

Im Fokus

New Research Trends in Anthropology/Sociology of China

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Abstract

This paper looks at the new country-specific and disciplinary challenges and the ways in which anthropologists and sociologists of China have re-oriented their methodological and theoretical conventions in rethinking the role of the ethnographer and resiting the audience for their writings. In doing so, this short paper argues that there is a recognisable loss of space-specificity and a tendency to retreat into the discipline.

Keywords: China, anthropology, challenges, contemporary responses

The 50th Anniversary of the Institute of Asian Studies is an apposite occasion on which to reflect, albeit briefly, on new research trends in the anthropology/sociology of China.¹ These are both challenging and interesting times for anthropologists/sociologists of China within and outside of that country as both the region and the discipline are in the midst of pivotal change. For this Asia-specialist audience, it is not necessary to do more than briefly allude to the unprecedented speed and scale of socio-economic change in China over the past few decades. Far-reaching internal reforms in the world's most populous country alongside local and global flows of persons, goods, capital and ideas have blurred boundaries, increased diversity, fostered a sense of difference, altered spatial configurations of village, town and city, shifted popular paradigms and influenced everyday perceptions and practices. As China has encountered and engaged with the global and is itself fast-becoming a global power there is a fast-growing demand for knowledge and understanding of China and for greater country-specific expertise and multi-disciplinary interpretations including those

¹ Although anthropology and sociology have differing disciplinary conventions and training, there is a tendency to use the two labels interchangeably within and outside of China.

of anthropologists/sociologists. Within China too, new socio-economic trends have demanded new policies informed by such knowledge.

The discipline of anthropology has also experienced a period of reflexivity and recent change with an accompanying shift in emphasis from space to issue, local single-site to multi-sited ethnography, the cultural-specific to global and transnational flows of people, capital, commodities, cultural events and from post-modernist ethnographic writing to the production of cultural and social theory. In part these shifts are a response to the over-arching challenge facing anthropologists: how to retool methodologically and theoretically to combine both the local and translocal or transnational flows that are reshaping lives, identities and spaces into new and larger analytical agendas. Anthropologists/sociologists of China have responded to these new country-specific and disciplinary challenges in ways that have re-oriented their methodological and theoretical conventions that have distinguished the discipline.

Methodological Trends

It is ironic for anthropologists of China that, just as ethnographic observation and description can take its rightful place alongside theoretical argument and monograph writing to make up the trinity of elements that distinguish the discipline of anthropology (Fardon 1990: 1), the conventions of ethnographic observation and description have themselves been questioned for China and within the discipline. In China, over the past twenty-five years and after several decades of little or no access to the field, the opportunities for anthropologists from within and outside the country have expanded so that a new generation of rural and urban community field studies have resulted in a number of monographs and lengthy articles with a variety of themes (see Bossen 2002, Harrell 1993, Heins-Potter/Potter 1990, Jankowiak 1993, Judd 1994, Kipnis 1997, Ku 2003, Ruf 1998, Siu 1989, Stafford 2000, Whyte 1993, Yan 1996, Yang 1994, and many others). There are also several studies based on shorter periods of field investigation conducted alongside and supplemented by research from a variety of documentary sources (e.g., Croll 1994, Evans 1997, Greenhalgh 2003, Wolf 1985). Paradoxically for both shorter and longer field studies in China, the new opportunities for field research have been matched by new challenges in that informants, while remaining unusually self-conscious, are likely to be more mobile, limited in variety and more secretive as communities become less bounded and linked to the regional and national in

a new range of various and complex ways. Now access to the field may be less restricted but following entry, the researcher is more likely to find that informants neither official nor villager or worker are readily available for interview let alone observation. Secondly, as households have become more complex, autonomous and diverse economic units, so research on the incomes, resource flows and economic activities of individual and aggregated kin-linked households has become a much more time-consuming exercise and time itself has become privatised and commoditised. Households too, given the raft of new taxes and other informal levies, are less inclined to reveal the details of their incomes and the extent of their economic and other activities which, with renewed mobility, may take place far from the neighbourhood (Croll 2004, Greenhalgh 2004).

Although anthropologists have long theorised about the representation of the local, generalisation and the comparative, now the challenge within the discipline is to incorporate the translocal or even transnational following the new flows of people, goods and messages and to combine the local with the translocal and transnational in rapidly shifting social, economic and political contexts. Earlier and in China too, the predominance of bounded communities had led to an anthropological preoccupation with language and representation, the relationship between rhetoric and everyday practice and between villager and local agents of the state. Now in China and in the discipline, challenges from the translocal, globalisation and the transnational have prompted a move to new ethnographic practices that are issue-oriented and multi-sited to emphasise encounters or linkages, follow flows and construct multi-faceted and made-over identities.

Theoretical Issues

These new ethnographic practices prompted by fast changes in China and shifts in the discipline have directed the attention of anthropologists of China towards larger theoretical agendas to do with modernity, globalisation and identity which, together with cultural markers, constructs and representations, are all themes of increasing interest to anthropologists/sociologists and cultural theorists. This is not to say that previous ethnographic studies of China were not engaged with or informed by anthropological theory but what has changed is the privileging of theory to stall the fear that, unless attention is directed towards disciplinary input, contributions from the China field will continue to lie outside broader disciplinary debates rethinking place and process.

Perhaps because of the long-time methodological constraints limiting fieldwork in China and the subsequent novelty of gaining greater access to the field and undertaking prolonged ethnographic enquiry, it has to be said that, for several decades, there has been more concern with adding to the country-specific knowledge of such a large and diverse society than to generating theory or addressing the discipline. There is certainly a growing number of anthropologists of China who now think that previous ethnographies have utilised constructs derived from other regions in the discipline and therefore remained marginal to mainstream theoretical debates in the discipline (Sangren 2004).² Despite the twin goals of the discipline to simultaneously understand or interpret the local and advance theoretical understanding of culture and society, the balance between the ethnographic and the theoretical, place-specificity and the comparative, the familiar and the different and between local and universal constructs has been somewhat precarious. At the present time, the interest in the critical production of and redefinition of social and cultural theory among anthropologists of China is such that there is a recognisable loss of place-specificity and a tendency to retreat into the discipline which, in the context of post-modernism, globalisation and the transnational, is itself merging into cultural and other studies.

In turn, the present bias towards the theoretical has given rise to a counter concern that the ethnographic base of such studies and ethnographic description itself has become thinner than it might be with fewer in-depth field studies of the type necessary for the understanding of the local or everyday practice and perception in different regions of China (Greenhalgh 2004, Pieke 2004, Ruf 2004, Watson 2004, Weller 2004, Yan 2004). There are those who suggest that the local itself has become so decontextualised or 'displaced' that the discipline is in danger of inventing a China located somewhere between some local knowledge and universal category or construct which for the most part ultimately derives from categories constructed in and for the study of Western societies (Brownell 2004, Greenhalgh 2004, Kim 2004, Pieke 2004, Li 2004). Instead they argue for longitudinal in-depth fieldwork or the study of the local in relation to the regional and global in ways that simultaneously increase knowledge about China and advance theoretical understanding of social and cultural change (Kim 2004, Weller 2004, Yan 2004). In the meantime, the privileging of the production of social

² My own interviews with a small sample of anthropologists/sociologists of China drawn from several different continents suggests concern with this challenge.

and critical theory over ethnography has also affected the third element of the anthropological trinity or the representations of the other in monograph writing.

Writing Culture

Some years ago, post-modernist and critical theory sensitised the discipline to the relations of power implicit in the ethnographic encounter and the production of knowledge about 'the other'. For several decades, a predominant theme within the discipline was concerned with the process of 'othering' and of writing culture and in this mode of reflexivity, there was a greater awareness or consciousness about the role of the anthropologist in the invention of and/or representation of the other (Carrier 1995, Clifford 1988, Cohen 1994, Said 1978). What is apparent in the anthropology of China too is that the preoccupation with rethinking the role of the ethnographer and author has shifted to resiting the audience with the predominant question becoming not so much 'of whom do we speak?' as 'to whom do we speak?' Not surprisingly, given current debates about place-specificity and disciplinary contribution, there is some difference in purpose between those whose first aim is to mainstream China anthropology by contributing to anthropological theory and writing for a disciplinary audience and those whose primary aim is to utilise anthropological methodology, theory and concepts to explore everyday practices and perceptions in order to arrive at a greater understanding of China's culture and society for a wider audience than the discipline. In mediating this split, it does have to be said that it is the ethnographic detail of practices, perceptions and processes that are the distinctive hallmark of the discipline and crucial for understanding the rapid changes that are taking place in China today and that never has this knowledge been in greater demand or deserving of greater attention both within and outside of China.

Outside of China, knowledge of that society is of increasing relevance now that there are new fears of a globalised and globalising China as it soaks up commodities, floods markets with made-in-China goods and attains super-power status. Inside of China, there is less of a split given the increasing demand for new social institutions to substitute for the state and the work-unit and new social policies to reduce social disparities, achieve 'all-round' social development and maintain social stability. In all these tasks it is the fieldwork of the country's own sociologists/anthropologists that equips them to make a growing contribution to such national policies. Indeed the contributions of both China's own and

foreign anthropologists/sociologists are appreciated increasingly by both analyst and policy-maker: they are more likely to have a holistic approach borne of this most multi-disciplinary of disciplines, to be informed by theories that have a firm footing in the local and ethnographic and to be experienced in both long- or short-term and single- or multi-sited field work while writing and representing 'the other' is part of the disciplinary agenda. In a cross-cultural discipline that customarily questions or eschews categories and abstract theories, it should be possible to avoid splitting theory from ethnography and place-specificity from universal construct and instead combine the customary advantages of our discipline with writing accessibly for a wide variety of audiences or face many ways. Facing many ways is perhaps the foundation stone of anthropology/sociology and unless we do so with confidence or vigour and – most importantly – take others with us, then we may well be writing the epitaph of the wonderfully insightful and relevant discipline that is anthropology/sociology.

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