects. It is up to a historian and ethnographer to pinpoint the conjunctures when particular processes gain lasting significance and definitive power. How do social phenomena such as nations, states, ethnicities, communities, lineages and religions come to shape material life, mark identities and confirm commitment? Through what means are boundaries hardened or blurred? Whose voices prevail, and whose memories are highlighted or erased from historical or cultural memories? A point in time, a site in space, an institutional feature, are embedded in processes that sustain them, and given instrumental and symbolic meanings by subjects who engage them. Liu Zhiwei, in summarizing our explorations in the field together, has written an insightful article in *Lishi yanjiu* (2003) on how we apply the concept of *structuring* to historical and ethnographic work in South China. Uncovering these processes in the flux of social life and the fields of power requires patient sleuthing.

The Individual Actor

If process and structure are dialectically linked to human action, how should we conceptualize the difference between an individual actor and the human agent? I have gained insight from conversations with Richard Wong, a Chicago-trained economist and colleague, who shares with me how European intellectual history relates

to modern social science analyses. Allow me to paraphrase his ideas below. For a market-oriented economist whose basic unit of analysis is the atomistic, self-interested actor, Wong traces the evolution of the concept of the individual through the centuries (Lukes 1973). He starts with medieval Europe, when the church dichotomously viewed the world as separated by the forces of darkness (for pagans) and light (for believers of the Christian faith). However, towards the end of the Middle Ages, minds, if not hearts, were changing. Some historians found it hard to fit the classical ages in their moral and religious imagination that were framed dichotomously. The Greeks and Romans had had remarkable achievements in their philosophies, economies and political systems although they were seen as non-believers. By recognizing these achievements, the historians were beginning to stress that people, not God, could be the originator of their own actions. This complicated the opposition between a life of sin and salvation and allowed an appreciation for the creativity of men in everyday material life.

Religious individualism was ushered in when Martin Luther unveiled his 95 Theses in 1517 and initiated the Protestant Reformation. His religious action, circumscribed at the time, subsequently transformed Western civilization. In his challenge to the authority of the pope and the church clergy, he redefined the process of salvation, stressing the individual believer's faithful relationship with God.

Wong asserts that political individualism surfaced in the 17th century. Philosophers challenged the moral and institutional powers of old regimes and debated on the sovereign rights of individuals. They stressed rational, self-interested, and contractual relationships with new forms of governance, the rule of law, and the political basis for personal liberty (e.g., Thomas Hobbes, John Locke). Later scholars coined the complex historical processes The Enlightenment. The concept of the sovereign rights of individuals is also a cornerstone for modern Western legal thought. One is born with natural rights. These rights are not given by governments. Instead, it is the responsibility of states and their constitutions to protect the rights.

Economic individualism closely followed in Wong's view. Based on accumulated intellectual debates in which the individual as a subject was step by step released from layers of social contextualization, one can almost anticipate Adam Smith's construction of the market and pricing mechanisms in the 18th century. Although Adam Smith was mindful of the balance between market, state and the moral sentiments embedded in human actions, the idea of utility and self-regulated market was highlighted by later scholars. Economic individualism captured the atomistic, self-interested actors, rationally calculating means and ends, coming into contractual arrangements in market transactions, and structuring supply and demand. Individual good dovetailed with the good of society. The invisible hand of the market replaced regulations by the state and the moral principles in society. If every actor was similarly unencumbered, human action would be quantifiable and comparable for statistical

analysis. This concept gained tremendous significance in social sciences paradigms in the 20th century for economists, sociologists and political scientists. Anthropologists might have been the exception.

Social Practice and Human Agency

Fortunately for sociologists and anthropologists, the three classic social theorists in the 19th century, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx and Max Weber, offered counterweight to the conceptual atomization of the human self. In various ways, they put the individual back into different structural, historical, and moral contexts. Emile Durkheim believed that individuals were *social* beings. Different economic formations necessitated solidarities and moralities for individuals to relate to the collective. In societies with little division of labor, society was held together by repressive laws and rituals to induce commitment. He termed it mechanical solidarity. As economies advance, increasing division of labor enabled individual parts to contribute to the whole in structurally differentiated but functionally integrative ways. Collective consciousness was based on mutual appreciation of difference. He termed it organic solidarity. The source of alienation was traced to the individual's unbalanced relationship with society, either by being suddenly detached from one's social environment in times of rapid social change, or overly engaged with a particular social ideology (such as nationalism) in which collective goals overwhelm an individual's sense of self. His book *Suicide* used French data to argue that self-destruction was a *socio-structural* issue. Durkheim's functionalist assumptions, however, had prevented him from examining inequalities, conflicts, and power play embedded in social relations and mainstream (collective) moralities.

Marx captured social turmoil in his class analysis. Social differentiation came with private property. Owners of productive forces exercised power over the organization of work and the terms of distribution. These social relationships were not neutral but full of power, domination, and contestations. Each class had its progressive historical roles and exploitative powers that were eventually challenged. This was the essence of class contradictions and struggles, and reflected not only at the economic base but also political institutions, ideologies and other class-based cultural forms.

European Marxists have focused a great deal more on the superstructure and stress the autonomous power of state apparatus to exert political and cultural hegemony (representatives include Antonio Gramsci, the Frankfurt School, Louis Althusser and Raymond Williams). In Foucault, power becomes even more intangible and diffusive, in the constitution of the body, language and thought. Their critical revisions of Marxist concepts are rich and complex, but I would not be able to detail them here.

The human agent exercising purposeful action is central to a Weberian perspective. In the pursuit of meaningful lives, individuals intentionally or unintentionally make

society, history, and themselves. As mentioned earlier in this essay, Philip Abrams calls this human-focused process of change “structuring.” Human intentions and actions may not be firmly rooted in a particular type of social structure (as Durkheim would see them), nor are they single-mindedly class-based (as Marx might view them). One can appreciate the historical paradox of human action in Weber’s work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Members of a Protestant sect, anxious about salvation and God’s grace, worked hard to convince themselves that they were the chosen group. This work ethic dovetailed with the historical conditions of Europe to create a new class of capitalist entrepreneurs with tremendous structural consequences. The Weberian treatment of purposeful human action and its unintentional results makes one appreciate historical change as diverse, rich, and multi-directional.

My South China colleagues and I have stressed this dialectical relationship between individual selves and structure, of intentional action and unintended structural consequences. Conceptually different from the atomistic individual, human agents create webs of material and symbolic significance that become ordering frames for further actions. In the introduction of *Agents and Victims in South China*, I highlight the paradox of agency in Chinese peasants by downplaying the conceptual dichotomy of power and resistance (as in James Scott’s work). Instead, I stress “complicity.”

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 20th century, who, as Richard Madsen says (1984, p. 30), have made themselves as they made history. (Siu 1989a, pp. 13–14)

In a volume entitled *Furrows: Peasants, Intellectuals, and the State*, 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 1990c)

I have argued that in the 1930s, the writers *chose* to write about peasants. By the 1970s and 1980s, they *had no choice but* to write about peasants. In face of a political movement that was determined to include them, intellectuals and peasants gave it compliance, and at times, commitment and complicity. On looking back, so many felt victimized by the structures and processes made significant by their very actions.

Today, 200 million rural residents are on the move to search for better livelihoods in cities although they face tremendous institutional and cultural barriers. Intellectuals find new spaces to express defiance and ambivalence, but cynicism abounds. A young generation is restless, instrumental, and volatile in their emotions. Sensing a cultural and moral vacuum, the government urges them to stand proudly behind their nation and give more to society. A major state agenda to induce "social harmony" (*hexie*) is to mobilize educated urban youths to serve in poor rural regions whose residents were politically, economically, and physically incarcerated for decades under the Maoist regime. One wonders if there is a sense of *déjà vu*?

In sum, our perspective on practice contains social structure in Durkheim, power in Marx, and purposeful agency in Weber. The ensuing issue is to locate social practice in the appropriate historical moments from which it arises and for which it has lasting albeit unintentional impact.

Deconstructing History

Anthropology has long set its goal to understand the cultural other, just as historian David Lowenthal raises the parallel issue of uncovering the historical other (1985). Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson put the two together by highlighting the historically generated politics of difference (Gupta and Ferguson 1992/1997). Boundary making is an "othering" process, be that national, cultural, ethnic, or social. They cogently illustrate how the cultural other, subject of almost a century of anthropological scrutiny, has been embedded in historical junctures of colonialism, modern state-making, socialist revolutions, neo-liberal transformations, and contemporary contestations.

Although the use of history in cultural analysis is important, anthropologists have not been fully engaged with it. Many who study contemporary topics often ignore it. Some pay tribute in the beginning as historical background, and then proceed to the ethnographic present. Others use historical documents (e.g., local gazetteers, lineage

genealogies) to glean empirical “facts.” A few use critically deconstructed historical materials to unveil the definitive/structuring processes underlying the ethnographic present. This is the way I see history and anthropology intersect.

How does one critically read history? For sure history is not just events that happened in the past. There are no necessary linear connections in time between events. Nor can we claim that history is “tradition.” Every phenomenon (or material object) is made by people in spatial and temporal contexts that are culturally defined. What is considered significant to be remembered as an event is a selective process. How an event is preserved and later reread involves more interpretations. Many happenings, voices and experiences are simply deemed unimportant, forgotten, or deliberately silenced. These critical views of history have long characterized the works of E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Natalie Davis, James Scott, Bernard Cohn, Nicholas Dirks, Ann Stoler, and David Faure.

As researchers, we bring our own discriminating gaze. We locate a site, find relevant informants, survey social landscapes, and watch events unfold. We uncover historical materials such as stone stele, local gazetteers and lineage genealogies. Not only must we treat them as constructed objects, but we should also be aware of the conceptual tools we bring to ask pertinent questions, to glean what we consider to be relevant data, to critically “read” the “texts” and to eventually pose our interpretations against competing ones.

Let me illustrate this point with a Hong Kong story. In recent decades before and after Britain returned the sovereignty of Hong Kong to China in 1997, social and political protests have intertwined with nationalistic parades orchestrated by pro-China forces. Each camp has its own version of what Hong Kong was, is, and should be. In a speech I gave on the eve of the political changeover, I addressed a debate among the public with my own narrative on Hong Kong’s history.

In fewer than 24 hours, Hong Kong will be reunited with China. The notion “One country, two systems” is a unique one. “One country” refers to sovereignty. “Two systems” on the other hand involves complex histories and contradictory emotions. In contrast to China’s nationalist narrative, the Hong Kong experience has been neither entirely colonial/Western nor narrowly territorial. The territory’s residents have acquired overlapping identities of Hong Konger, Cantonese, Chinese and global citizen. They are attached to a territory without clear boundaries. It constitutes fluid layers of social meaning, economic interests, and political preferences and has grown global without losing its Chinese bearing.

... From the Ming dynasty to the end of the 20th century, local population have been quite beyond the reach of formal state apparatus and have foiled any serious imposition of rigid labeling. Interacting with various state efforts, merchants, professionals, revolutionaries, refugees, post-war baby boomers, and new immigrants have displayed tremendous ingenuity to accommodate, to maneuver, and to absorb. Every turn of political event has triggered a remarkable churning

of such diverse energies. Over time, the process has created a phenomenon we call Hong Kong. To respect “two systems” in the political formula is to appreciate these energies. . . . Wherever we choose to place our analyses or faith, I hope that this story can be testimony to the open society of Hong Kong, where public forums are vibrant and different voices respected. Maybe we should not build anything at all in the future reunification plaza—let it be that open, tolerant and “public space” representing what is truly a Hong Kong experience. (Hamilton 1999, pp. 110–11)

Understandably, my version of the Hong Kong story is one among many. I have embedded a particular reading of society and politics in my thick descriptions of Hong Kong’s history against one that builds on stark images contrasting patriotism with colonialism. My task as a social scientist is to demonstrate that my reading meets a high standard of analytical scrutiny.

Culture and the Language of Power

Culture is a major subject of inquiry for anthropology. Before Clifford Geertz and the publication of his 1973 book *The Interpretation of Cultures*, the term had an essentialized quality. It was treated as the accumulated wisdoms of generations that had become the basis of worldviews, moralities, and the guiding principles of actions and judgments for societies. Artifacts and texts were collected as material culture and displayed in museums. So were architectural forms preserved as cultural heritage. They were given significance as embodiment of a population’s life worlds. Culture, in the minds of the layperson, was timeless, encompassing, and uncontested. It could be uncovered, quantified, and recorded as empirical realities.

Critical theory since the 1960s has led to a less tangible view of culture that focuses on its constructed and negotiated nature. Rules, values, styles and judgments are naturalized, improvised, and reinforced by social practice both in public and private life (Ortner 1984; Dirks, Eley, and Ortner 1994). Pierre Bourdieu terms it *habitus*. Engagement with these material and ritual complexes frames a population’s sense of identity, locality, history, and entitlement. Anthropologists who observe life worlds on the ground should go beyond the timeless façade of “culture” and highlight crucial historical moments charged with power implications (state-making, colonial encounters, imperial expansions and the like) in which *culture* is used as spatial, temporal, and social markers to differentiate “us” from “them” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992/1997).

Over the years since I started fieldwork in the 1970s, my concept of culture has become softer, more interpretative, and infused with conflicting meanings and power. To trace it is an exercise in deconstruction. A light-hearted exchange with a historian colleague at Yale illustrates the difference in approach to the treatment of culture and its material representations. My colleague has deep knowledge of oasis towns along

the Silk Road in the Tang and Song. She deals with rare material artifacts—stone stele, documents, unearthened burial objects, religious statues, and paintings in caves and grottos. She often complains that anthropologists just “make up data as they go,” whereas she and her archaeologist colleagues have solid, tangible, material objects in their hands. I caution her that historians are in a far worse situation than anthropologists. “At least we are fully aware of how we construct our data,” I claim, “but historians have to deal with other people’s constructions.” Nothing from the past exists as objectively untouched by human intentions and social practice.

It is interesting to observe how an essentialized “Confucianism” has been actively promoted by the Chinese government in recent years. After decades of deliberate social engineering to erase it, the post-reform state is investing heavily in its resurrection. Confucian institutes are given the mission to uplift the Chinese cultural essence in tune with China’s rise in the new global order. Even in the Olympics opening ceremony in 2008, the timeless essences of “a Chinese civilization” were performed with unprecedented fervor to capture the world’s imagination. For an anthropologist’s analytical eye, it was a remarkable theater of power and spectacle—demonstrating what the organizers considered to be the rightful place of empire, nation, and global player in the 21st century.

An important focus of my colleagues to study culture and history has been rituals associated with family and marriage, lineage formations, community festivals, and popular religion. One early example is my article on the chrysanthemum festivals in Xiaolan (see chapter 8 of this volume), which traces the evolution of the festival from the late 18th to the late 20th century. Every sixty years the festival was staged. One saw different casts of characters rising to the occasion. Many were local elites representing lineage and merchant institutions, cultivating literati themes to stress affiliation with the imperial order, and competing with one another on the lavishness of the displays. These events illuminated the making of local society with cultural imaginations that dovetailed with the expansion of imperial rule during the Ming and Qing. The town’s elites in the Republican, the socialist and post-reform eras continued to recycle the festivals and imposed their priorities while claiming that they were celebrating “tradition.” The festivals were visibly grand cultural spectacles to confirm a changing nexus of power in the Pearl River Delta. Using thick description gleaned from historical archives and ethnographic data, I have offered my interpretations of how a region and its creative populations used symbolic and instrumental means to become part of the imperial empire, and in the ensuing centuries, of a nation in turmoil, a socialist revolution, and a late-socialist state.

In another article, I turn to delayed transfer marriage (*buluojia*) in the Pearl River Delta during the Qing. “Where were the women?” (1990b) questions *buluojia* as being part of a “marriage resistance” complex tied to women’s engagement with the silk industry in the late 19th century. I trace the evolution of that marriage practice

as the regional norm long before the arrival of the silk industry. I critically “read between the lines” of local documents and highlight the agency of indigenous populations (women included) who established their respective places in an advancing empire by using local customs on their own terms. This leads us to ask, “Who exactly were the inhabitants in South China” who, for centuries, claimed that their ancestors had migrated from the Central Plains (Zhongyuan)? If these populations were indigenous, why did they shed almost all local cultural markers but retained certain features of their marriage customs? Why and how did they employ the cultural strategies to establish identities in the open “frontiers” of the delta at the time and claim settlement rights? Although I start the article on women and marriage practices, the way I approach the topic leads me to offer a new reading of a regional political economy and ethnicity in the making.

In a similar vein, Liu Zhiwei analyzes “lineage on the sands” in the Pearl River Delta during the Qing. In his chapter published in *Down to Earth* (Faure and Siu 1995), he combines the emerging institutions of lineage, the cult of a deity Beidi, and their associated rituals to solidify cultural languages of power. Emergent social groups accumulated wealth from the reclamation of the sands, compiled genealogies, established corporate trusts, built ornate ancestral halls, claimed ancestry and literati connections with surnames from the Central Plains, and drew hard lines against those without such constructed lineage pedigree and denied them settlement rights. In this cultural complex, the destitute might not be the familiar Marxist categories of poor, landless peasants, but a non-lineage member, a non-villager, and those *culturally* excluded and labeled “ethnic.”

Using a similar line of argument, Liu and I explore the changing “ethnic” lines drawn between farmers and fishermen in the maturing Pearl River Delta in the Qing. In “Lineage, Market, Pirate, and Dan” (see chapter 9 of this volume), we do not start our research with static “ethnic” categories. Instead, we see them as labels used by established settlers to exclude potential competitors in the open political fields of the sands. Cultural labels hardened precisely when social and economic circumstances were fluid and social hierarchies transgressed. In times of peace, fisher-folk were seen as boat masters, transport functionaries, and merchants. In times of dynastic decline, they were discriminated as Dan and accused of piracy. Nonetheless, the nature of sands reclamation enabled those who were excluded to find upward mobility. Once “landed,” they built ancestral estates, farmed the rich alluvial fields, performed rituals, and compiled genealogies according to what was considered proper cultural strategies. They also imposed discriminating labels on those who came behind them. Ethnicity, in our conceptual schema, is anything but static. It is a historical process full of economic meanings and power play.

David Faure sums up these cultural processes of lineage and ethnic formation and places them in crucial historical moments. His book *Emperor and Ancestor* (2007)

provides ethnographic sensibilities and archival depth. In a review of his book in *China Quarterly*, I relate his views as follows:

Lingnan in the Ming and Qing found legitimate engagement with the center not only in household registration or religious orthopraxy, but also through the language of lineage. Lineage formations, long associated with South China in anthropological literature as cultural essence and functional necessity were, in Faure's narrative, produced by a conjuncture of historical events that tied village to state. This argument enriches and revises Maurice Freedman's seminal works. It begins with Faure's study of the New Territories of Hong Kong between the 16th and 18th century. The present work focuses on specific lineage formations—territorial communities tracing common descent, displaying written genealogies, literati pretensions, landed corporate trusts, elaborate ancestral halls and rituals. These magnate lineages emerged in the Pearl River Delta in the Ming and Qing alongside highly capitalized reclamation of the sands, ethnic self-differentiation through household registration and tax collection, the Great Rituals Controversy and court politics, gentrified local leadership, and the proliferation (and improvisation) of lineage and community rituals. As Faure states, "At different times in Chinese history, the interface between local society and the imperial state was characterized by different modes of verbal expressions, manners, and administrative styles and beliefs, the combination of which is summed up in the shorthand that serves as a name given to an institution. The 'lineage' of South China was such a shorthand." (2007b)

The book is a masterpiece in historical anthropology.

Historical Anthropology as a conceptual framework does not limit its topics to happenings in the past, as shown by my own ethnographic work on the socialist and post-reform periods. When the imperial state was a symbolic resource, the manipulation of cultural meanings and identities gave local regions and populations a great deal of room for maneuver. Such state-society relationship fundamentally changed in the 20th century. Rural society (and the inhabitants) was politically and discursively "othered" by new regimes. The othering reached its peak in the Maoist era, when the hard structures of a state machinery became unmediated. Local society was stripped of its cultural resources and social nexus and economically cellularized (Siu 1989a). Since the 1990s, I have used a rather Foucauldian concept of power to question a dichotomous view of state and society. In "Socialist Peddlers and Princes in a Chinese Market Town" (chapter 5 in this volume), I observe the entrenchment of state power even in people's most entrepreneurial maneuvers. Residents of the market town that I studied tried hard to put the Maoist revolution behind them, just as the state professed to liberalize its control over the economy and society. However, with generations having internalized the institutional and ideological power of the state, their purposeful actions ironically reproduced such intrusive power in their everyday pursuits. I term this process "state involution."

In subsequent articles on family practices, popular rituals, the rural-urban divide, and urban village enclaves, I analyze how the hard and soft powers of an authoritarian state (both institutional and discursive) have continued to extend themselves with the unselfconscious complicity of the general population to produce the social dynamics and cultural forms in the post-reform era. In my review of three books on post-reform China (2006), I raise the issue as follows.

China is hot. The global media has named this century 'The China Century.' . . . All contribute to an image of a country energized, on the move towards real and imaginary markets, and almost desperately in a fast forward mode.

Looking beyond economic data and media sensation, anthropologists ask how the rhetoric of reform and the real force of market in late-socialist China translate into the lives of ordinary people . . . Not unlike those in many developing countries, their lives weave together stories of pride and unbound aspirations as well as ambivalence and sadness . . . Everyone is intensely engaged with processes of becoming.

What is the historical baggage that this energized population carries in its efforts to move ahead? What is the lingering impact of a Maoist revolution that so many would only wish to forget? Emotions have been volatile . . . [But] there is certain one-dimensionality in people's mind-sets, imaginings and strategies. It is as if every individual is an eager operator but with minimal cultural resource or social mediation. How does one conceptually link these instrumental actions with the institutional structures people find themselves in? As in the earlier periods, can these human agents be victims of the very circumstances their actions have made significant?

Locality and Translocality, Unity, and Diversity

One clearly cannot treat Chinese culture as timeless and bounded. The question is how to appreciate its infinite diversity and intense unity in the past, and why it appears starkly one-dimensional today. Philosophers may see the continuity of a cultural core, and political scientists may stress integrative administrative mechanisms. Anthropologists and historians, on the other hand, find dynamic life-worlds linking villagers to translocal complexes of power, interest, and authority. Agrarian empires have reached their subjects through these layered interactive processes.

A focus on the cultural interface between political center and local society naturally leads to the classic works of G. William Skinner, Maurice Freedman, Arthur Wolf, Barbara Ward, Myron Cohen and James Watson. To understand a state agrarian society with historical depth and spatial spread, these scholars have provided different conceptual frameworks. Each has his or her own theoretical take on explaining the juxtaposition of unity and diversity in Chinese culture and society.

Skinner's "spatial" framework views Chinese dynastic history as constituted by regional cycles of growth and decline. His concept of regional systems in the late

imperial period is built upon Durkheimian functionalism and neo-classical economic assumptions. It begins with a hierarchy of rural marketing structures created over time by exchange activities based on farmers' calculations of transport costs. The hierarchy of nodes and their periodic marketing schedules, structurally differentiated but functionally integrated, allowed maximum circulation of goods, people and information (1964). The social world of villagers could be quite discreet and homogeneous at one level but would be cross-cut by the next level of economic exchange.

Skinner adds a temporal dimension to the spatial structure by arguing that the economic, social and normative mapping of the peasant world softened and hardened with the pulsating rhythms of periodic markets and dynastic fortunes (1971). As goods, people, information and cultural norms moved up and down the hierarchy of nested systems, rural life was exposed to city life and the imperial enterprise. Communities were porous in times of dynastic heyday, and turned inward only in times of political decline and endemic disorder. Interactions with the state machinery took place at higher-level marketing nodes, where economic functions intertwined with administrative ones (Skinner 1977).

The significant methodological point in the Skinnerian framework is how to locate one's research site in the dynamic spatial and temporal contexts. Counter-intuitively, his model turns anthropological attention from a physically bounded "village" to a standard marketing community as the most basic unit for understanding Chinese rural society. At a macro regional level of analysis, the growth and decline of these pulsating, nested hierarchies of marketing communities had shaped the course of dynastic histories (Skinner 1985a).

Maurice Freedman starts with cultural principles—that of kinship and descent. Using a structural-functional perspective, Freedman maintains that rich rice agriculture and the need for irrigation and defense created the conditions for the emergence of lineage communities with landed properties in Southeastern China. His insight on the unity and diversity of Chinese culture and society parallels Skinner's. Corporate kin groups stressed their unique identities reinforced by written genealogies, landed wealth, ornate ancestral halls, elaborate rituals, and even belligerent political behavior against local competitors. But they were linked to higher-order kin organizations (real or fictive) that extended far beyond local society, and they subscribed to a common Confucian culture of the political center.

David Faure has been influenced by the Weberian orientation of Barbara Ward's work (1985) in the New Territories of Hong Kong. He moves away from the functionalist argument of Freedman by giving lineage formation a historical grounding. Rather than seeing lineage principles as a cultural ideal made possible by the conditions of a rich river delta, Faure goes far beyond kinship and descent to stress the contestation of settlement rights in a frontier region and how that dovetailed with particular political and moral debates emanating from the imperial center (1986).

It was during the Ming and Qing, when the empire was expanding into a developing Pearl River Delta with particular state-making agendas, local populations claimed settlement rights and established landed estates in the river marshes. These estates, together with their ornate lineage halls and elaborate rituals, became the backbone of a particular type of lineage formation in South China. Affiliation with literati pedigree (real or fabricated) and migration charters in lineage genealogies all pointed to translocal elements in the making of localized groups. Such language of lineage was a powerful means for local populations to differentiate into settlers and farming groups who paid taxes against the mobile, the ethnic and the excluded, who did not. A “site” comprising lineages, full of meaningful cultural markers, is a historically grounded conscious construct by those involved in its making (Faure and Siu 1995). We term this process “the original translocal society” (Faure and Siu 2003).

Clearly following Barbara Ward’s conscious model and the importance of an imaginary “center” in local self-fashioning, David Faure and I generally view a region as a construct, a product of human agency. Identities, statuses, institutions, and alliances are remade and negotiated, and in flux with instrumental intentions, meaningful manipulations and power play. But things do come together to produce lasting impact, and it is that conjuncture of historical processes that produce significant structures. Our major difference from a Skinnerian perspective is that Skinner (1985a) uses cyclical structures of growth and decline in regions to illuminate dynastic histories. Instead, we use historical processes to understand how certain structures emerged to be selectively remembered as guiding principles for action and identity. An inspiring work along a similar line of thinking is *The Age of Wild Ghosts* by Erik Muggler (2001).

Another major nexus of state-society interface has involved popular religion. Arthur Wolf (1974), Stephan Feuchtwang (1992) and James Watson (Johnson, Nathan, and Rawski 1985, pp. 292–324) each in his own way stresses the percolation of the imperial metaphor and political etiquette to everyday popular religious beliefs and rituals, historically and now. Generations of peasants might have never left their villagers, but through ritual practices, they have learned (and earned) their respective places in the imperial order and navigated the authoritative workings of government bureaucracies. This cultural nexus of power linking center to locality would not be complete if we leave out the formal operations of the civil service examination system and its lasting impact. According to intellectual historian Benjamin Elman (1991), it intertwined and reproduced the economic power of land holding, the social power of education, and the political power of officialdom over the centuries. The imperial system was resilient because local populations were able to endorse it on their own diverse terms. It appeared to be an imposing political machinery only in times of crisis (Watson 2004).

On the integrative mechanisms of cultural practice, be they formal educational institutions based on classical scholarship, or the vernacular stories and theater pieces in popular circulation, they helped construct identity and define membership. On this, a literary scholar Cyril Birch argues that Chinese popular stories and novels, “read by children or by the semi-educated, orally presented by storytellers or transferred to the dramatic stage . . . confirmed cultural identity just as surely as the dazzling beauty of the cathedral told the European peasant he was a Christian” (Plaks 1977, p. xi).

What, then, is the modern fate of the original translocal society? This is an important question for any social scientist who needs to contextualize his or her “site” of research. I should illustrate with an example. When I started fieldwork in the 1970s in Guangdong, Vivienne Shue, a political scientist, went to north China to conduct hers. We were both exploring how much and through what means the Maoist state had penetrated rural society, and we came to divergent conclusions. I do not think it was a matter of regional difference between north and south. Instead, it was a difference in how we have perceived “villages.” I see traditional Chinese villages as very “translocal” from the start, as described by Skinner, Wolf, Freedman, and others. But from the 1950s to the 1970s, the hierarchy of marketing systems had been replaced by state channels of supply and procurement. Complex lineages alliances were diminished together with the demise of ancestral estates, halls, rituals and their managers. Community festivals were erased from public memory. Popular religion and rituals that used to display the pantheon of the gods were no longer available for villages to engage and imagine. In a word, diverse forms of cultural authority were step by step marginalized and destroyed. What was left was a cellularized village with a drastically shrunk social world and a cultural vacuum, left bare by three decades of intense political transformation under Mao. If I did not have a long historical understanding of how villages were constructed over the centuries with translocal resources, I would not have appreciated how they were stripped down to a bare existence under Mao. I used my monograph *Agents and Victims in South China: Accomplices in Rural Revolution* (1989a), to illustrate such processes.

In the post-reform period, I turned to another kind of “locality,” this time village enclaves at the margins of every major Chinese city. As I described in my article “Grounding Displacement: Uncivil Urban Spaces in Postreform South China” (2007a), I apply similar historical arguments to seemingly “postmodern” developments in present-day China. I would only highlight two points here. First, residents in these urban village enclaves (*chengzhongcun*) are not rural remains of a previous era. They are post-reform creations where residents are juggling with major phases of China’s development at the present: a deep and hard rural-urban divide that has grounded villagers in a collective land regime, a lingering socialist bureaucracy that no longer values labor, an unbridled, amoral market (mostly distorted by state policies and

entrenched interests), and a government eager to promote linear development and national pride. These are villagers who shrewdly game big-time real estate based on the unexpected rise in the value of their collective land, migrant workers who subject themselves to substandard housing in return for low rent, and local officials who reap unimaginable profits from real estate deals and who bank on erecting landmarks to fulfill their ambition and vanity. They are all major stakeholders in China's fast-forward move to be world factory and modern global player. Second, I argue that the villagers, however rich they have become, and their migrant renters, however mobile they seem, are experiencing intense social, cultural, and political incarceration. They have been grounded by decades of institutional discrimination against their rural status despite a revolution conducted in their name. These Zomia-like enclaves are physical sites of conscious, localized rurality as much as they are dynamic discursive fields when village finally meets urban tsunami in the 21st century. China's "urban revolution" has drawn intense academic interest (Zhang 2010; Hsing 2010). In appreciating its citizen's feverish march towards urban postmodernity, it seems all the more important to acknowledge layers of the Maoist past in the process (Siu 2012).

Inter-Asian Connectivity: Rethinking Global, National and Regional Space

If defining a locality is crucial to anthropological theory and method, how does one apply a processual framework to understand an interconnected Asia? What if regional constructs are not land based and state centered but traversing oceans and politics over centuries?

Henri Lefebvre has certainly inspired me to think about social space as both mental and material. Manuel Castells confirms in my mind that space is a concrete expression of each historical ensemble in which a society is specified and signified. Marc Augé and David Harvey have highlighted for us the shifting temporal-spatial parameters, scales, associated subjectivities and references as the world experienced modernity, postmodernity, or super-modernity. Today the world has become "small." Institutionally, nation-state boundaries can become blurry, and citizenship contingent. We can cross time zones and vast continents in hours. In cyberspace, it takes seconds to have billions transferred.

Global flows have made it difficult for anthropologists. They can no longer assume that they will discover the cultural other in fieldwork. Those studying African traders easily find their ethnographic subjects appear on their doorstep in New York City or Guangzhou. But material resources, people, cultures, images and meanings seldom travel "whole," nor are their flows smooth (Ferguson 2006, Tsing 2005). Fragments circulate and multiply in the hands (and imaginations) of creative human agents at different historical times. Some are reinterpreted and highlighted. Others are

abandoned, forgotten, silenced. These selective processes are lived experiences that anthropologists like to explore.

Critical social theorists in the late 20th century have re-oriented certain Euro-centric paradigms about these historical processes. The list is long. Jack Goody, in *The Theft of History*, shifts our attention to “civilizing processes” in Eurasia that had tremendous impact on the unfolding of modern European history (2007). Dimitri Gutas alerts us to the massive Arab translations of Greek classics in Baghdad during the 6th to 9th centuries, which might have found their ways into Latin translations in the Italian Renaissance (1998).

However, de-centering Europe, if politically or morally framed, can easily lead us back into a parallel mindset of re-orientalizing Asia. An inspiring exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2004–05, entitled “China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200–750 A.D.,” showed the extensive flows of trade goods and the cultural fusion among multi-ethnic populations that stretched from Europe through Central Asia to north China. These processes contributed greatly to the making of “China” centuries past, from the late Han to the Tang dynasty. At the Asian end of intercontinental dynamism, Mark Lewis portrays the Tang dynasty as the “cosmopolitan empire” where commerce and cultural florescence illuminated a geographically extensive polity that engaged with regions from Korea to the Persian Gulf (2009). Furthermore, Janet Abu-Lughod extends the world systems by tracking shared commercial institutions in the 13th century linking Europe and Asia via the Mideast Heartland and the Indian Ocean (1989). A crucial analytical lesson is to look for the historical and cultural linkages missing in our frameworks, and to understand how essentialized, land-based categories came to dominate academic thinking (Lewis and Wigen 1997).

For the later centuries, Timothy Mitchell (2000) and Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003) argue that the European-centered cartography of a singular, universalizing modernity is problematic. They stress the simultaneous appearance and articulation of particular forms of politics, sensibility, temporality, and selfhood in locations ranging from the Caribbean in early imperial expansion, to 19th-century Bengal, and contemporary Morocco. Bernard Cohn (1996) is particularly astute to unveil the forms of colonial knowledge and language of command in India. Benedict Anderson, in exploring the relationship between print culture and the rise of nations as imagined communities, explains how census, maps and museums have defined populations, territories and cultural traditions (1983/1991). In *Empire at the Margins: Culture, Frontier and Ethnicity in Early Modern China*, my co-editors and I rethink empirical categories of frontier and ethnicity when “center” was contingent (Crossley, Siu, and Sutton 2006).

In these moments of critical self-reflection on the representation of historical “facts,” and on academic categories we have taken as natural starting points (empires and nation-states), how should we conceptualize Asia—East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia and beyond? How have these regional spaces been defined? How have

research questions on their cultures, populations, economies and politics built upon particular configurations? One should question how established scholarship has relied on ordering frames that are largely land based and state centered. Anthropologists have their habit of locating research on tangible, bounded sites where they can immerse themselves and have their feet well-grounded. If they detect movements, they see diaspora, always assuming a solid center and home base for “migrants” to move from.

It was also self-representation, as Mark Lewis, in his book *The Construction of Space in Early China* (2006), delineates the meticulous spatial ordering frame of the imperial textual enterprise, privileging a particular kind of political center and marginalizing “regions” and “local customs.” The merchants, although dynamic, multi-ethnic, multicultural, and cross-regional, had no place in the imperial imagination. In the eyes of many economic historians who are deeply interested in the adventures of the court eunuch and imperial official Zheng He in the 15th century, who sailed seven times with his fleet from coastal China all the way to Africa, the trips were often viewed as political trips to track down a royal competitor of the Ming emperor, or at best, “foreign trade” at the margins of empire.

Nonetheless, ocean-based scholarly traditions focusing on trade and markets are not lacking: Fernand Braudel on the Mediterranean (1966/1996), K. N. Chaudhuri on the Indian Ocean (1991), and Takeshi Hamashita on the East China Sea (2008), not to mention Leonard Blussé on Canton (Guangzhou), Nagasaki and Batavia (2008); Janet Abu-Lughod on the Middle East, Islam and the Indian Ocean (1989); Philip Curtin (1984), Timothy Brook (2008), and Amitav Ghosh (1993, 2011) on inter-cultural trade; Sugata Bose (2006), Thomas Metcalf (2007), and Enseng Ho (2006) on inter-regional political and militaristic networks. Each tradition has taken an ocean and its immediate coastal land as a “region.” If our analytical attention is refocused on the fluidities and connections along ocean-based trade routes, cultural fusion and sedimentation in the well-positioned port cities with resourceful inhabitants, the substance of these scholarly traditions could be treated as more interactive. The Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) gave the rights of discovery of the New World to the Spaniards on the west of the line of demarcation, and gave the rights to the Portuguese to the east of the line. However, the two trading empires fought it out again in the broad “Asian” region, from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific until the Dutch, the British, and the Americans appeared on the scene.

The result of these globally linked historical processes is, conceptually, “an Asia inside out” (Tagliacozzo, Siu, and Perdue 2015a, 2015b). From the experiences of the populations involved in its making, the region is a very different kind of “space” from the views of those at the center of empires or nations. The three-volume set reveals dynamic processes that have linked regions of a large continent. The first volume highlights moments of connection that might not have been deemed historically

significant but in fact became structurally relevant for what followed. The second volume uncovers sites of connection that have captured transregional flows across physical and political boundaries. The third, forthcoming volume focuses on peoples and institutions of connection. To illuminate our shared commitment in challenging conventional geopolitical categories and linear histories, I quote from the introduction of *Asia Inside Out: Connected Places*:

This volume thus highlights the conjuncture of historical circumstances in the making of connected places—the (macro) political forces, the (micro) strategies of personalities, the translocal institutional resources deployed, the meanings negotiated, and the structuring consequences of all of the above. We use the concept “spatial moments” in a broadly defined Asia to capture the dynamics of time-place analysis in both material and discursive forms. . . . Place-making in Asia, in our view, has involved multi-scalar processes. They are malleable structural assemblages, created by human agency and accumulated over the centuries. (Tagliacozzo, Siu, and Perdue 2015b, p. 25)

I can illuminate these multi-layered histories from my vantage point in southern China. It is a “region” always seen as marginal and subversive in the imperial construction of space, politically suspect during the socialist period, but has now assumed center stage in the reform era in the last few decades when China embarks on its worldly venture. If one takes this “Asian” region historically connected by trade and cultural fusion, it is not analytically surprising to find a dark-skinned, bearded “South Asian” being worshiped in the Temple for the God of South Seas (Nanhaishen Miao) outside of Guangzhou, accepted as part of local folklore. The historical mosques and Islamic cemeteries in Quanzhou and Guangzhou also testify to the presence of large Arabic populations in centuries past. One would also not be surprised to find the popular Mexican silver dollar being used regularly and unselfconsciously as donations to a Hongsheng Temple in Chaolian *xiang* on the western edge of the Pearl River Delta during the Qing (Siu and Liu 2015, pp. 64–97). By the 19th and early 20th centuries, port cities in southern China such as Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Jiangmen and Siyi, known to be the land of emigrants to the Americas and Southeast Asia, were shaped by European-style merchant houses and business districts. These architectural forms also dominated the cityscapes of colonial cities such as Calcutta (Kolkata), Bombay (Mumbai) and other port cities in the Gulf region. “Asia” as a regional construct was core to historically worldly cultures and markets. How these politically ambiguous port cities and their ethnically diverse populations relate to their respective “national” spaces is an issue for serious rethinking. The connections and fluid processes were phenomena I would not term “diaspora” (Siu 2009b). By stressing the empirical significance of the historical and contemporary global, we may finally put the state-centered analytical paradigms (which have dominated 20th-century social sciences) back in their historically appropriate places.

In sum, I hope to have used this essay to clarify some of the major research themes and conceptual tools that my South China colleagues and I have explored over the years. We have used them to define historical anthropology and to guide our research in the archives and in the field. No doubt we will continue to fine-tune field methodologies and critical reading to understand historical and cultural texts. The process hopefully allows us to test analytical frameworks and address theoretical debates that center on structuring, human agency, social practice, and power. Our intellectual journey in South China has connected us to oceans and landmasses across the globe in empirical and disciplinary terms.

Space considerations do not allow me to include a list of Chinese references. The references I have used in the essay are largely English-language sources.

4

China's Century

Fast Forward with Historical Baggage

Books reviewed in this essay:

Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village 1949–1999, by Yan Yunxiang. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003. 289 pp.

Only Hope: Coming of Age under China's One-Child Policy, by Vanessa Fong. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004. 242 pp.

On the Move: Women in Rural-to-Urban Migration in Contemporary China, edited by Arianne M. Gaetano and Tamara Jacka. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. 355 pp.

China is hot. The global media has named this century “The China Century.” The sustained double-digit growth, the massive infrastructural developments, the ever-expanding cities that “swallow” entire villages, the rural-to-urban migration of laborers in tens of millions, and the worldwide consumption of China's products all contribute to an image of a country energized, on the move toward real and imaginary markets, and almost desperately in a fast-forward mode.

Looking beyond economic data and media sensation, anthropologists ask how the rhetoric of reform and the real force of market in late-socialist China translate into the lives of ordinary people. The 2003 premiere of Sue Williams's documentary, *China in the Red*, brings home to us vivid images of those who have chosen to take bold steps to engage with the market and those who have been dragged down by noncompetitive state industries and a government that simply lets go (Williams 2003). Not unlike those in many developing countries, their lives weave together stories of pride and unbound aspirations as well as ambivalence and sadness. From the details of everyday life, one feels the depth of human drama at this juncture of China's feverish march toward modernity. Everyone is intensely engaged with processes of becoming.

What is the historical baggage that this energized population carries in its efforts to move ahead? What is the lingering impact of a Maoist revolution that so many would only wish to forget? Emotions have been volatile. One sees them explode among nationalistic students who have yet to find a language to relate to the world. One is

faced with daily social strife among the city rich, the predatory officials, the migrant workers who fill foreign-owned factories (Lee 1998, Pun 2005), and the urban poor who dig their heels in and refuse eviction. Whether indulging in stock fever (Hertz 1998), in religious revival (Yang 2004), in a consumption craze for luxury cars, private housing (Jing Wang 2005, pp. 72–93), and ethnic tourism (Friedman 2004; Schein 2000), or bearing the abuses of migrancy (Solinger 1999, Zhang 2001b), a generation of Chinese appears single-mindedly anxious to push ahead (Chen et al. 2001, Davis 2000, Solinger 2006). If these individuals are agents who negotiate their ways through roller-coaster rides from plan to market, how does one conceptualize the context of their agency? There is one-dimensionality in their mindsets, imaginings, and strategies. It is as if every individual is an eager operator but one with minimal cultural resource or social mediation. How does one conceptually link these instrumental actions with the institutional structures people find themselves in? As in the earlier periods, can these human agents be victims of the very circumstances their actions have made significant (Siu 1989a and chapter 5 of this volume)?

The three books under review provide vivid ethnographic accounts of the fluidities. One may find parallels in Caroline Humphrey's *The Unmaking of Soviet Life* (2002). Substantively similar to Humphrey's treatment of post-socialist Russia, the books focus on the partial disintegration of socialist-statist structures in China that have given meaning to people's lives for several generations. One sees desperate maneuvers to find new opportunities, to catch up for lost time, or merely to cope with unbearable uncertainty. Not unlike Lila Abu-Lughod's description of contemporary Egypt (Mitchell ed. 2000, pp. 87–114), many Chinese juggle their lives and aspirations with three realisms: a lingering socialist realism in which labor is no longer prized, an unmediated capitalist realism justifying survival of the fittest, and a development realism stressing modernization and nationalist pride.

Conceptually, the books use ethnographic encounters to address issues about agency and the nature of power in everyday life (Dirks et al. 1994). From their respective angles, they provide critical readings of the human endeavors as they unfold, sustained fieldwork now being very possible in China. Moreover, they generally address current anthropological concerns, especially on engagement with modernity, and on conceptual frameworks highlighting process and contingency (Knauf 2002; Mitchell 2000; Taylor 2004). Their focus on individual strategies and subjectivities is in tune with the Weberian turn in anthropology over the past few decades (Keyes 2002).

The ethnography by Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life Under Socialism* (2003), is particularly perceptive. In the 1990s, he returned to Xiajia Village in Heilongjiang province of northeastern China. Villagers had generously taken him in during the harsh, hungry days of his youth. Old friends opened their hearts to him, enabling him to explore intimate moments in their lives. His long association with the village also allows him to compare generational experiences in their layered subtleties and

to appreciate the compelling changes. Conceptually, he wishes to take the study of Chinese family beyond established models of corporate structures, economic organization, and political hierarchy. Instead, he explores its personal and emotional aspects, focusing, as he says, on "the moral experiences of individuals, whose concerns about privacy, intimacy, emotionality, and individual rights are as important as economic gains" (p. xii). In the recent decades of reforms, he asks, how is the moral fabric in the family being rewoven, and who are the major stakeholders? Amid anxieties that have arisen from severe transgressions of institutional parameters long taken for granted, how is family life put on a course that is nothing less than revolutionary?

Yan begins his narrative of the privatization of the family by arguing that decades of socialist policies in the political economy of the village fundamentally eroded the corporate and hierarchical structures of family relationships in gender and generational terms. Collectivization and associated changes in rewarding labor collapsed patriarchic power. Parents lost control over inheritance, marriage transactions, and family formation. Moreover, traditional family values were often under direct and organized ideological attack by the socialist state. In the decades from 1949 to 1979, younger generations have grown up with new ideas about personal entitlement. Post-Mao market liberalizations have given them partial exposure to ideas of romantic love and conjugal intimacy, and driven them further away from the concerns of the larger familial unit and toward individualistic pursuits. Unlike in the past when generational priorities often overruled conjugal intimacy, and when children were groomed to support parents in their old age, young villagers today have asserted their voices in the organization of their private desires. They refuse arranged marriages, freely engage in premarital sex, live apart from parents the moment they are married, press hard on family division, spend precious resources on their conjugal homes, and migrate to cities looking for opportunities.

Parents are often bitter and confused in what Yan terms a "crisis of filial piety," often trapped in their cellularized villages as much as in a cultural and emotional vacuum. They feel betrayed by the government and abandoned by their children. Yan largely shares their concerns that a family held together not by intergenerational reciprocity but by shrewd market calculations would breed egoistic, uncivil individuals with no concern for the public good. The government not relinquishing its control over public life adds to the problem, as a younger generation grows up with no appreciation for or experience with civic associations. The questions are as follows: Can we conceptualize the changes as an unavoidable move from collective to individualistic modes of development, as a linear trend similarly experienced by other industrializing countries in the past? Or, is the atomistic, uncivil, intensely individualistic aspect of family life that Yan describes a phenomenon unique to late-socialist rural China? If it is, has Yan successfully incorporated this historical experience in his analysis?

Building on the richness of Yan's ethnography and his insightful treatment of Chinese family life, I would like to raise the following for further exploration. First, what was the nature of family life in the pre-1949 periods? It may be true that emotional expressivity is much more direct today than in the past, but one cannot assume a prior lack of private emotions or individual agency. Historians have challenged established models of the Chinese family with countless examples of intimacy and illicit passion, of intense individual maneuvers and desires, even under the most restrictive social circumstances and cultural norms. Love and romance were not lacking as themes in traditional folklore and other popular art forms. Parental anxieties arising from unfilial children were also not uncommon. If these emotions existed in pre-revolutionary days and were allowed to be expressed (albeit in different ways), what conceptual tools must we employ to appreciate them in order not to succumb to the pitfalls of the corporate and economic models of the traditional Chinese family?

Moreover, a longer historical exploration allows us to reassess some unique changes in the socialist period and enrich Yan's argument with regard to today's intense privatization of family life. In an earlier article on inter-generational family dynamics (Davis and Harrell 1993, pp. 165–88), I argued that desperate maneuvers to secure dowry and bride price among Chinese families in the 1990s were indicative of how fundamentally “the family” had been stripped down and redefined by the socialist revolution and how parents and children were actively involved in its “reconstitution” in the post-reform era. The intensely conjugal pursuits of the 1990s involved both generations coping with the prior destruction of layers of relevant social relationships and ritual resource that had made up larger familial processes. The traditional embeddedness of familial processes provided diverse means for security and recourse beyond the conjugal unit, reinforced by a nuanced moral fabric that wove together the private and the collective, and that channeled its members' individual expressivity in multiple ways. Few such channels remain today. If one appreciates the historical complexities contributing to family forms in pre-Mao and post-Mao periods, one would not conceptualize the situation as a linear movement from corporate forms to individualized strategies.

Yan has described the lack of public life in the village today as a result of the withdrawal of the state in the organization of community events as well as its lingering political control. The larger question remains as to why there is such cultural paralysis in the public realm. A fuller treatment of the embeddedness of the family process in the past and the nature of its atomization and ironic entrenchment in the socialist and post-reform periods may enlighten us on how the villagers will be empowered (or handicapped) to exert their agency in the future.

In *Only Hope* (Fong 2004), a similar lack of alternatives seems to dictate the lives of “singletons” in today's urban China. Based on fieldwork conducted between 1997 and 2002 in Dalian, a thriving coastal city in the northeast, Vanessa Fong details the

focused energies of teenagers from various family circumstances and those of their equally anxious parents. "What is it like to grow up as a singleton in a society used to large families?" (p. 4), Fong asks. The upside is that one gets almost anything one wants from doting parents. The downside is that these "little emperors" are pushed over the edge to perform what Fong terms the "cultural model of modernization" (p. 13). Because of lingering ideas about filial piety, coupled with uncertainty in employment and the withdrawal of state benefits, parents in Dalian face uncertain prospects. They regard their children as prized commodities. In this accelerated demographic transition triggered by China's one-child policy, parents invest heavily to cultivate their "only hope," loading their children with unrealistic expectations.

Amid public perception of the young generation being spoiled rotten because of the attention showered on them, many singletons crack under pressure. A sadly comical scene in the documentary film *China in the Red* illuminates the central theme of Fong's book. Teenage students gathered at the gate of a higher education entrance examination hall. Anxious parents were wiping sweat and tears, and sheltering their children from the sun with umbrellas. Vendors with huge oxygen containers lined the street. Candidates sat next to them with tubes pressed against their nostrils, taking in the last dose before charging into "examination hell." The ethnographic details can sometimes be excruciating. In one instance, Fong was told of teenage suicides in an elite high school. To her horror, her ninth-grade informant displayed not sadness but a calculating coolness, commenting that "I hope even more high school students commit suicide. . . . That way, there will be fewer people competing to get into good high schools, colleges, and jobs" (p. 87).

The problem is the gap between First World ideals and Third World realities, Fong argues. There are ideals for upward mobility in modern industrial societies. Families are known to push their children to succeed. But the peculiar demographic transition in China and the economic downturn in Dalian because of the collapse of state-owned enterprises make it particularly difficult for the families involved. Moreover, the urban consumer revolution, fueled by new desires cut and pasted from the Internet, tempt and taunt these teenagers almost instantly. Tensions in the family are high, as Fong devotes a chapter on fierce exchanges between parents and children over filial piety and calculated reciprocity. The emotions expressed are painfully direct, nothing short of Sartre's *No Exit* (1946).

Gnawing questions remain: How does one explain the mentality of pushing through a fast track with no alternative imaginings? For a sizable city economy such as Dalian's, are mobility opportunities so single-tracked and one-dimensional for teenagers and their parents? Not unlike the villagers in Yan's ethnography, these urbanites are feverish in maneuvering to advance their private selves, but there seems to be little cultural resource to think or reach beyond the interlocking three realisms. Between their private selves and the language of the state (be it socialism, market

reforms, or national modernity), there is little public space to explore. Posed against the works of historians and anthropologists on the vibrant, multilayered city life before socialist transformations (G. William Skinner, William Rowe, David Strand, and Gail Hershat, to name a few), the stark uniformity of life in late-socialist cities must be more fully explained. Only then may we better appreciate the frustrations of the singletons and their parents with regard to the compelling structure of opportunities they face.

The cellularized worlds of villagers and urbanites, a product of Maoist politics since the late 1950s, are physically bridged by the restructuring of market towns (Faure and Liu 2002, pp. 233–49) and the movement of rural migrants to cities in the recent decades. No matter how migrants are defined, the number is massive, ranging upward of 100 million (Gaetano and Jacka 2004, p. 1). In the migrants' home villages and the cities where they work, the volatility triggered by such movement is profound. It has touched not only gender relationships and family life but also the development of entire regions and the associated cultural discourses.

The volume *On the Move* (Gaetano and Jacka 2004) focuses on *dagongmei* (working maidens). The authors argue that the pattern of migration has been highly gendered. Because of a history of draconian household registration and repatriation policies in the decades after 1949, rural migrants today suffer severe discriminations as outsiders. The uncertainties of the state sector have also made urbanites defensive, and they single out migrants for blame. Moreover, from a feminist perspective, lingering gender biases compound sexual exploitation and abuse of women workers. The authors also note that most of these young women are negotiating their identity shifts from youth to adulthood, thus complicating the already volatile situations.

The ethnographic accounts, supplemented by personal stories, are rich and varied. They involve factory workers, marriage migrants, domestic helpers, and hostesses in karaoke bars. As the editors have noted, the chapters provide "insights into rural women's motivations for out migration, their experiences of work and life in the city, the strategies they employ to negotiate or overcome their inferior status in the eyes of urbanites, their social networks and ties to home, the ways they try to shape a future for themselves, and the long-term implications of migration for themselves, their families, and their village communities" (p. 4).

What ties these diverse topics together is the authors' endeavor "to understand the interconnections and interactions among migrant women's subjectivity, self-representation, and agency on the one hand, and broader structures, institutions, and sociopolitical discourses on the other" (p. 5).

Fighting against the "controlling gaze" of the state media demanding "modern qualities" (Sun) or of popular consumption expecting filial daughters and docile sexual objects, the "agency" of these women migrants is complicated and at times contradictory (Gaetano). Tiantian Zheng suggests in her chapter that her hostess

informants play into men's stereotypes and fantasies about rural female bodies and appropriate such consumption discourses for their own material and social gain. The question to ask, as Gaetano highlights, is whether one celebrates their performances as empowerment and resistance, or as acts of desperation by victims who see few alternatives.

Their sojourn can be summed up by haunting images of the migrant returnee in Fruit Chan's film, *Durian, Durian* (2000). The main character travels to Hong Kong to be a sex worker, subjecting herself to inhumane conditions. She returns to her hometown, where family and friends shower her with attention for her "accomplishments" as a businesswoman and make demands on her savings. She watches her life fall apart under the pressure of collective pretense. Her only solace is a durian fruit sent to her from Hong Kong by a young illegal immigrant girl whom she has befriended, who is as much a fugitive as she is, in every sense of the word. Be they Yan's villagers, Fong's teenage singletons, or female migrants, the historical baggage they carry is heavy. Yet they feel compelled to move on in a fast-forward mode. To what extent is this agency; to what extent is it complicity?

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