

Review Essay

Anthropological Approaches to Self in Contemporary China

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Li Jing, *Renqing shehui: renji guanxi yu ziwoguande jiangou* (Society of Favours: Interpersonal Relationships and the Structure of Self). *Bentu Shehui Yanjiu Yeshu Zhi Wu* (Nativist Social Research Series No. 5). River Edge, NJ: Global Publishing Co., 2002. xx + 265 pp. US\$9.00 (paperback).

Liu Xin, *The Otherness of Self: A Genealogy of the Self in Contemporary China*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002. xviii + 222 pp. US\$59.50 (hardcover), US\$24.95 (paperback).

Read together, these two books are fascinating for what they reveal about contemporary Chinese culture, the similarities and differences between English and Chinese-language anthropological writing, and the plusses and minuses of using the concept of “self” to explore processes of cultural change. Though both authors are well read in the English-language anthropological literature on China, Li Jing, writing in Chinese, theorizes the concept of self using frameworks from the Chinese writings of Fei Xiaotong, Du (Tu) Weiming, Li Yiyuan, and Jin Yaoji, while Xin Liu, writing in English, theorizes the concept of self through the frameworks of Clifford Geertz, Michel Foucault, John and Jean Comaroff, and Charles Taylor among others. Both authors devote attention to the English-language work of Francis Hsu and concern themselves with the relationships between modes of selfhood and the decline of previous forms of moral authority in post-Mao China. In so doing, they also both draw a stark contrast between the past and the present and somewhat self-consciously portray contemporary China in a manner that emphasises cultural continuity at the expense of exploring difference.

Li Jing’s book focuses on social relations in a small, primarily agricultural village in southeastern Shanxi, Lu Cun, Li’s ancestral home. Between 1993 and 1999 she relied upon her family connections to undertake a total of ten months of ethnographic research. Li joins a movement among Chinese intellectuals to nativize (*bentuhua*) the social sciences, purposefully drawing on Chinese terms rather than Chinese translations of English terms to theorize about social relations. She argues that Western social theory is oriented towards Western social problems and grounded in Western languages and so is inadequate for theorizing China’s social phenomena. In its place she relies on the intersection of a set of conceptual abstractions that are part of the vocabulary of Lu Cun residents, like *renqing* (human sentiment), *mianzi* (face), *guanxi* (social relationships), *gong* (public) and *si* (private), and a series of concepts coined by

Chinese social theorists, like Fei Xiaotong's *chaxu geju* (differential mode of association). While recognizing the benefits of such an approach, I would caution that nativization runs the risk of failing to recognize that Chinese social science (like all social science) has always been a multilingual project, and that social science involves interpretation even when the researcher and those being researched speak the same language.

The first chapter lays out Li's theoretical framework. She begins by arguing that the Chinese self must be seen as relational (*guanxi xingde*) and that the nucleus of the self for both men and women is the father/son axis (*fuzi zhou*). Everyone is concerned with the continuation of particular patrilineal household lines. This concern, Li demonstrates, does not imply a lack of father/son conflict, as every individual, male or female, can see himself or herself as part of more than one father/son axis. A man positioned as a son in one household is a potential father in another, and in his position as father or potential father he may come into conflict with his own actual father. From a position in a given father/son axis, Li argues, Chinese individuals define themselves in terms of concentric circles of relatedness, as conceptualized in Fei Xiaotong's notion of *chaxu geju*. Both the father/son axis that is chosen and the size of the concentric circle of relatedness depend upon social context. In addition, the "self" (*ziwo* or *ji*) that is defined by these circles has both self-interested (*liyi ziwo*) and moral (*daode ziwo*) aspects, the latter of which Li theorizes through the work of Du Weiming.

Following Li Yiyuan, Li Jing then argues that Chinese projects of selfhood involve seeking a harmonious balance (*hexie junheng*) among these various aspects of self. She concludes that this balance, especially among the young, has shifted towards a narrowly defined self-interested self as a result of the erosion of traditional moral authority during the political campaigns of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, and the decline of collective agriculture, the rise of living standards, the resultant consumerism, and the perceived increase in cadre corruption of the reform era.

While Li Jing's conceptual apparatus is quite flexible, it also seems susceptible to reification. Rather than using the framework as a means to differentiate the self-concepts of variously situated people, she suggests that for a given period of Chinese history there is a singular model of self for all rural Chinese people regardless of social class, gender, or locality. Her presumption that the father/son axis is the primary starting point of self-conceptualization for all of contemporary rural China is clearly contradicted by researchers who argue that the conjugal relationship has replaced parent/child relations as the primary focus of kin relationships in some rural areas.¹

Except for a brief conclusion, the remaining chapters of Li's book shift from abstract theorization to closely grounded ethnography. The gap between the theoretical and ethnographic chapters looms large. While her theorizing argues at the level of "the Chinese self", her ethnography describes in great detail her

¹ Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life Under Socialism: Love, Intimacy and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949–1999* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

relationships in the village and the life histories of particular individuals in Lu Cun. The ethnographic description is well worth reading for those interested in Chinese village life during the 1990s.

Chapter Two situates Lu Cun in terms of general historic, geographic and economic frameworks. Though the reform era has led to increased incomes in the village, this has been the result of villagers leaving Lu Cun to seek temporary work or to run small trading businesses during the agricultural slack season. Within the village little non-agricultural employment exists. Consequently, Li argues, neither the centrality of agriculture to the village economy nor the centrality to village life of marriage and raising children has changed.

Chapter Three examines family life in Lu Cun through detailed descriptions of particular households and their specific sibling, husband/wife, and parent/child relationships. These portrayals demonstrate that the social and economic legacies of Maoist class labels are still important more than twenty years after the labels were abandoned. The previous difficulties of men with bad class labels finding wives and extending their family lines (those who were able to marry tended to do so later than good-class young men) have been passed on to the next generation, who experience increased burdens of elder care and a subsequent lack of capital to start their own families.

Chapter Four examines the deterioration of interpersonal relationships during the divisive political campaigns of the Maoist era and the shape of inter-household personal relationships today, including those between cadres and ordinary villagers. Chapter Five describes patterns of village religious belief and practices and their implications for interpersonal relationships. During the reform era Lu Cun has experienced the restoration of a temple, the revitalization of many earlier religious practices and the participation of some villagers in Catholicism and Protestantism. Li Jing notes the emphasis on crass materialism (*gonglizhuyi*) in much contemporary religious practice and attributes this to the intersection of traditional patterns of religion and the effects of the past fifty years of Maoist and reform-era Communist Party rule.

In contrast to Li's focus on a rural village, Xin Liu's book examines business practices in the city of Beihai, Guangxi Province. Liu's theorization of self emphasizes the centrality of narration to the experience of selfhood. Following theorists such as Husserl and Carr, Liu argues that this experience must be structured in terms of time, the relationship between what has just happened and what is happening now. A narrative provides this structure. Following Foucault, Liu sees narratives in terms of discursive conditions of possibility, by which he means not just linguistic structures but also the material conditions that enable the dominance of a particular narrative form.

By locating the structure of self in a set of discursive conditions, Liu also posits the possibility of radical and relatively abrupt changes in selfhood. As an example of such a change, he describes in great detail the transformation of several intellectuals into businessmen, including his central informant, Haihun, the general manager of the Beihai Star Group. He argues that these transformations are not simply career

changes, but total reconstitutions of the self as an ethical subject. Liu calls the capacity of the self “to become its own Other” (p. 128) “the otherness of self,” hence the title of the book.

In Beihai, Liu argues, narrations of self centre around the triangular relationships between three stock characters: the boss (*laoban*) of a private business, the section chief (*chuzhang*) of a government bureau, and massage parlour girls (*xiaojie*). The boss can afford to pay for banquets, karaoke and the sexual services of parlour girls but needs the help of the section chief to make even more money. The section chief is an intermediary official—high enough up the official hierarchy to make decisions and low enough to have a role to play in enforcing their implementation. His salary is modest compared to his desires, and he lives for the pleasures the boss can supply. Such pleasures are safer to receive than monetary bribes or material gifts, as they leave no physical trace that may be identified in future investigations.

As Liu points out, Beihai in the 1990s is an especially apt setting to describe such a corrupt triangle. Originally a special economic zone, Beihai received considerable investment after Deng’s 1992 tour of the south, but never developed any productive industries. When it fell out of favour with Zhu Rongji in 1994, investment flows dried up and many partially completed office buildings were left unfinished and empty. Other than speculation in real estate, the only form of business Liu describes is an attempt to get official approval for waivers on import duties, allowing a quick profit of questionable legality. The businessmen whom Liu interviews all express the opinion that producing real goods or services makes little money in comparison to securing such favours from officials. Liu describes several attempts by Beihai businessmen to lure Beijing officials to Beihai where, far from scrutiny, they are more likely to participate in the “golden production line” of banquets, karaoke and parlour girls. While Beihai may not be representative of all of China, it can, in Liu’s words, “remain significant in revealing the sickness of a normal body of modernization” (p. 98).

In the second half of the book, Liu explores the relationships between the narration of self in Beihai and two other forms of conceiving time and narrating the self in China. He labels the Beihai form “modern” and calls the other two the “revolutionary” and the “traditional”. He explores the traditional through Francis Hsu’s book *Under the Ancestor’s Shadow*. For Hsu, village life in early twentieth-century China carries the weight of the actions of previous generations. Though there is a constant exchange between ancestors and descendants, the fate of the living is to some extent out of their own hands, a matter of the behaviour of their ancestors in earlier times. In terms of the narrative that it enables, this traditional discourse imparts the heavy weight of the past to the present and the future, and causes individuals to understand their own lives in terms of a gradual transformation from descendant into ancestor.

To explain the revolutionary form of narrating the self, Liu turns to the socialist realist novel *The Sky of Bright Sunshine*, which depicts a struggle between a revolutionary cadre and a counter-revolutionary former landlord who opposes

collectivization. In this book the force that drives the characters is not the weight of the past but the hope for a utopian socialist future. Self-narratives are defined in terms of an orientation towards the future.

Finally, for the modern form of narrating the self, Liu supplements his ethnographic description of business in Beihai with a discussion of Anyi Wang's novel, *A Song of Everlasting Sorrow*. The novel describes a Shanghai woman's life from the mid-1940s to the late 1980s, and Liu argues that this depiction presents a peculiar contradiction in terms of time. Though the main character grows older and lives through many revolutionary changes, nothing in her life ever really changes. Thus, unlike the traditional narration of time, in which the self gradually transforms from descendent into ancestor, and the revolutionary narration of time, in which individual struggles gradually build a socialist utopia, in the modern narration of time there is a total breakdown both of social transformation and of the connection of the self to any larger social entity.

Liu ties the contradictory narrative structure of Wang's novel to his ethnographic description of Beihai business practices in several ways. First, he notes that, although stories involving the triangle of the boss, section chief and parlour girl have a narrative sequence, they never involve any larger social transformation. Rather, the circle of "gifts" (from parlour girl to section chief, section chief to boss, and boss to parlour girl) revolves purposelessly and endlessly. Second, he cites Chinese entrepreneurs describing their own sense of anomie, timelessness, placelessness and lack of meaning. Involved in endless cycles of discussions on mobile phones (a technology that makes the physical location of the speakers irrelevant), in which they arrange golden production lines and negotiate deals of tenuous legality, these entrepreneurs often cannot remember what they did or where they were the day before. Rather than the carefully planned days and appointment books of the stereotypical Western business executive, Beihai's bosses live on their mobile phones, ready to rearrange all activities if an important connection calls. The section chiefs' search for pleasure likewise becomes a timeless search. The indulgence in momentary physical pleasures effaces any larger significance in the sexual and gustatory experiences.

Liu is quite explicit about the degree to which his labels of traditional, revolutionary and the modern are arbitrary. He argues that his writing technique parallels that of Foucault. He is not representing actual historical events, but writing history as if it were a sequence of analytically separable epistemes in order to better illuminate the present. Whether such a strategy actually works in Liu's terms is a matter for the reader to decide, but I was bothered by the extent to which it both renders itself vulnerable to misreadings and masks important historical continuities. Liu's ethnography and analysis are full of untaken opportunities to note the place of the "traditional" and the "revolutionary" in the contemporary period, and vice-versa. For example, Haihun describes his own conversion from academic into businessman not in terms of an "otherness of self" but in terms of a basic continuity of his filial ethic—by earning more money he can be more helpful than ever to his schoolmaster father. The parlour girls interviewed by Liu similarly describe their lives in terms of

filial contributions to their natal families. One of them also earnestly invokes the idiom of “serving the people” to describe the significance of giving pleasure to the section chiefs. Finally, while Liu illustrates what he means by the “modern” through Wang Anyi’s novel about contemporary China, I believe that the “modern” business practices described by Liu would have been better illuminated through a discussion of *Jin Ping Mei*, the famous sixteenth-century novel about sex, business, corruption and anomie during the Ming dynasty. Generally speaking, the cyclical conceptions of time that Liu describes as modern have long histories in China’s Buddhist and Taoist traditions. While none of these examples contradict Liu’s analytic strategy, they do show the need to be cautious not to over-literally adopt Liu’s terms.

In the end, Liu’s analytic strategy overlaps considerably with that of Li. This becomes especially clear when *The Otherness of Self* is considered in conjunction with Liu’s first book, *In One’s Own Shadow*, which coincidentally depicts social relations in a Shaanxi village in the same region of China as the Shanxi village where Li did her research. All three books note the increasing breakdown of social relations and the anomie of China in the late 1990s. All three speak largely in terms of the categories of the traditional, the revolutionary and the modern, though Liu is more explicit about the arbitrariness of these designations. All three books also tend to emphasize the cultural similarities among the people they write about. For example, both Li’s book and Liu’s first book render gender relations in rural China in terms of a single frame of patrilineally structured households—both men and women orient themselves towards the father/son axis. In Liu’s second book, the parlour girls, section chiefs, and bosses similarly all participate in the same narrative conception of self, even though they are positioned differently. This strategy of cultural depiction goes against the grain of much contemporary ethnographic writing, which typically suggests that men and women, or any set of differently positioned actors in the same society, will have relatively separate experiences of self. Finally, both Li and Liu use this strategy to critically suggest that there is something generally amiss about contemporary Chinese society.

In writings about “the self” in contemporary China it perhaps should be taken for granted that there will be overgeneralizations about both the contemporary period and its contrast with earlier periods. When viewed on their own terms, both authors succeed in pushing their perspectives. They provide analytically rigorous syntheses of very different bodies of theoretical literature, as well as closely grounded ethnographies of important contemporary social phenomena.