



## The Anthropology of Power and Maoism

**ABSTRACT** The legacies of Maoist rule made reflecting on power almost unavoidable for U.S. anthropologists who conducted research in the People's Republic of China (PRC) just after Mao's death. In this article, I examine the theorization of power in the works of five such anthropologists. Although their approaches are diverse, they share an historical awareness of the unexpected dynamics and paradoxical outcomes of Mao's attempts to enact a revolutionary transformation of the social organization of power in the PRC. I conclude this article by enumerating lessons from these authors' analyses for the anthropological study of power in general. [Keywords: power, Maoism, governance, China, postsocialism]

Every Communist must grasp the truth, "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun."

—Mao T'se-tung

I went to China with Marxist hopes; but I left with Max Weber's worst fears. Writing this ethnography has been a self-reflective endeavor.

—Helen F. Siu

**I**N THIS ARTICLE, I EXPLORE a relatively obscure corner of the discipline—the anthropology of Maoism—to elicit a set of principles for gaining depth and clarity from the diversity of anthropological approaches to the study of power. While primarily concerned with the exercise of theorizing power, I begin by briefly exploring some of the reasons why the anthropology of Maoism makes a particularly valuable resource for this exercise.

U.S. anthropologists were not allowed into the People's Republic of China (PRC) until after Mao died in 1976, and the continuation of anthropological studies of the PRC coincided with the emergence of power as a central theoretical concept in cultural anthropology (D'Andrade 1999). More importantly, as the epigraph by Siu illustrates, the first post-Mao PRC anthropological researchers were often motivated by personal interest in the radical transformations of the social organization of power that Maoism and Marxism more broadly suggest. They saw Marxian social theory as simultaneously a theoretical resource for anthropology, a governing ideology in the PRC, and a source of their own political hopes. The failures of Maoist governance,<sup>1</sup> particularly its inability to replace capitalism with a system in which the abuse of power disappeared, forced these anthropologists to both reexamine

their own political assumptions and to seek out new ways for understanding the dynamics of power in general.

Because of Mao's efforts to involve the "masses" themselves in the revolutionary transformation of society, these ethnographers confronted Maoism not only as a governing ideology for elites, but also as a form of thought that had deeply informed popular consciousness. Lisa Rofel's (1999) depiction of silk factory workers in the city of Hangzhou shows how deeply Maoism influenced those who came of age during the Cultural Revolution. Even during the mid-1980s, when they had abandoned both their reverence for Mao and their faith in collectivism, these workers maintained their "belief that struggle against improper authority is the singularly most important activity in life" (Rofel 1999:176). They habitually questioned and challenged those with power in their factory. Their conception of power itself seemed anthropological, embracing assumptions that many within the discipline would consider Foucauldian. They perceived power as an inescapable aspect of all social relations and "politics as a dialectical relationship [in which] authority exists on one side of a social relationship, and insubordination stands as its opposite force, in the face of which it pushes or stops" (Rofel 1999:176). For anthropologists interested in Maoism to begin with, it is easy to understand how research among such people could lead to reflection on the problems of power.

The books I have chosen to examine here—Helen F. Siu's *Agents and Victims in South China: Accomplices in Rural Revolution* (1989), Mayfair Mei-hui Yang's *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China* (1994), Robert P. Weller's *Resistance, Chaos, and Control in China: Taiping Rebels, Taiwanese Ghosts, and Tiananmen* (1994), Ann

Anagnost's *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China* (1997), and Judith Farquhar's *Knowing Practice: The Clinical Encounter of Chinese Medicine* (1994a)—all address Maoism as a general phenomenon and problematize the concept of power. Perhaps not coincidentally, all of these books were authored by U.S.-educated anthropologists who did their fieldwork in the PRC during the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the shadows of Maoist governance loomed largest, and who continue to work in U.S. universities, where power remains a primary concern.<sup>2</sup>

In deriving a “post-Maoist” approach to the study of power from these works, my purpose is not simply to add to an already impressive list of anthropological perspectives on power: feminist, postcolonial, poststructuralist, Weberian, Foucauldian, Marxian, and so on. Just as many of these signposts could be shown to have multiple and at times contradictory meanings, the authors I examine here cannot be said to have arrived at a single theoretical position. In senses that I hope to make clear, Yang is explicitly Foucauldian, Siu and Weller are implicitly Weberian, while Farquhar and Anagnost might be labeled poststructuralist. What these authors share is a view of Maoism as a theoretical discourse that simultaneously governed Chinese society, influenced anthropology, and structured their own political imagination. Such a view of Maoism required these authors to reflect on the interrelations among their own politics, their theoretical choices, and their ethnographic portrayals. Whatever their differences, they theorize power without giving in to tendencies to reify it into a singular, omnipotent concept, to denounce it as an evil to oppose, or to ignore the complexity of the dynamics it indexes. Through summarizing their works, I derive some common principles applicable to a broad range of approaches to the anthropological study of power.

### AGENTS AND VICTIMS IN SOUTH CHINA

Siu's *Agents and Victims in South China* is one of the first English-language ethnographies of China to be published in the post-Mao era. Siu began her fieldwork in 1977, returning to a part of the Pearl River Delta where she still had relatives. The book focuses on the evolution of the multifaceted relationship between the central state and local society under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), particularly in terms of the roles of local elites. It raises a long series of questions about the organization and dynamics of power under Mao.

Organized historically and full of examples, tables, maps, and individual profiles, the book's empirically rich detail can itself be read as a critique of the type of ideologically driven histories produced by the Maoist regime, of the very notion that historical and cultural legacies should in the first instance be treated as ideological artifacts, a notion that was enshrined in even primary school textbooks in Mao's China (Siu 1989:18). The book begins with a rich description of the Pearl River Delta during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911); briefly traces the turbulent first half of

the 20th century, when warlords battled for rule of the nation, the Japanese invaded, and civil war between the Nationalists and Communists broke out; and finishes with a close description of the changes brought about during successive phases of Maoist governance. To greatly oversimplify, the tale is one of the transformation of a dispersed complex of power relations during the Qing Dynasty (multiply organized in lineages, ancestral trusts, marketing organizations, temple hierarchies, academies of learning, and local militias) into a unitary structure of power emanating from party headquarters in Beijing and enforced locally through the overlapping structures of household registration, communally organized property rights, the assignment of class labels, and state monopoly control of agricultural and nonagricultural products and inputs.

Siu's depiction of this transformation raises a number of “paradoxes of power” (to pluralize the title of one of her chapters) and touches on the perennial issues of agency, complicity, and rebellion in the process. As Ortner (1996: 1–20), among many others, argues, social analysis usually falls into the traps of making either too much or too little of agency. Siu avoids these pitfalls by focusing on the elements of contradiction and paradox that arise in the very processes of exercising, consolidating, and resisting power.

Consider first a series of questions relating to placing individuals in positions of political power. Who should be trusted with power? The system of class labels was in part a method for identifying leaders for the new society, but the CCP labels fit neither the complexities of earlier Delta socioeconomic life nor local ideals of virtue. Few Delta residents had the purity the CCP was looking for, and Delta cadres selected at the beginning of CCP rule were often later purged for the “counterrevolutionary” affiliations they held before CCP rule. If a revolutionary transformation of society is to be imagined and pursued, how can anyone raised in the old society be a suitable leader? Second is the problem of power as a corrupting force. Part of Mao's justification for launching the Cultural Revolution (1966–68) was that local cadres had become corrupt because of the privileges granted to them while in power, while the inanity of Mao's own actions raises the question of what holding so much power did to Mao himself. Conceiving power as a force that corrupts those who hold it complicates the metaphor of a “powerholder,” a human agent who is able to possess an inanimate thing. Can power ever simply be held? Finally is the problem of why an individual would want a position of power and responsibility in the first place. When local leaders were framed as targets during the Cultural Revolution for the purpose of training the next generation of rebels, many of them became more than willing to pass on the trappings and responsibilities of positions in local government to the rebels (see also Chan et al. 1992:128–129). Should power ever be given to someone who really wants it?

A second type of paradox involves the relationship between systems of power and higher purposes. By the Great Leap Forward (1958–59), the CCP organization of local

power was at its height. Local cadres were required to enforce changes on local society in a way that earlier local leaders could only imagine. Spurred on by their superiors, local cadres competed with each other in agreeing to give more grain to the state, commit more labor to corvee projects, and follow Maoist directives to the letter. One cadre interviewed by Siu explained the period as follows:

We were all caught in the spirit of euphoria, competing with one another, exaggerating and then believing our exaggerations. The state expected us to deliver so we pressured the masses. Why did the peasants comply? Well if they wanted to eat, they had to work; there was no alternative. One could not survive outside of the collective. . . . Since the party enjoyed tremendous power to organize people's lives, when things went wrong, people would not blame themselves; they blamed the party and the cadres instead. [1989:185–187]

In the final analysis, the very extent of this power revealed its limitations. For if the Party succeeded in first creating a relatively monolithic group consisting of “the masses” and then driving them to absurd efforts, it failed miserably in accomplishing its stated goal—a leap forward in rural development. In short, when conceptualizing power, the power to manipulate people and the power to accomplish ends should not be conflated.

The relationship between the power to manipulate others and the power to accomplish ends arises again in Siu's analysis of the Cultural Revolution. Here Weber's (1978: 212–301) typology of the specific forms authority takes (rational versus charismatic and so on) is relevant. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao bypassed his own bureaucracy and spurred the Red Guards to action by cultivating his own charisma and spreading his words through the propaganda apparatus. As Siu puts it, “direct ideological weapons replaced organizational power” (1989:242). As power in concrete contexts became more and more dependent upon an individual's ability to convince others that he or she had the best interpretation of the ideology in question, politics became more and more subjective. Although it was easy enough to unleash destructive forces in this manner, it is unclear what else could have been achieved.

Finally, Siu's analyses raise a series of paradoxes regarding the relationship of local and individual agency to state organized power. When describing the rise of Maoist state power during the early 1950s, Siu emphasizes how it could not have been achieved without a degree of complicity from Delta residents. Nationalist rule been brutal enough to make a regime change desirable for most Delta residents, and many of them found ways of turning the construction of CCP power to their own ends, at least temporarily. In contrast, when describing the post-Mao dismantling of the communes and construction of a market economy, Siu emphasizes how Delta residents could not have resisted the reforms even if they had wanted to. The reforms were forced down their throat by the same powerful government that they had helped to construct three decades earlier. In short, Siu ironically focuses on local complicity in the construction of structures that became

oppressive and local powerlessness in the face of changes that, at least in economic terms, enriched the majority of Delta residents.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the analysis of the exercise of agency can be separated from that of the construction of locally empowering socioeconomic structures as well.

Yet another paradox of individual agency and state power involves the relationship between rebellion and submission during the Cultural Revolution. Mao's incitement of Red Guard rebellion was part of his strategy for consolidating power at the top of the CCP. At the very core of Red Guard rebellion was submission to Mao's charisma. Siu states:

Rebellion against authority was apparently motivated by ardent loyalty to authority, be it Mao's or that of the party bureaucrats. Powerful patrons like Mao were elevated to superhuman stature. Revolt against leading political figures in the party hierarchy paradoxically reinforced their importance among those involved in the struggle. It seemed that rebellion was occurring under the shadow of its ideological opposite. [1989:240]

Here, again, Siu avoids the traps of making too little or too much of agency by focusing on the elements of contradiction inherent in social action itself.

In sum, *Agents and Victims* illuminates a whole series of paradoxes about power, agency, complicity, and rebellion in the evolution of state-society relations in the Pearl River Delta. Although Siu herself does not summarize these paradoxes in any explicit way, the issues they entail are important ones for an era when power has become an all too often reified concept in anthropological theory.

#### PRACTICE AND IDEOLOGY UNDER MAOISM

Siu's study of the role of local elites in state-society relations is complemented by Ann Anagnost's and Judith Farquhar's musings on the relationships between writing, practice, and ideology in the exercise of power under Maoism.<sup>4</sup> As Siu's historical examples illustrate, many of the tensions between center and locality in implementing Maoist policies involved the manner in which theoretical or ideological writings emanating from the center were interpreted in local settings. The most destructive moments occurred when local practice was dogmatically made to conform to Maoist theory.

On the surface, Farquhar's *Knowing Practice* seems to have little to do with questions of power. It addresses the relationship between medical practice and textual knowledge in traditional Chinese medicine. Farquhar completed an 18-month course at a college of traditional Chinese medicine that involved, as all such courses do, both rigorous textual training in various medical traditions and practical training in diagnosing and treating illness. Although this dual focus may seem comparable to the training of Western physicians, Farquhar was taken aback by the extent to which the different traditions of Chinese medicine yielded conflicting interpretations of symptoms and, more importantly, the way in which doctors handled these conflicting interpretations. When she asked her teachers to analyze

the contradictions among these competing traditions, she was told that doctors used their “experience” (*jingyan*) to make diagnostic decisions and that she should take “practice” (*shijian*) as her guide. In short, theoretical contradictions were never explicitly addressed. This experience led her to make the relationship between the textualized traditions and doctors’ practice the focus of her ethnography. She concluded that, at least during the early 1980s, Chinese doctors’ attitudes toward conflicting medical theories were “relativistic.”

Doctors must act, and they must have an ethics and a politics. But they must intervene in illness while knowing that there is no one world, no single objective standpoint, no absolute truth. One key to their efficacy lies in their willingness to accept teaching from the past and from elsewhere, their understanding that slowly embodied virtuosity cannot be finally verbalized, and their politics that can function in a world of multiple biases and bodies. [Farquhar 1994b:93]

This eclecticism might seem distant from issues of power under Maoism, but the language of taking practice as one’s guide was politically charged throughout the Maoist period, indexing a whole series of issues regarding the relationship between written guidelines, instructions, and theories issued by the state center and their interpretation and implementation in local settings. While Red Guards were taught to learn revolutionary ideals by putting Maoism into “practice,” quotes from Mao’s famous essay, “On Practice,” like “Discover the truth through practice” (Mao 1975:308), were often invoked disingenuously to resist the dogmatic implementation of Maoist policy.<sup>5</sup> As Farquhar puts it, “Chinese people can be said to have lived, sometimes bitterly, a ‘practice of practice’” (1994a:3). The dogmatic implementation of a “scientific Marxism” that sharply limited access to other sources of textually based knowledge formed the historical background to the doctors’ concern with eclecticism.

Anagnost’s (1997) work explicitly theorizes the relationship between writing, world making, and power under Maoism. She begins her book with an analysis of *suku* (speaking bitterness), the Maoist technique in which impoverished individuals were taught to publicly describe their sufferings in terms of the revolutionary categories of class and exploitation during political campaigns. Anagnost draws on Marston Anderson’s (1990) literary analyses of socialist realism and Derrida’s notion of “presence” to theorize speaking bitterness as a process by which ideas and categories that first appeared in Marxist theoretical writings were transformed into social realities. Derrida critiques notions of written representation in which writing is seen as merely re-presenting something that was already present. Instead, Derrida sees writing as a powerful act that reconfigures the world rather than merely mimicking it. Anagnost similarly examines how Maoist writings were used to remake the world, even creating the “peasant subject” rather than simply reporting on a social type that was already present. As she puts it,

In revolutionary practice, a poetics of the body and its insults moved from literary representations to the spoken words of uneducated peasants. This eruption into speech of the peasant subject must therefore be placed within a whole system of representations in which new conceptions of the social and historical became “real-ized” through the visceral experience of the speaking subject. [1997:19]

Speaking bitterness made its deepest imprint on China’s social landscape through its role in “real-izing” Mao’s system of class identities. Because Mao defined class in rural China as much in terms of the experience of exploitation as in terms of relations to the means of production, narratives of speaking bitterness (i.e., experiencing exploitation) directly informed both the process of assigning class labels and local understandings and embodiments of what these labels meant. Although Mao’s definition of class in terms of exploitation can be said to have allowed local conditions to influence the definition of class categories, their application was by no means a transparent reflection of preexisting conditions. In most campaigns, work teams were forced to fill state-designated numeric quotas for landlords or other undesirable categories (Vogel 1969:108). During the Land Reform (the first rural campaign) many people had to be trained extensively before they could speak their bitterness in the proper class terms. Anagnost’s point, however, is not to dispute the accuracy of the CCP’s categories, but to note their productive power in transforming the social landscape. Here her quotation of Vaclav Havel’s discussion of the role of ideology in Eastern Europe both illuminates this productive power and suggests commonalities in the use of ideology across most socialist regimes:

Ideology is ultimately subordinated “to the interests of the structure . . . it has a natural tendency to disengage from reality, to create a world of appearances, to become ritual. . . . It becomes reality itself, albeit a reality altogether self-contained, one that on certain levels (chiefly inside the power structure) may have a greater weight than reality as such. [1997:108]

While class categories were perhaps the most important method by which the CCP inscribed its ideology onto the social, the communist process of categorizing and naming individuals and collectives extended to many other realms as well. As Bakken (2000) suggests, China was governed in large part by labeling models to be emulated (and countermodels to be scorned). In another article, Anagnost suggests that by acting within, ignoring, and falsely assuming the identity labels given by the state, Chinese individuals and communities complied with, resisted, and manipulated to their advantage the “hegemonic fictions” (1997:55) spun by the Maoist state. Thus, like Siu, Anagnost both examines the spaces for agency in Maoist structures of power and analyses the dynamics that emerge.

In the conclusion to this latter essay, Anagnost contrasts this dynamic with the mechanisms of panoptical discipline that Foucault suggests for Western societies:

Subjects are not constituted as objects of knowledge in a science of the individual so much as they are classified

into a system of signs that locates them as factors in a historical drama, a master narrative about the consciously directed progression toward socialism. . . . The goal is not so much the orthopedic refashioning of the individual so that deviance is made to conform to a norm presumed to be already present in the social body as a whole but the radical re-formation of that very social body, in which old practices are displaced by new, in the utopic projection of a new social reality. [1997:116]

Perhaps my framing of this contrast exaggerates. As Mayfair Yang's discussion (below) of socialist biopower illustrates, the Maoist regime did concern itself with eliciting compliance to specific behavioral programs. Moreover, moments of utopic projection are undoubtedly common in Western regimes as well. Yet I agree fully with Anagnost in pointing to the relative importance of the drive to utopic excess as a distinguishing feature of socialism. The difference involves the place of holistic transformation in the socialist imaginary. Insofar as the very legitimacy of the regime is caught up in its ability to make the claim that it has enabled a holistic transformation, socialist states tend to play the game of enforcing the acknowledgment of their social categories even and especially when they seem irrelevant to other realms of everyday practice. This leads to the highly politicized rituals of Maoist campaigns. Though these rituals undeniably shaped social "reality," rarely did the changes they effected have much to do with the transformations literally suggested by the ideologies in question.

### GIFTS, FAVORS, AND BANQUETS: THE ART OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN CHINA

Mayfair Yang's (1994) book describes PRC discourses about and practices of creating and manipulating social relationships, or *guanxixue*. In contrast to Siu's focus on a single geographic region or Farquhar's focus on a well-defined institution, Yang examines a diffuse series of discourses and practices across a broad urban landscape. Like the other authors reviewed here, however, Yang analyses the distinctive nature of Maoist state power, its failures, and its transformative effects. More than any of the others, she makes the explicit theorizing of this power a primary goal.

Yang introduces her account with a narration of the difficulties she encountered in attempting to do fieldwork in the early 1980s. She describes the fear engendered by a pervasive climate of surveillance (in which, for example, all visitors to her dorm room were required to register with the authorities), the maze of bureaucratic channels she needed to navigate to secure permission for the formal study she had originally planned, and the counterstrategies she learned for avoiding both surveillance and dealing with bureaucracies. She situates these difficulties not as the unique circumstances of a foreign researcher, but as indicative of the practical dynamics of living under a still fairly Maoist system of state power. Yang then describes her theoretical strategies for describing this system:

In outlining the workings of state power, I do not simply seek to describe the state in terms of a narrow technical sense of the bureaucracy and its official class. The state is

not its system of laws, rules, and regulations; nor is it a system of force based only on policing, punishment, and military action. What forms a point of departure for this inquiry into modern forms of social control and counter-control in contemporary China is Foucault's novel definition of power [1980] as a constitutive field and discourse of strategic action, rather than something possessed by a class or a group. [Yang 1994:43]

Yang continues, "What is at issue in this book is not merely class or institutional control, but a modern technique and telos of power" (Yang 1994:43). Yang's reliance on Foucault moves her analysis in two, somewhat contradictory directions. On the one hand, she deliberately sets herself apart from the Maoist, revolutionary preoccupation with "seizing" power. Those who treat power as an object to be seized tend to neglect that technologies of power can have similar systemic effects no matter who controls them and that "holding" a certain form of power can transform the will of the power holder herself in unanticipated ways. On the other hand, she is quite sensitive to the fact that different systemic structures of power can entail differing social dynamics. She emphasizes the differences between state power in Stalinist, totalitarian systems, and Western capitalist ones, as well as the differences between states that focus almost exclusively on economic development and those that define their projects in moral-political rather than economic terms (Yang 1994:40–43). Insofar as this latter emphasis implies that "who" holds power is important at least in terms of determining the overall structure of the system implemented, the two directions of Yang's analysis could be taken as contradictory, though I prefer to see them as necessary complements.

Yang applies the notion of power as a constitutive social field to not one but three distinct "domains of power techniques" that she sees interacting in China during the 1980s. Each domain corresponds to a particular mode of exchange:

(1) the state distributive economy, (2) the gift economy [i.e., *guanxixue*], and (3) a resurgent commodity economy. Each mode follows its own rules of operation and its own corpus of etiquette and good forms in social relations, produces its own system of valuation and rates of exchange, and represents a unique style of the tactics and strategies of domination. Though representing distinct tactical styles, these domains of power techniques are not mutually exclusive in the sense that they comprise separate institutions or functions of the social structure; rather, they transverse institutions and are intertwined within them. Furthermore, the practices of each mode of exchange can be seen as reactions to the practices of the other two modes, so that their boundaries are marked by conflict. [Yang 1994:178–179]

Although Marxist systems of state distributive economy are theoretically oriented toward the principle of giving to each according to his or her needs and, thus, toward eliminating the operation of power from the distribution of goods and services, the bureaucratic system that administers the economy quickly usurps the disciplinary power that capital holds in capitalist economies. Goods and serv-

ices are distributed not only according to a principle of need but also according to the principle of complying with the demands of the bureaucratic system itself. Priority for state housing in the 1980s, for example, was given to those who had complied with the birth control policy and had provided exemplary service to their work units, or under Mao to those who had been assigned class statuses that supposedly demonstrated their loyalty to the state. The extent of this normalizing, disciplinary process extends to the entire field of goods distributed by the state, including (in the early 1980s) services like medical care and education, as well as the enormous range of life activities for which bureaucratic permissions were needed, such as marriage, divorce, birth, moving one's household register, changing jobs, obtaining a passport or driver's license, and so on.

The gift economy and related system of power poached off and operated in resistance to the official state distributive economy. The official economy created innumerable opportunities for individual bureaucrats to divert resources away from state ends and toward personal ends. Though these opportunities formed the basis for the gift economy, Yang does not simply equate this economy with the corruption of a narrowly defined bureaucratic elite. In urban China, the state economy constructed a "society of gatekeepers" in which the number of people who controlled access to some good, service, or necessary form of bureaucratic permission was enormous. Moreover, access to these gatekeepers was extended through networks of kin and friendship to all those who held some sort of relationship to the gatekeeper. As a consequence, the art of social relationships became a ubiquitous technique in urban China, as it was in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (see also Walder 1986). Bureaucrats were simultaneously enforcers of state processes of normalization and key links in chains of the gift economy. This dual role split the subjectivities of individual bureaucrats and enabled the two systems of power to transverse institutions and intertwine within them.

Yang emphasizes that the gift economy was also a system of power and morality. Whereas the state distributive economy worked to enforce a regime of normalization to state defined political and moral ends, the gift economy rested on and acted to reproduce a form of alternative ethics that emphasized reciprocity, personal loyalty, kinship, mutual aid, and so on. The gift economy thus involved a realm of personalistic power that has been well described by anthropologists in other contexts. This power centered on the deployment of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1977) and was marked by a lack of subject-object distinction between the item exchanged and the people who exchange it (Gregory 1982; Strathern 1984, 1988). Yang argues that the dimension of personalistic power differentiated the gift economy from the commodity economies that also developed under the shadow of socialist state economies.

The tensions between the state and gift economies arise at many levels. At the ideological level, Yang explores this tension by explaining Mao's seemingly strange (from

a Marxist vantage) identification with Qin Shihuang (the first emperor of China) in the "Criticize Lin Biao, Criticize Confucius" campaign of 1972. Where pre-Qin Confucianism saw the state as familial relationships writ large and envisioned good leadership as the harmonizing of human relations, Qin's Legalist philosophy saw the strength of the state as resting on the destruction of social relationships and the total atomization of society. Family loyalties, friendship, and social relations in general were imagined as coming at the expense of loyalty to the state and, thus, were to be discouraged by a variety of brutal means. The classic literature on totalitarianism similarly describes social atomization as consequence of the reign of terror in totalitarian regimes (Arendt 1967; Wittfogel 1957), but Yang's point here is different. For Yang, the conception of totalitarian states as atomizing is a facet of those states' self-representations rather than a social reality. In fact, the distribution systems of Maoist and Stalinist states engendered societies dominated by a refined art of social relationships. The propaganda that presents an atomized society as an ideal and reality of socialist life, like that in the "Criticize Lin Biao, Criticize Confucius" campaign, is a state reaction against this art.

At the level of individual subjectivity, Yang explores the tension between the state and gift economies through her discussion of Mao worship. In Mao worship, "each individual was brought to an equal distance from the leader or state center, and state surveillance was directly embedded in the interiority of each subject" (Yang 1994:248). Even for the most devoted, however, complete loyalty was never possible. There was always the problem of a "flash of thought" in which an unrevolutionary idea would unexpectedly erupt into consciousness. Such flashes necessitated confession, discipline, and self-doubt. These flashes point to the contradictory nature of socialist state power. On the one hand, the classification and normalization procedures of the centralized state distribution system created highly differentiated subjects. On the other hand, the propaganda apparatus promoted the image of the people as fully unified, what Lefort (1986), in his analysis of the Stalin cult, calls the "People-as-One."

All of Yang's arguments reflect her Foucauldian theorization of power, inviting a brief consideration of common criticisms of Foucault. In critical essays on both Foucault's work (Habermas 1987; Hoy 1986; Said 1986) and its applications to the anthropology of China (Sangren 1995, 2000), questions of agency predominate. By denying that power is something held by a particular human agent, does not Foucault's conception become nihilistic? By making power into a kind of all-determining superorganic structure—Power with a capital "P"—does not Foucault's conception reproduce the errors of the most static forms of structural-functionalism? Sangren (2000) compares Foucault's concept of power to the Chinese religious concept of *ling* (a type of magical power usually attributed to deities) and suggests that both concepts mystify power relations by portraying power as above and beyond indi-

vidual human agency. Although I have considerable sympathy with these critiques, I think that there is more room for middle ground than is usually acknowledged. Both Foucault and Yang are concerned with systemic technologies of power. These technologies can persist over time because the people they empower dominate their societies. From the perspective of a powerful individual, abandoning a particular technology does not guarantee that another person will not use it to reestablish a similar form of domination. But this argument does not imply that such technologies constitute self-reproducing wholes. To prevent a recognition of the systemic effects of certain technologies of power from sliding into a reductive theoretical functionalism of Power, what is needed is neither a total denial of the agency of power holders nor a denial that technologies of power can have systemizing effects, but, rather, a form of practice theory, which is just what Sangren advocates.

Viewing power in this way opens up the concrete historical questions posed by Siu. How does the very fact of "holding" a certain form of social power constrain or limit the power holder? Are different forms of power more suitable for achieving different ends? How so? And, most importantly, how might we reform systems of power so that they are more just? The work of Robert Weller provides yet another strategy for engaging such questions.

### **SATURATED SOLUTIONS AND THE PRECIPITATION OF RESISTANCE**

At first glance, Weller's (1994) book is not an anthropological study of Maoism at all. Two of his three case studies of power and resistance in Chinese social movements (the study of the 19th-century Taiping Rebellion and that of ghost worship in Taiwan during the mid-1980s) do not involve the PRC, while the third (the 1989 Tiananmen student movement) focuses on a post-Mao movement. Nevertheless, I include his book here for three reasons. First, Weller conducted his historical research on the Taiping Rebellion in 1984–85 during a year at Nanjing University, exposing him to the PRC during a period when the shadows of Maoism still loomed large. Second, his discussion of Tiananmen focuses on the postcrackdown reassertion of authoritarian control, an action associated with the more conservative (i.e., Maoist) factions of the party apparatus. Finally, and most importantly, he draws on his experience of and reading about Maoism and socialism more generally to extend his argument beyond the case studies proper and to justify his presumptions.

While Yang, in her use of a Foucauldian conception of power, focuses on the systemizing dynamics of power under Maoism, Weller's book focuses on social action. He argues that even under the most totalitarian systems of authoritarian rule, there are spaces for the independent interpretation of social reality. He organizes his book around the question of when these forms of independent action

should be considered acts of resistance against the regime in power.

He opens the book with a list of the types of social action that have been labeled resistance by anthropologists in the 1980s—including devil worship in South America (Taussig 1980), Mexican American sexual humor (Limón 1989), and, most relevantly here, Yang's (1994) book on *guanxixue*. Rather than determining whether the resistance label is justified in any of these cases, Weller links the question of when to categorize a given social action as resistance to two common paradoxes in anthropological analysis: that of religious practitioners who participate in or even initiate elaborate symbolic rituals without being able to offer any consistent explanation of their own actions, and that of social practices whose political significance shifts radically in a short period. In making these links, Weller suggests that much social practice proceeds in a state of interpretive silence, ambiguity, or both. Taking silence or ambiguity as a starting point, he then draws on Stanley Fish's argument (1980) to argue that a consistent political interpretation of a given practice requires the work of a powerful social organization: "The move from indeterminate meaning to definitive interpretation involves a social transformation where one group successfully develops and promotes its interpretation above all others" (Weller 1994:27). For more ambiguous social actions, Weller suggests the metaphor of a saturated solution and for the politicization of such actions, that of precipitation:

Saturated solutions stand just on the verge of precipitating. They are as full as they can get, having dissolved everything put in them, just as a ritual may dissolve all attempts at interpretation. Yet just one little push can change the entire character of the solution by precipitating out a solid when there was only a liquid before. . . . If saturated events are thick, overflowing with dissolved possibilities, precipitated interpretations are thin and easy to analyze. We recognize them easily through their thoroughly worked-out interpretations that we hear consistently and uniformly. . . . Only at this point of explicit interpretation can we speak clearly of political resistance. [1994:23]

In applying these metaphors to his three case studies, Weller suggests that ethnographers must distinguish potential precipitates from actual ones and identify the social and historical forces that sometimes allow one interpretation to precipitate out, while another redissolves.

The Taiping Rebellion began as a messy, multivocal, religious movement in which the Christianity of Hong Xiquan blended with the polytheistic religious practices of the wild frontier region of the Xunzhou Prefecture in Guizhou during the mid-1840s. Then known as the "God Worshippers," the movement was marked by uncontrolled possession trances in which almost any participant could offer interpretations of the cult's religious, historical, and political significance. As the local Chinese state began to oppose the movement and define it as political, Hong Xiquan and the movement's other leaders began conceiving

their own state. They organized lines of political and military authority within the movement and violently suppressed those uttering heterodox interpretations during spirit possessions. Eventually the polyvocal religious movement was transformed into a rebelling army with its own orthodox, antigovernment ideology—the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. The Taipings eventually conquered the southern half of China, briefly established their own state, and nearly toppled the Qing dynasty.

In its open rebellion against the extant regime, the Taiping Rebellion meets anyone's definition of political resistance. It did not start out that way. In the beginning, Weller argues, the situation was not that different from his second case—Taiwanese ghost worship during the 1980s:

The apparently enormous differences between the two cases—one a shattering rebellion and the other a politically quiescent religious oddity—should not disguise the fundamental similarity of the processes in both cases. For Taiwan, however, hindsight provides no benefits. In spite of many attempts to force a unified interpretation there, the solution still remains saturated, and any potential political resistance remains unrealized. [Weller 1994:110]

Weller attributes the lack of precipitation among the ghost worshippers to the relative power of the Taiwanese state. Unlike Guizhou in the 1840s, Taiwan in the 1980s did not offer religious leaders the physical and social space to create an independent army.

The third case study focuses on the struggle for the definition of historical meaning during the 1989 student democracy movement. Student protest began that spring and escalated after April 26 when the government attempted to define the movement in terms of “chaos” (*luan*). For two months many dissenting voices contested this interpretation. Opinions were split at the highest level of the government and even the *People's Daily* began giving voice to a wide variety of positions. After the more conservative factions of the CCP leadership won out and violently suppressed the movement on June 4, the CCP revived its dormant structures for carrying out political campaigns and, at self-criticism sessions and public meetings, forced the monological official line down everyone's throat. Although pro forma acceptance of the party line was evident enough, so were expressions of boredom, hedonism, and lack of engagement with the wider scene. These, Weller argues, point at the spaces for saturated solutions of ambiguity even at the height of an authoritarian movement towards monovocality.

Weller's approach can be contrasted on many levels to that of Yang. Where Weller defines resistance in terms of explicit expression and intentional institutional plans, Yang sees resistance as indicative of the directions in which power is trying to push, rather than indicative of the intentions of the resistor. With Foucault, Yang sees subjectivities as constructed by and through power, subjects as often simultaneously and contradictorily resistant and compliant, and their resistance and compliance as both conscious and subconscious. In contrast, Weller is more

Weberian than Foucauldian. Although his insistence on the importance of ambiguity, a surfeit of meaning and a lack of interpretation builds on poststructuralist theories of language, he does not simply mimic them. “Meaning in actual social life,” he argues, “is not homogeneously messy” (1994:221–222). Rather the processes of defining and redefining the significance—political or otherwise—of a given social action must be understood in terms of the institutional histories of those doing the interpreting.

Sangren (2000:232) argues that Weller's approach, with its emphasis on explicit interpretation, neglects the processes by which subjectivities are constructed, and is at a loss to explain cases in which the explicitly defined “resistance” of given group of social actors actually contributes to the reproduction the very social system they think they are resisting.<sup>6</sup> While agreeing that Weller does not focus on the reproduction of social forms, I still believe Weller's work is a valuable contribution to the theorization of the dynamics of power, particularly within the parameters he set for himself. His insistence on paying attention to processes of institutionalisation cannot count as the reduction of social life to the action of individuals and can even be considered a form of attention to processes of subjectification. Moreover, his focus on explicit expression raises the important question of complicity in power dynamics, while his emphases on ambiguity and process enables a subtle approach to this problem. Finally, and in this regard resembling Yang, Weller's insistence on spaces of ambiguity deflates the presumption that a revolutionary seizure of power could ever enact a once-and-for-all transformation.

## CONCLUSION

In his book, *Envisioning Power*, Eric Wolf distinguishes “four modalities in how power is . . . woven into social relations” (1999:5). These include an individual, Nietzschean sense of the power that inheres in individuals, a Weberian sense of power that focuses on the ability of “an *ego* to impose its will in social action upon an *alter*,” a tactical or organizational power in which the contexts that constrain social interaction are manipulated, and a structural power that “not only operates within settings and domains but also organizes and orchestrates the settings themselves, and that specifies the direction and distribution of energy flows” (1999:5). While it may be useful to distinguish among these different modalities of power, I would add that the most successful anthropological explorations of power examine the interactions among them to compare and contrast the workings of power in concrete historical settings. On this level, the writings discussed here are far more successful than Wolf's own case studies, which have been justifiably criticized for focusing only on structural power and then reifying this modality into “little more than a label, a concept that is brandished every now and again to remind the reader that it is intended to be the focus of the study” (Barrett et al. 2001:474). In contrast, Siu

provides a detailed historical meditation on the paradoxes of power that emerged in the Pearl River Delta, Yang examines the interrelations among several structures of power and modes of subjectification that emerged under Maoism, Weller examines the place of the imposition of political meaning in the construction and destruction of organizational power in three Chinese cases, while Farquhar and Anagnost explore the interplay between ideology, writing, and social practice in Maoist and post-Mao China.

Many theoretical lessons may be taken from these studies, the first of which is to reduce Wolf's four modalities to three. The concept of structural power is simply too easy to reify. As Siu demonstrates, the very attempt to transform multiplex structures of power to a singular system is likely to exacerbate rather than eliminate abuses of power. More importantly, as Yang and Weller argue, even when organizational power reaches as far as the Stalinist or Maoist state, unexpected dynamics and spaces of ambivalence emerge. As Anagnost observes, even "hegemonic fictions" can be turned to various ends. Rather than assuming an overarching form of structural power, I prefer extending the concept of organizational power to many levels, with the caveat that even the most superarching level cannot be seen as constituting a singular self-reproducing structure.

Wolf's second modality, that of power in localized interpersonal relationships, is perhaps of most immediate interest to anthropologists, as this is the modality most directly envisioned in ethnographic writing and research. The best studies, however, analyze this modality in relation to aspects of the first and the third. Siu's study of the CCP reorganization of relationships between Delta households and local leaders draws attention to the interaction between the second and third modalities, while Yang's examination of the construction of subjectivity in the art of social relationships provides an example of interaction between the first and second. Direct analyses of the interplay between the first and third modalities, as in Yang's exploration of processes of subjectification in the Mao cult or Siu's analysis of the complicity of Delta residents in the consolidation of Maoist power are also important.

The contrast between the approaches of Weller and Yang suggests drawing a careful distinction between politics and power dynamics. Politics is by necessity a self-conscious process that almost always involves an attempt to reshape power relations. Power dynamics may or may not be visible to those involved but are always described from the point of view of an analyst. In practice the two are closely related. Politics involve the analysis of power dynamics and the analysis of power dynamics can involve close attention to politics. Despite their differences, both Yang and Weller are successful at simultaneously exploring native self-consciousness about power relations while constructing their own models. Weller gives explicit local interpretation a key place in his own theory while Yang incorporates numerous native theories of *guanxixue* into her analyses.

Finally, power must be seen as having uses beyond the reproduction of power relations for their own sake. For a potential political leader, focusing on how to gain power without conceiving of the reasons why power is desired can only generate the most cynical form of politics. An anthropology of power that makes power an end in itself joins in this cynicism. As Farquhar (1994b) argues, power in a doctor-patient relationship cannot be seen apart from responsibility for healing. As Siu's analysis of the Great Leap Forward exemplifies, organizational power should be analyzed in terms of what it accomplishes as well as its success as a means of domination. The weakness of the type of power that "grows out of a barrel of a gun" (Mao 1967:33) can only be understood from this perspective.

The deep sense of paradox, irony, and contradiction in the anthropology of Maoism makes it a valuable resource for all anthropological studies of power. The theoretical reflections of the authors reviewed here derive their worth not only from the individual talents of the authors but also from the historical circumstances in which they did their research. These authors thought and wrote about power not just because of the trends within their discipline but also because of the governing ideology of the regime where their research took place. This combination drove a level of reflexivity that few have matched.

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#### NOTES

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1. The topic of Maoism continues to yield heated debates and in pointing to the importance of the failures of Maoism here, I wish to make it clear that I do not think that everything done in Mao's name was a failure. Especially in the areas of rural health care and education, Maoist governance yielded some noteworthy achievements.

2. Like any such selection, my list of books is both thematically motivated and somewhat arbitrary. Of the five I selected, Yang and Siu provide the purest examples of an anthropology of Maoism, while Anagnost, Farquhar, and Weller concern themselves partially with Maoism and partially with other things (the non-Maoist specificities of the reform era for Anagnost, Chinese medical practice for Farquhar, and social movements in general for Weller). Rofel 1999 is another example of an erudite theorization of power that is partially concerned with Maoism (and partially with gender in the reform era), while Mueggler (2001) provides a fascinating analysis of how the Maoist and post-Mao state is imagined in a very remote and non-Han location. Sangren (2000) supplies another noteworthy theorization of power in a Chinese context, though without much reference to Maoism. In my selection, I have emphasized the period of research (before 1985) because I believe that this was when the sense of contradiction and paradox Maoism raised for U.S. anthropologists reached its peak. Though some later researchers (notably Jing 1996; Mueggler 2001; Ruf 1998) have theorized power in their examinations of Maoist governance, they have tended to focus on how these issues looked from the perspective of a particular locality, a worthy but slightly different concern.

As is usual in any subfield, the more general studies tend to come first. Studying power is inescapably political and a critique of Maoism just does not sit easily beside the more typical anthropological critiques of racism, colonialism, capital, and patriarchy. As the visibility of Maoist abuses has waned, even some China specialists have found it easier to ignore the anthropological theorizations discussed here. In revisiting these works, I mean to suggest that for China and non-China anthropologists alike, political discomfort can be theoretically productive. For a general review of anthropology in and of the PRC, see Harrell 2001.

3. The residents of the Pearl River Delta have been among the biggest winners of the reform era. Throughout this period there, the presence and exploitation of desperate, work-seeking migrants from other parts of the country has served as a reminder of how fortunate the original Delta residents have been.

4. Though neither of these authors can be said to focus solely on Maoism, their partial attention to issues of Maoist state power is symptomatic of their position among the first U.S. anthropologists to do research in China during the post-Mao era. Anagnost went to Nanjing in 1981, while Farquhar went to Guangzhou in 1982.

5. Even more famous was Mao's oft-quoted aphorism "seek truth from facts," though it does not appear in "On Practice." See Kipnis 1997:113–114 for more on that saying.

6. One famous example is Willis's (1977) ethnography of working-class school resisters in England.

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