



**Refusing to Inherit “China”: The Troubled Histories and Continuities of an
Anthropological Object**

Megan Steffen, Ph.D.

When reading the field known as the anthropology of China in English, the past is not necessarily a foreign country, but it often takes place in a *different* country. In a 2001 *Annual Review* article on the anthropology of China, Stevan Harrell makes an historical argument about the state of the field and argues that “the opening up of China’s societies and communities” in 1978 corresponds to an opening in anthropology as a discipline in general.¹ Of course, not *every* Chinese-speaking society and community opened up in 1978. In a footnote on the first page, Harrell clarifies that he uses “‘China’ to refer to the People’s Republic of China. Taiwan is called Taiwan and Hong Kong is called Hong Kong.”² This strikes me as exceedingly sensible, and yet it begs the question: Why not jettison the source of confusion altogether? Why use the term “China” in anthropology at all?

Throughout this essay, I will—by closely analyzing a few revealing examples—show how the anthropology of the territories now referred to as the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan³ is plagued by past scholarship that uses the terms “China” and “Chinese” in confusing, less-than-

¹ Stevan Harrell, “The Anthropology of Reform and the Reform of Anthropology: Anthropological Narratives of Recovery and Progress in China” in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 30 (2001): 139.

² Ibid.

³ The official name of the territory I refer to as Taiwan in this essay is the Republic of China, but—as I’ll argue—the implied continuity between that name and the island of Taiwan erases the history of the island itself.

sensible ways. While current anthropologists can do nothing to change the naming conventions of their predecessors, there is no reason anthropologists working in the PRC now need to identify their work as taking place in “China” as opposed to “the PRC” or, better yet, in a more specific place *within* the larger political entity known as the PRC. As it stands now, the field known as “the anthropology of China” runs the risk of completely erasing the work of ethnographers with field sites in Taiwan and Hong Kong from scholarly conversations the way Harrell’s *Annual Review* piece does when he admits he has to cut Taiwanese and Hong Kong cases out of his review because they don’t fit.

That ethnographic scholarship about these two Sinophone places wouldn’t fit into a larger narrative built around ethnographies of the PRC should come as no surprise, given the region’s history.⁴ In the 20th century, anthropologists who conducted research in the territory that would eventually become the People’s Republic of China (PRC) worked under several different colonial, imperial, republican, or communist regimes. After the founding of the PRC by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949, anthropologists trained in anglophone countries found themselves largely shut out of field sites and unable to conduct in-person fieldwork. Instead, anthropologists from the UK and USA went to British Hong Kong’s New Territories or to Kuomintang (KMT)-ruled Taiwan, respectively. These were places where—like Vincent S.R. Brandt in South Korea—anthropologists had experience or connections because of their home countries’ past and present military commitments.⁵ As Alex Jong-Seok Lee argues in the introduction to this issue, anglophone anthropologists working in East Asia after World War II

⁴ Throughout this essay, I use the term “Sinophone” to repudiate diasporic and imperial logics. See Shu-Mei Shih, “What is Sinophone Studies?” in *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, eds. Shu-Mei Shih, Chien-hsin Tsai, and Brian Bernards, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

⁵ Robert Oppenheim, “Historicizing Mid-Century American Anthropology of Korea: Vincent S.R. Brandt, Stereoscopically,” in this issue.

maintained a “relative silence” about the military conditions and alliances that shaped their production.⁶ The primary political considerations preventing ethnographers from working in the PRC are present only as subtext in these monographs produced between the 1950s and the 1980s; most research conducted in Sinophone places at the time identified itself as part of the “anthropology of China.” By closely reading ethnographic works that claim to be about “China” from the past hundred years,⁷ this article makes five main observations: 1) that in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and even some of the 1980s, anglophone anthropologists deliberately shaped their fieldwork in Hong Kong and Taiwan so that these places could stand in for a shared scholarly object called “China”; 2) that scholars who currently do fieldwork in the PRC often unquestioningly cite that body of work, which reifies “China” as a scholarly object; 3) that uncritically inheriting the anthropology of “China” plays into contemporary nationalist and imperialist political agendas; 4) that history, both as a discipline lurking at the edges of Chinese anthropology and as a series of chronological events experienced by a group of people, has been crucial in defining “China” for both people who study it and the people who think of themselves as Chinese; and 5) that in the PRC, the effects of historical events have created most of the continuities that justify the discipline’s assumption that “China” should be treated as a unified object and field of study. In other words, in the anthropology of “China,” history has often eclipsed culture.

Even now, anthropologists writing in English about the PRC lump past studies of Hong Kong and Taiwan into the anthropology of China. One recent monograph cites a handful of

⁶ Alex Jong-Seok Lee, “East Asian Savage: Untouched Orientalism and Imperial Anthropology, Introduction to the Special Issue: Anthropology and East Asia,” in this issue.

⁷ Although this essay follows the anthropology of “China” in English linearly through time, it does not attempt to cover all or even a very representative sample of ethnographies; instead, I have chosen works that I felt revealed something specific or dangerous about creating (or inheriting) “China” as an anthropological object.

ethnographies conducted in Taiwan in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s to describe what “debates on Chinese religion” focused on “[i]n the past.”⁸ The statement and its accompanying citations are true; anthropologists doing fieldwork in Taiwan *did* structure their English-language work around debates about “Chinese religion.” Inheriting these works at their word erases the political implications of calling studies of religious practices on the island of Taiwan representative of China just a decade after Japanese researchers—in the same place, but under a *Japanese* colonial administration—described the island on which they took place, along with Korea, Manchuria, and other occupied territories, as part of Japan.⁹ To mitigate this troubled inheritance, I argue that anthropologists working in the PRC today should stop treating past work done in Hong Kong and Taiwan as historical predecessors and instead think of them as comparative studies. In other words, rather than participating in a compulsory citational practice drawing a straight line from work done in the territory that would become the PRC before 1949 to work done in Hong Kong and Taiwan during the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, as well as to work done in the contemporary PRC post-1978, anthropologists should instead think of the anthropology of China’s past as work done in another country, if only because much of the field’s past research was indeed conducted in other countries.

⁸ Emily Ng, *A Time of Lost Gods: Mediumship, Madness, and the Ghost after Mao* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2020), 69 N13. NB: I chose this manuscript because it was the newest monograph on the PRC I happened to have on hand. This connection between historical work in Taiwan and the contemporary PRC is sometimes a relic of general exams that demand students master a field and its history, so many first ethnographic monographs set in the PRC include citations similar to this one, especially if they touch on kinship, religion, or ritual.

⁹ Sonia Ryang, “Toward a New Anthropology of Japan: A National Frame of Study and Its Potential Use in the Study of Japan as Biopower—with the Focus on the Figure of the Korean,” in this issue.

This is not to suggest that, until now, “China” has been an uncontested category.¹⁰ My arguments are particularly indebted to Rey Chow’s repudiation of Chinese nationalism in Hong Kong in *Writing Diaspora*¹¹ and to Keelung Hong and Stephen Murray’s *Looking through Taiwan*, the latter work arguing that the appropriation of Taiwanese ethnographic material for the anthropology of “China” “naturalize[s] Chinese rule [of Taiwan]...and is actually more political than any recognition of an autonomous ‘Taiwanese’ culture.”¹² In many ways, the works that I analyze here are consequences of a larger trend in postwar historical studies of China, where the rise of North American nation-states at the same time that “culture became an object of intellectual contemplation” allowed scholars to naturalize and define China as an eternal, unified object.¹³ In a 2014 *Annual Review* piece on the anthropology of China, Frank N. Pieke summarizes the work of his predecessors in Taiwan and Hong Kong as trying “to distill the essence of unspoiled Chinese culture.”¹⁴ This is a broad, but historically accurate summary of many scholars’ intentions, but what anthropologists who want to study “China” need to do now is qualify that literature and distinguish their work from it rather than unquestionably inheriting it.

Creating the Chinese Nation: Anthropology before the Communist Revolution

The idea of eliminating the word “China” from scholarly work could be seen as revisionist, but I prefer to see it as retro: a return to a forgotten trend. In a 1928 book titled *The*

¹⁰ See, for example, Allen Chun, “Fuck Chinese Chineseness: On the Ambiguities of Ethnicity as Culture as Identity,” *boundary 2*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (1996).

¹¹ Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993).

¹² Keelung Hong and Stephen O. Murray, *Looking through Taiwan: American Anthropologists' Collusion with Ethnic Domination* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008): 7-8.

¹³ Judith B. Farquhar and James L. Hevia, “Culture and Postwar American Historiography of China,” *positions*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1993): 486.

¹⁴ Frank N. Pieke, “Anthropology, China, and the Chinese Century,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 43 (2014): 125.

Formation of the Chinese People, Li Ji, one of the first Chinese practitioners of modern archaeology, interrogates the idea of a homogeneous, territorially bounded Chinese race.

Examining the claim of a scholar who uses a reconstruction of ancient China's borders to find the location of the "Chinese race," Li astutely asks,

are *all* the inhabitants who to-day live between 20° and 40° north latitude and 100° and 121° east longitude the descendants of those who occupied the territory between 33° and 38° north latitude and 106° and 119° east longitude twenty-six hundred years ago?¹⁵

Li thinks not, and, rather than relying on the conflation of modern political borders with primordial racial ones to find the Chinese people, he turns to ethnographic traits. He calls the (implicitly Han) majority the "We-group" in reference to the thousands of years of historical records that consistently define the We-group against their historical others—the "You-group."¹⁶ The We-group is associated "with the making of Chinese history from the beginning," its members claiming to be "Descendants of the Yellow Emperor," a category Li admits is mythical and yet still "ethnologically...significant."¹⁷

Li has done something terribly clever by *removing the word China* from his analysis. It's a rhetorical move that allows him to communicate the complexity of a place that could plausibly be bounded, but which in fact provides an "anthropological problem...comparable in magnitude to that of Europe," an entire continent.¹⁸ It also gives him the freedom to speculate about the past without confronting the politics of the contemporary. Nevertheless, Li's decision to include both the We-group and the You-group in the category of people who do and have lived in the territory he calls "China" is not completely apolitical. It echoes his contemporary Sun Yatsen's idea of a

¹⁵ Li, *Formation of the Chinese People*, 4.

¹⁶ Li, *Formation of the Chinese People*, 5-7.

¹⁷ Li, *Formation of the Chinese People*, 7, 126.

¹⁸ Li, *Formation of the Chinese People*, 56.

Chinese nation that, through its nationalism, would manage to unite what he then imagined to be the nation's five major ethnicities: the majority Han, the Mongolians, the Tibetans, the Manchurians, and the Muslims. The primordial You-group could also include the fifty-five ethnic minority groups recognized by today's PRC government. Li's formulation of a You-group is flexible, almost as if he anticipated the taxonomic changes driven by minority studies that would accompany the next few decades' regime changes.¹⁹ Ironically, it's the We-group, the Descendants of the Yellow Emperor, of which Li may have considered himself a part, whose racial and ethnographic identities seem monolithic and overdetermined despite remaining only implicitly Han in Li's analysis.

Li's attachment to the long history of the We-group (and implicitly to the long history of China and the Chinese people) is essential to what would eventually become the anthropology of China. History, as a unifying narrative, is the factor that undoes and remakes anthropological ideas *about* China as well as anthropological access *to* China for the next eighty years. Take, for instance, Francis L. K. Hsu's classic ethnography, *Under the Ancestors' Shadow*. Hsu's book was first published in 1948, three years after the Japanese unconditionally surrendered to the United States and just one year before the Chinese Communist Party won the civil war and forced the KMT to flee to Taiwan. In 1971, when the PRC was in the midst of the Cultural Revolution and Hsu himself was unable to visit the country again, a second edition was published. In the added preface, Hsu grapples with a new question: "How could a people with such an ancient tradition of attachment to family and kin so quickly turn Communist?"²⁰

Confronted with a changing society he cannot see, Hsu can only speculate about the lives of the

¹⁹ Ping Song, "Anthropology in China Today" in *Asian Anthropology* vol. 16, issue 3 (2017): 228-241.

²⁰ Francis L. K. Hsu, *Under the Ancestors' Shadow: Chinese Culture and Personality*, Second Edition (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1971 [1948]), v.

people he studied thirty years before and assert that the Chinese must have changed. Indeed, he writes that, since the Opium Wars in the 19th century, “For all Chinese it was not a question of change or no change, but one of how much change.”²¹ Here “all Chinese” are united by the shared experience of defeat, reform, change, and finally revolution—in other words, a shared historical narrative of events unites “all Chinese” as they exist today.

One could argue that, by drawing the unifying historical narrative back into the Qing Dynasty, Hsu has included himself under the bracket of “all Chinese.” Although Hsu spent the majority of his career in the United States and even served as the president of the American Anthropological Association in 1978, Hsu’s ties to a pre-Communist China are apparent. The proper text of *Under the Ancestors’ Shadow* opens with an anecdote from Hsu’s childhood in Manchuria; however, this conversation revealing “Chinese” cultural conventions occurred at a time when this territory would technically have been under *Japanese* control.²² Nevertheless, the fact that the culture he’s studying is “Chinese” is a given for Hsu. Before even explaining what he means by “Chinese,” he implies that there are many Chinese cultures, and that this work “is an attempt to determine the effects of *a* Chinese culture on the personality—not the effects of the personality on culture.”²³ At the time of the book’s writing, Hsu must have thought his work’s major contribution would be to personality theory debates, rather than as one of the last examples of ethnography of a country that would, only a year later, be closed to researchers based in the United States.

Hsu does spend a substantial amount of effort investigating, as Li did, the validity of his interlocutors’ claims to be of “Chinese” origin. His field site, West Town, is located in “one of

²¹ Hsu, *Under the Ancestors’ Shadow*, vi.

²² Hsu, *Under the Ancestors’ Shadow*, 1.

²³ Hsu, *Under the Ancestors’ Shadow*, 13-14, emphasis mine.

the Min Chia colonies in Yunnan,” and yet all “have legends about the migration of their ancestors from some central provinces into Yunnan.”²⁴ Despite West Town’s marginal location, Hsu ultimately defends and *quantifies* his interlocutors’ insistence that they are Chinese by making an incredibly long list of typically Chinese customs they observe that even those “elsewhere in China” do not bother with anymore: “These and many other things show that West Towners not only are Chinese in culture but also tend to insist that they are more Chinese in some respects than the Chinese in many other parts of China.”²⁵ Throughout his ethnography, Hsu constantly works West Town, a kind of China Minor, against the ideal type of Chinese culture, or China Major. Always, the reader must keep in mind that, no matter how things happen “elsewhere in China,” she must be prepared to accept that they are “[n]ot so in West Town.”²⁶ While one can get a clear idea of what West Town is like from Hsu’s concrete ethnographic observations, the rest of China, the China Major to West Town’s China Minor, remains weirdly opaque, defined only in negative terms, by how it differs from West Town. Hsu even admits that his “knowledge of the [rest of the country] is limited,”²⁷ but this does not prevent him from using “China” as an ideal type to define West Town in the same way that Li uses the You-group as the backdrop against which to examine the We-group.

Peering in from the Periphery: Anthropology in Hong Kong’s New Territories before 1978

Hsu’s 1948 effort represents one of the last times a scholar working out of a U.S.-based university *could* unreflectively assume a unified, Chinese object. For Anglophone researchers, studying Chinese culture only became more difficult after the success of the 1949 revolution and the establishment of two separate republics: the CCP-led People’s Republic of China (PRC) and

²⁴ Hsu, *Under the Ancestors’ Shadow*, 17.

²⁵ Hsu, *Under the Ancestors’ Shadow*, 19.

²⁶ Hsu, *Under the Ancestors’ Shadow*, 29.

²⁷ Hsu, *Under the Ancestors’ Shadow*, 285.

the KMT-led Republic of China on Taiwan (ROC). Further complicating matters was the existence of Hong Kong and the New Territories, which had been ceded to British colonial authorities in the mid-1800s as part of the Qing Dynasty's concessions after the defeats of the Opium Wars. In spite of this, many scholars continued to imagine "China" as a single cultural entity. As Erik Mueggler observes in the introduction to his 2001 ethnography, *The Age of Wild Ghosts*:

Historians and anthropologists have long imagined China to form a cultural whole. The classic anthropology of China, which has taught us most of what we know about "Chinese culture," made this a founding principle. To study any village, no matter how peripheral—and most were in the far peripheries of Taiwan and Hong Kong's New Territories—was to investigate a culture common to the Chinese people. For anthropologists, this common cultural core was first captured in the conceptual triune of Chinese lineage, Chinese household, and Chinese family, brilliantly described by Maurice Freedman (1958, 1966)...the idea of a common cultural core has continued to infuse much anthropology of China, sometimes as a foil against which to bring out local differences, sometimes as a resource to fill in gaps in analysis.²⁸

The books Mueggler references above are *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China*, written by Freedman in 1958, and its 1966 follow-up, *Chinese Lineage and Society*. A return to these texts shows that while Mueggler may be right about the rest of the field, Freedman shows an uncommon awareness of his own position in relation to the concept of "China." *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China*, which is a sociological analysis of historical materials, begins with an apology and a wish that "political and academic circumstances" had allowed him

²⁸ Erik Mueggler, *The Age of Wild Ghosts: Memory, Violence, and Place in Southwest China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 18.

to go to China.²⁹ “My wording here is deliberately cautious,” Freedman explains, “because I do not wish to associate myself with those who assume that at some time in the past all parts of China displayed the wide-ranging localized lineage which is now peculiar only to certain areas.”³⁰ Freedman is a careful scholar, painfully aware of his limitations and more rigorous because of them.

In the 1966 *Chinese Lineage and Society*, Freedman is able to draw upon fieldwork he’s done in Hong Kong’s New Territories. Though he’s quick to assure the reader that “this book is no more conclusive than its predecessor,” he’s more confident than before, having “established from the evidence of my own eyes what, in timorous moments, I had earlier feared might be the product of a too enthusiastic imagination.”³¹ Barred from entering the PRC, Anglophone scholars continued to follow Freedman into the New Territories throughout the 1960s. In *A Chinese Lineage Village*, Hugh Baker reports that he chose his field site because of a tip he got from Freedman.³² Here, as in Freedman’s work, there is some slippage between the “Chinese” in the book’s title and the text’s actual location in the New Territories. Baker admits, initially, that the original title of the dissertation that led to the book was *A Lineage Village in the New Territories of Hong Kong*, but then spends the remaining pages trying to strip away the factors that make Sheung Shui distinct from the rest of the politically unwelcoming territory just miles away from it. For example, he asserts, “The area is occupied by two groups of peoples, discounting the many non-indigenous groups which have come in during the last twenty years;”

²⁹ Maurice Freedman, *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China* (London: University of London, 1958), v.

³⁰ Freedman, *Lineage Organization*, 1.

³¹ Maurice Freedman, *Chinese Lineage and Society: Fukien and Kwangtung* (London: Althone, 1966), v.

³² Hugh Baker, *A Chinese Lineage Village: Sheung Shui* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1968), vii.

however, it becomes clear that these non-indigenous groups (both merchants *and* refugees) have been many in number and significant in their influence.³³ Baker is also visibly reluctant to admit that the lineage he sees in 1963 might have changed, calling any changes “from the return from evacuation in 1669 until the leasing of the New Territories in 1898” as occurring “in degree rather than in kind.”³⁴

Despite Baker’s discomfort, he’s an excellent ethnographer, as evidenced by the details he records that allude to the historical transformations taking place just across the border. He chronicles the impact that political upheaval in the PRC had on the New Territories, which absorbed waves of political refugees,³⁵ and notes with some consternation how Sheung Shui’s natural market town should be, according to the geographical model, Sham Chun, a town on the PRC side of the border, but that “political instability in China turned the New Territories increasingly towards Hong Kong.”³⁶ The spectre of contemporary Communist China haunts Baker’s ethnography even as he attempts to resurrect the ghost of Imperial China’s past.

Freedman and Baker’s preoccupation with using the New Territories of the 1960s as a window into the China of the 1760s is characteristic of a certain kind of sinology that hoped to reconstruct the texture of Chinese history through ethnographic analogy. Not knowing what the PRC was like meant that the only way to make work in the New Territories relevant to the sinological projects that had preceded it was to connect that particular present to an Imperial past that had to be salvaged through ethnographic fieldwork. This was a risky strategy, though. “It is possible that Chinese rural society will soon have changed beyond recognition,” Freedman

³³ Baker, *A Chinese Lineage Village*, 2.

³⁴ Baker, *A Chinese Lineage Village*, 204.

³⁵ Baker, *A Chinese Lineage Village*, 36-38.

³⁶ Baker, *A Chinese Lineage Village*, 7.

writes with trepidation.³⁷ It was more than possible; it was already happening. Because foreign scholars were no longer permitted to enter the PRC and Chinese scholars were no longer encouraged or allowed to go abroad,³⁸ the English-speaking scholarly community remained in the dark about developments in the People's Republic (with a few notable exceptions.)³⁹

Another China: Anthropology in Taiwan before and even after 1978

This ignorance also applied to scholars working in the other republic: the ROC or Taiwan. It's worth mentioning that Freedman, Baker, and the majority of the other anthropologists working out of the New Territories, which remained under British control, came from universities in the United Kingdom; similarly, most of the anthropological voices studying Taiwan were those of scholars trained by universities in the United States. For a certain generation, Taiwan was as close to "China" as U.S. citizens could get, and, as Hong and Murray argue, they were especially welcomed by a KMT government that wanted to "demonstrate that there was a 'free China,' in contrast to the larger, but closed, Maoist China."⁴⁰ Taiwan was also the keeper of many material relics of China's Imperial past, which was still accessible to foreign scholars within the Academia Sinica archives and National Palace Museum.⁴¹

Before the PRC's Reform and Opening Up in 1978, U.S.-based scholars were deeply invested and embedded in Taiwan. In 1958, Arthur Wolf set out to the ROC with a team of researchers and the ambition to expand upon the Six Cultures Study of child development; the village families they studied in the Taiwan Basin were to stand metonymically for the Chinese

³⁷ Freedman, *Lineage Organization*, v.

³⁸ Gregory Eliyu Guildin, *Saga of Anthropology in China: from Malinowski to Moscow to Mao* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1994), 81-182.

³⁹ C. K. Yang, *Chinese Communist Society: The Family and the Village* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1965).

⁴⁰ Hong and Murray, *Looking through Taiwan*, 58.

⁴¹ For more on how Taiwan was explicitly *not* seen as "Chinese" before the KMT arrived, see Hong and Murray, *Looking through Taiwan*, especially Chapter 7.

case. As often happens, however, things did not go exactly as planned, and the most interesting work with the longest-lasting implications for the field was not Arthur Wolf's, but that of his wife, Margery. Margery Wolf did not go to graduate school, but, as the team's typist, she had access to the entire team's fieldnotes and a wonderful eye for ethnographic detail. In 1968, she published *The House of Lim*, a novelistic rendering of the family she and Arthur had lived with in Taiwan, and in 1972, she published *Women and the family in rural Taiwan*, a more conventional academic text about the same fieldwork. Both books were revisionist; as Margery Wolf writes, the Chinese family had been studied by men who had found it male-dominated and male-centered, but with a focus on Chinese women, "the 'reality' of Chinese social life looks different."⁴² Wolf argues that Taiwan is "just as Chinese as Peking is," where differences in custom are analogous to differences between Peking and Shanghai or Peking and "small villages."⁴³ Though Hong and Murray fiercely criticize Wolf and her then-husband,⁴⁴ Wolf at least seems aware that declaring Taiwan "Chinese" is fraught politically: "My insistence on the Chineseness of the Taiwanese should in no way be construed as a political statement. The question of who rules Taiwan is a matter that should be decided by those who live there."⁴⁵ And yet, as Wolf must have known, calling Taiwan "Chinese" was a political statement; less than thirty years before, the island had been under *Japanese* colonial rule. Aligning Taiwan with "Chineseness" was tantamount to aligning it with both with the KMT and with the last time it had been under "Chinese" rule: The Qing Dynasty.

⁴² Margery Wolf, *Women and the family in rural Taiwan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), viii.

⁴³ Wolf, *Women and the family*, viii-ix.

⁴⁴ Hong and Murray, *Looking through Taiwan*, 50-51.

⁴⁵ Wolf, *Women and the family*, ix.

Even after the PRC's Reform and Opening Up, anthropologists working in Taiwan were more concerned with the relevance of their own work to the field of Chinese history than they were with the effects that relevance could have on the people they studied. Consider, for instance, P. Stephen Sangren's 1987 book, *History and Magical Power in a Chinese Community*. Like Wolf, he downplays the influence of fifty years of Japanese colonization on Taiwan's "Chineseness"; also like Wolf, he argues "that the people of Ta-ch'i," his field site in Taiwan, "are every bit as Chinese as those living in *the imperial capital*."⁴⁶ Unlike Wolf, he seems to have missed the memo that explained that while Beijing (or Peking in Wade-Giles) was the capital of the PRC in 1987, it was *not* an "imperial" capital, but a Communist one. Even at the time of Sangren's writing, *there was no imperial capital*, and there had not been one since before 1911. Sangren's slip might seem to someone like Chow as symptomatic of the state of sinology in the 1980s, a manifestation of "the anxiety that the Chinese past which he has undertaken to penetrate is evaporating and that the sinologist himself is the abandoned subject."⁴⁷ (I do not know Sangren; I would not feel comfortable diagnosing him this way.)

Nevertheless, I do think one can come to understand Sangren's tendency to collapse the present into the past if one considers the fact that he is trying to serve two disciplines: history and anthropology. From the outset, Sangren splits his audience into two camps: "first, experts in the study of Chinese institutions and, second, scholars concerned with general problems of relating institutions and culture in complex civilizations," that is, sinologists and social scientists, respectively.⁴⁸ He attempts to direct them to the sections that will interest them before the book

⁴⁶ P. Stephen Sangren, *History and Magical Power in a Chinese Community* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 11, emphasis mine.

⁴⁷ Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, 4.

⁴⁸ Sangren, *History and Magical Power*, v.

has even begun properly. Sangren warns that anthropologists will likely reject his structuralist assumption “that at some level Chinese culture is holistic.”⁴⁹ For someone who purports to want anthropologists (or at least people “concerned with general problems of relating institutions and culture in complex civilizations”) to read his work, this passage anticipating and then disregarding their concerns strikes me as recklessly defiant. If, however, one reads Sangren’s introduction not as that of an anthropologist but as that of an ambitious historian attempting to *revise* that field’s dominant narrative, it seems savvier. Adopting a rhetorical strategy similar to that of archaeologists, Sangren makes many of his arguments *about* historical issues by using his field site as a metonym not just for a territorially and culturally unified “China,” but for a *temporally* unified China. In fact, he seems to have chosen his field site because it “preserves a reputation for conservatism and a traditional Chinese character.”⁵⁰ And indeed this “traditional Chinese character,” embodied by “the ornate silhouettes of two temples” and “a large statue of the deity Kuan Yin,” is the real object of his study. It’s the ethnographic remnants of China’s imperial past that must be salvaged and documented—not Taiwan, which is incidental.⁵¹

Which is not to say that one learns nothing about Taiwan in the late 1970s from Sangren. As with Baker, Sangren’s ethnographic details often work to undermine the integrity of his theoretical stance. It turns out that Ta-ch’i’s conservative, traditional “Chineseness” has been manufactured for reasons that are intimately connected to contemporary, peculiarly *Taiwanese* politics. Ta-ch’i’s preservation is no historical accident, but the result of “the deceased president and deified national hero, Chiang K’ai-shek” finding the scenery reminiscent of his hometown. Sangren reports that the former president was “a frequent visitor to his three villas in the area.

⁴⁹ Sangren, *History and Magical Power*, 1.

⁵⁰ Sangren, *History and Magical Power*, 24.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Chiang's remains are interred a few miles east of the town at Tz'u-hu, his favorite villa and the object today of a ceaseless stream of pilgrims, who come to pay homage to his memory."⁵²

Later, Sangren writes:

The potential of Ma Tsu pilgrimages to constitute a Taiwanese identity that excludes mainlanders has been cause for considerable ambivalence in the government's view of the cult. Recently, however, high government officials have visited famous Ma Tsu temples with increasing frequency...Moreover, Chiang's temporary mausoleum near Ta-ch'i, has become the object of a large-scale pilgrimage, as noted in Part I. The attempt of course, is to make Chiang the focus of a cult that will encompass both mainlanders and Taiwanese.⁵³

Acknowledging the desire of officials to co-opt the Ma Tsu cult into Chiang's state-sanctioned cult to unite "mainlander" and "Taiwanese" pilgrims is the closest Sangren gets to telling his reader that Taiwan's internal conflicts were such that the island was under martial law during the entirety of his field work. Wolf gets closer by explicitly mentioning "the brutal mass murders of Taiwanese leaders and potential leaders after the 1947 rebellion," but she believes the conflict between the KMT and those they rule is basically settled: "After twenty years some of the wounds inflicted in this bitter period (by both sides) have healed, but the scars are almost as painful and certainly as apparent as the original wounds."⁵⁴

Wolf may have mistaken a festering wound for a scar. The KMT governed Taiwan with martial law for thirty-eight years and fifty-seven days. At the time it was lifted in 1987 (the year Sangren's book was published), it was the longest period of martial law ever recorded in modern

⁵² Sangren, *History and Magical Power*, 23.

⁵³ Sangren, *History and Magical Power*, 91-92. The terms "mainland" and "mainlanders" are emblematic of the very idea of a unified "China" that I'm critiquing in this essay.

⁵⁴ Wolf, *Women and the Family*, 6.

history. How could these ethnographers not record what, in retrospect, must have been a crucial part of Taiwan's circumstances at that particular moment? Was it simply because anthropologists at that time didn't go to the field to look for violence and domination?⁵⁵

Wolf's resistance to finding violence and domination a suitable object for study is complicated by her later fieldwork in the PRC. In "Chinanotes: Engendering Anthropology," a chapter she contributed to Roger Sanjek's 1990 *Fieldnotes: The Making of Anthropology*, Wolf compares her research experience in Taiwan with a research trip she took later to the PRC in 1980, just after it opened to foreign scholars. In contrast to the field notes from Taiwan, which she looks back upon fondly, but admits to having perhaps used a little bit too freely (the Lims of *The House of Lim* are barely disguised), the notes from the PRC are "an even heavier burden."⁵⁶ She continues: "It is unfortunate but true that in China one can still suffer serious damage for the expression of an unpopular opinion, no matter how innocent that opinion may seem to the unwary outsider."⁵⁷ In 1992, Wolf revises her story somewhat; she writes that she and her then-husband assigned numbers to each person "to provide some protection to our informants should our notes be confiscated, a very real possibility in that period of Taiwan's history."⁵⁸ Never, however, does she state explicitly in either case what her interlocutors needed to be protected

⁵⁵ Even Clifford Geertz and Franz Boas were criticized for the lack of contemporary politics in their writings; the former for his tendency to resist political activism in an effort to maintain the "boundaries between science as a vocation and politics as a vocation" and the latter for his belief that the "polluted realm of political strife, emotions, social domination, economic exploitation" lay outside the purview of anthropology. See Paul Rabinow, "Humanism as Nihilism" in *The Accompaniment: Assembling the Contemporary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 7 and 33-34.

⁵⁶ Margery Wolf, "Chinanotes: Engendering Anthropology" in *Field Notes: the makings of anthropology*, ed. Roger Sanjek (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 352.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Margery Wolf, *A Thrice-told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism, & Ethnographic Responsibility* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 61.

from, though my guess would be that in the PRC case, she is relying on US-educated readers to infer that the answer is Communists.

In a 2003 interview for *American Anthropologist*, Wolf confesses that she “used to put Marxism and contemporary communism in the same barrel,” and thus “was willing to put up with a lot.”⁵⁹ The implication of this statement is that her work’s turn to feminism was spurred by her acceptance of Marxism as distinguishable from communism, say, as it is practiced in the PRC. I am not sure if I need to say that many of the victims of the White Terror in Taiwan were Communists or accused of being Communists; I am not sure if Wolf would have known that from her position as an American in the middle of the Cold War. I am not sure it occurred to her that the execution of a hundred thousand “Communists” by KMT soldiers under the watchful eye of the United States Seventh Fleet and the United States’ own McCarthy trials might not be entirely unrelated. I am willing to admit that *saying* Taiwan was under martial law for thirty-eight years is just stating a fact, without texture or context. I wasn’t there. I can’t, like Hong and Murray do, argue that the violence should have been obvious.⁶⁰ Scholars need to keep this question of how one perceives politics at the top of their minds. It’s reasonable to think that it might be easier to see political persecution in the land of your putative enemy and more difficult to see it when the persecutors are your hosts, friends, and comrades in a struggle that seems global and Manichean. Even when ideological divides between communist regimes and liberal democratic ones haven’t resulted in proxy wars throughout the world, anthropologists have struggled to acknowledge that their interlocutors are capable of committing harm.⁶¹ At least

⁵⁹ Lisa Rofel, “The Outsider Within: Margery Wolf and Feminist Anthropology” in *American Anthropologist*, vol. 105, no. 3 (2003): 600.

⁶⁰ Hong and Murray, *Looking through Taiwan*, especially Chapter 1.

⁶¹ Megan Steffen, “A Mystery in the Archives: The Historiography of Denial, Henrietta Schmerler’s Rape and Murder, and Anthropology’s Project of Prevention,” forthcoming in *American Anthropologist*.

some of the reluctance anthropologists working in the PRC now display when asked to publicly condemn the forced imprisonment and sterilization of Uighur people in Xinjiang Province may come from the same kind of denial.

Confronting the Culture of the Cultural Revolution: Fieldwork in the Post-Mao PRC

All of which is *not* to say that Wolf was wrong about the embodied vulnerability of her interlocutors in the PRC; on the contrary, other ethnographies from that same period of time only reinforce her interpretation of the political situation. Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang began her fieldwork in Beijing in 1982. In *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets*, she explains how, even as a foreigner, she began to feel fearful: “Had I been able to assess the situation with a cool head, I might have been able to resist the contagion of fear. After all, unlike my Chinese friends and acquaintances, I had a U.S. passport.”⁶² She did not keep a cool head; instead, she describes how, in a moment of panic, she rode her bike out to the edges of Beijing in the middle of the night and began burning compromising parts of her notes in a ditch until some worried bystanders explained that there was a mysterious compound nearby and her clearly suspicious behavior was likely to attract the attention of what were likely prison guards.⁶³ Yang explains throughout her book that the source of this “culture of fear” was past precedent; her interlocutors were still haunted by the recent events of the Cultural Revolution and the “deep sense that something had gone wrong with a revolution that most of them had enthusiastically and idealistically embraced.”⁶⁴ Even Wolf, with her previous insistence that “the general outlines of women’s lives are much the same all over China”⁶⁵ had to admit that the women she met once she got to the PRC were different; they

⁶² Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 22.

⁶³ Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets*, 23.

⁶⁴ Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets*, 33.

⁶⁵ Wolf, *Women and the Family*, 13.

were cagey, and the outlines of their lives were broken or twisted into canned answers and set narratives.⁶⁶ Thirty years of sudden and seemingly arbitrary top-down policy changes and constant revolution had left the PRC irrevocably transformed; this was a different “China” than the one Wolf and Sangren knew in Taiwan, different from the one explored by Freedman and Baker in the New Territories, different, even, from the one Hsu so confidently used as a foil for West Village before the 1949 revolution. And why wouldn’t it be? The PRC *is* a different country from all three of those examples, bounded by different longitudes and latitudes, ruled by an entirely different government.

Yang knows this better than most. “Born in Taiwan of mainland Chinese parents,” she writes,

I was already cognizant of the cultural importance of gift-giving and maintenance of personal relationships in various Chinese milieus...in mainland China, these practices are quite elaborated and intensified, with interesting new twists of political and economic dimensions.⁶⁷

Yang’s tentative claims to knowledge of Chinese cultural “milieus” are similar to Hsu’s. Like Hsu, Yang’s relationship to her fieldsite within the PRC is conditioned by her experience of a Chinese (or perhaps, a Sinophone) culture within the home. The gift-giving Yang sees in the PRC is different from what she experienced in Taiwan, which is why it stands out to her. In fact, she finds differences everywhere, and, her relationship to the PRC is complicated and unresolved, as demonstrated by a long passage in the introduction where she ejects herself into the third person and writes about “the ethnographer” as an object rather than subject.⁶⁸ Yang

⁶⁶ Margery Wolf, *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985), 33.

⁶⁷ Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets*, 2.

⁶⁸ Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets*, 30.

calls the PRC her “mother culture,” a powerful metaphor of fictive kinship; though Yang *knows* that she was not raised in the PRC, she still believes on some level that going to the field is also a “returning from exile.”⁶⁹ Yang does not necessarily accept her place within the fictive kinship of the Chinese nation, but there’s a sense that she would prefer to keep pretending national kinship is a lived fact, not fiction. She seems proud when relating an anecdote about being mistaken for a Chinese person pretending to be an overseas Chinese while wearing blue jeans, and her discomfort in the face of her interlocutors’ interpolation comes not from their misrecognition of her, but from her fear of “being unmasked,” that is, from her awareness that she might not have the resources to keep fooling them forever.⁷⁰

Yang is perfectly entitled to her ambivalence. Within the context of her ethnography, conducted under the watchful eyes of neighborhood committees, Yang had good reason to make full use of the mimetic possibilities her appearance provided to stay inconspicuous. She is painfully aware of the political and even moral implications of her impulses. She remains skeptical of the Chinese determinism and assumption of Chinese peculiarity and timelessness she sees in 1980s intellectuals, writing:

To ascribe to Chinese culture an intrinsic timeless nature, and to blame this nature for various inadequacies in the modern world, overlooks what a perspective sensitive to historical context would recognize: much of what can be critiqued in China today are modern forms of power and control found elsewhere in the world in other experiences of modernity.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets*, 20 and 26.

⁷¹ Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets*, 35.

While I'd tend to agree with Yang, many scholars have found that there is much to be gained from arguing that Chinese culture *does* have an intrinsic timeless nature: Sangren used such an argument to create an object with relevance to multiple disciplines, and the 1980s intellectuals Yang is responding to here used it to create a Chinese *nation*. This nation, as Chow points out in her work on Hong Kong, uses *ethnic* similarity as an argument for *political* unification, even outside the PRC.⁷² In the context of Hong Kong—at the time not governed by the National Security Law—“Chinese” is *not* a political status; it is, as Chow says, a myth of consanguinity calling out to its fictive children. Indeed, the state now uses consanguinity with PRC citizens as a rationale to prevent ethnically Chinese U.S. citizens from leaving the PRC.⁷³

One could argue that the tendency to make experiences in one place and period of time stand for an eternal national or cultural whole is a common epistemic flaw presented by many if not most ethnographic works; however, it is otherwise clear-eyed scholars' willful ignorance of how their work buttresses arguments for the political unification of Sinophone territories that makes the flaw particularly egregious in this case. The idea that “China” is a culturally unified territory that should be and always has been politically unified has been floating around written political discourse since the Zhou invented the Mandate of Heaven three thousand years ago to legitimize their territorial expansion.⁷⁴ I am drawing, momentarily, on ancient history, not because I too wish to assume a timeless and temporally unified China, but because in recent decades the government of the PRC has drawn *precisely* on these ancient historical legacies, real

⁷² Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, 24-25.

⁷³ Edward Wong and Michal Forsythe, “China’s Tactic to Catch a Fugitive Official: Hold His Two American Children” in the *New York Times*, November 25, 2018. Accessed August 16, 2020: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/25/us/politics/china-exit-ban.html>.

⁷⁴ Wang Haicheng, *Writing and the Ancient State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

or imagined, in order to justify its rule.⁷⁵ The PRC has, only forty years after Cultural Revolution campaigns encouraged the rejection and destruction of its ancient history, transformed its national narrative so that the very same ancient, historical legacy has become its main source of legitimacy. Remember that in Li's *The Formation of the Chinese People*, the main ethnographic trait of the primordial We-group was its "association with the making of Chinese history from the beginning."⁷⁶ How "Chinese" history is told is intimately connected to who is included or implicated in that narrative as national subject. These strategies of history-telling allow the unification of the Chinese nation in its current manifestation to appear eternal, timeless, and—crucially for places like Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan—inevitable, and ethnographic works that gloss all Sinophone places as "Chinese" fit perfectly into the master-narrative of reunification.

And yet, the differences between the PRC and other Sinophone places are obvious once one looks closely at the ethnographic record. In *Other Modernities*, Lisa Rofel writes openly about how her "foreign face" creates a distance between her and her interlocutors at a PRC silk factory in Hangzhou. Rofel confronts the impact of recent history in an encounter with a woman who shares her memory of being beaten while pregnant during the Cultural Revolution.⁷⁷ Rofel's categories—China, post-Mao, women—break down in the face of her actual interlocutors and their real experiences of violence until she finds "it almost impossible to generalize about the

⁷⁵ When the British transferred control of Hong Kong to the PRC on June 30, 1997, the PRC sent the Bianzhong of Marquis Yi of Zeng, a complete set of ancient bells made in 432 BC, to be played in celebration on Hong Kong soil. Since the Bianzhong are on the list of Chinese relics forbidden to be exhibited abroad, the political message was clear: as Hong Kong had returned to its cultural and primordial "home," so the bells could find themselves at home on the island's soil.

⁷⁶ Li, *The Formation of the Chinese People*, 7.

⁷⁷ Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in the Years After Socialism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 163.

effects of China's latest modernization program on 'women' as if they were a homogeneous group."⁷⁸ Instead of attempting to massage this impossibility into her pre-existing framework, Rofel runs with it and organizes the book the way her interlocutors organize themselves, into three sections representing three different generations or cohorts of women. Rofel traces the differences between these women back to their experience of "distinctive and dramatic political movements under socialism,"⁷⁹ a structure that shows the Maoist state's policies were so radical that experiencing the same policy at different stages of life could produce distinct worldviews. These lived narratives are not mutually unintelligible, but they do not scale to the level of the "nation" either. In other words, the experience of history has become the defining factor that shapes and creates a unified anthropological object of study; in the PRC, history trumps culture.

Unnatural Nation: the PRC as an Actual and Imagined Object

What I mean by this statement will become clear by considering an ethnography of a minority people living in the PRC: Mueggler's *The Age of Wild Ghosts*. The population of the rural community Mueggler studies in Zhizuo, Yunnan is not easily categorized as belonging to one of the PRC's fifty-five ethnic minorities, but it's clear they speak a different language than the majority Han, have different customs than the Han, are subject to different laws than the Han, and, crucially for Mueggler's purposes, adhere to a different religion than the Han.⁸⁰ In his introduction, Mueggler demonstrates how studying a "marginal" people marginalizes his own work within Chinese studies, reporting that one anthropologist commented: "It's all very interesting, but is it China?"⁸¹ Mueggler thinks his field site might "be seen as just one more locale in the vast and diverse landscape of rural China, neither typical nor unique, neither

⁷⁸ Rofel, *Other Modernities*, 7.

⁷⁹ Rofel, *Other Modernities*, 21.

⁸⁰ Mueggler, *The Age of Wild Ghosts*, 14.

⁸¹ Mueggler, *The Age of Wild Ghosts*, 18.

marginal nor central.”⁸² On the other hand, the people of Zhizuo’s presumed difference from the rest of “China” has forced Mueggler “to search for other means to show how this local terrain articulates itself with the whole that ‘China’ is imagined to be.”⁸³ And in the end, it’s Mueggler’s interlocutors themselves who articulate their place within an imagined China, drawing on memories of real experiences. The rituals Mueggler studies are placed in relation to a past that is defined according to the historical policies of the Maoist state. Guided by the ritual’s song, ghosts make their way through the outline of the national map until they reach their final destination in Beijing, where the ritualist begins to sing in Mandarin so the state’s ghosts might better understand him:

[Beijing] was the home of the most powerful of ghost officials, associated with uncounted violent deaths—the leaders of the Cultural Revolution. Li Wenyi’s version named Lin Biao, who died in 1971 when his airplane crashed after an abortive attempt on Mao’s life, as the king of wild ghosts and Jiang Qing, Mao’s wife and a member of the Cultural Revolution’s “Gang of Four,” as their queen.⁸⁴

The presence of the ghosts of Chinese officials should not be read as the “sinicization” of the people of Zhizuo in the same way that the appearance of persecuted lamas is not interpreted by Manduhai Buyandelger as the Russianization of Buryat shamanism.⁸⁵ The problems addressed by the ritualist are not “Chinese” problems, but personal ones: a girl has been possessed by the voice of a baby demanding retribution for her grandfather. As Mueggler explains,

⁸² Mueggler, *The Age of Wild Ghosts*, 20.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Mueggler, *The Age of Wild Ghosts*, 235.

⁸⁵ Manduhai Buyandelger, “Dealing with uncertainty: Shamans, marginal capitalism, and the remaking of history in postsocialist Mongolia” in *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (2007): 127-147.

Her affliction drew mystery and fearsome potential from far away in time, in her grandfather's suicide during the Cultural Revolution. Where might the responsibility for that death be traced? To Lin Biao, Jiang Qing, and the Maoist policies of chaos they had fomented? Or to the kin and neighbors who had tormented the former official, avenging famine deaths? ...The voice of a baby speaking through her mouth had made present both a troubled history of violence welling up from national centers and more intimate personal histories of losses and transitions. The ritualist's voice was intended to unwind these histories on a long journey through a double landscape: intimate and distant, lived and imagined.⁸⁶

The Cultural Revolution, as a name for a cluster of historical events, belongs neither to Li's implicitly Han We-group nor to the minority's You-group. Instead, it is a distinctly *PRC* experience, linking the people Mueggler studies in Zhizuo to these historical heads of state through mutual complicity and bewilderment. The rituals Mueggler studies trace the peculiar attempts of a particular people to rewrite their traumatic memories of the past into a history they can live with; in many ways, however, this process of remembering and rewriting is not peculiar to Zhizuo at all but is part of a *national* project as the whole of the PRC struggles to find new ways to live with each other in the wake of past and ongoing state violence.

Here, the Cultural Revolution, an historical experience staged by the state but experienced broadly by its people, gives phenomenological ground to the imaginary Chinese nation. As a result of the Maoist state's sovereignty over its citizens, what Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* called the "deep, horizontal comradeship" between citizens who never met, became a deep, horizontal comradeship *experienced by* all citizens as those within the

⁸⁶ Mueggler, *The Age of Wild Ghosts*, 236-237.

PRC's territorial limits became subject to (or agents of) the often-violent policies of the state.⁸⁷ This support from personal experience creates a problem for the nation, which must not be seen as contingent and historical but as natural and *timeless*. Even as it manages to unify, in cultural practice and personal experience, Rofel's confessional interlocutors in Hangzhou, Yang's fearful interlocutors in Beijing, and Mueggler's haunted interlocutors in Zhizuo, this new Chinese nation also excludes. It excludes those like Yang, who have a claim to Chinese culture but have not shared in the distinctly PRC experience of being subjected to the Maoist state, or those like Chow, who as a Hong Kong citizen can only claim secondhand knowledge of the trauma, which is why Chow refers to attempts to convince Hong Kongers of their kinship with the Chinese nation as "illusory" and "manipulative."⁸⁸ While there is an actual, historical experience uniting the people living within the PRC as it exists now, this very experience undermines the imagined community of a Chinese nation that has ambitions to include Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and even "overseas Chinese" people living as far away as the United States.

It seems to be impossible for anthropologists studying people in the PRC to avoid encountering the Chinese nation as an object since, as both Mueggler and Rofel's ethnographies show, interlocutors already have their own imagined "China" against which they will measure the ethnographer's; however, this is one case where missing the metaphorical forest for the trees might be the right thing to do. Otherwise, ethnographers risk overlooking the people they work with in favor of studying the imagined nation. Put another way, one of anthropology's great strengths (and really, the privilege of the ethnographer) is to gain an intimate understanding of people's experience on the same level at which it occurs. For decades, the ethnographers of

⁸⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006 [1983]), 7.

⁸⁸ Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, 24.

“China” have tried to make their object of study stand for something larger than what lay before their eyes; however, when the metaphorical forest is so politically fraught, why wouldn’t one focus directly on the figurative trees?

Strange Citations: Inheriting the Anthropology of “China” in the 2000s

No ethnography exemplifies the tension caused by the anthropology of China’s insistence that ethnographies of places like Taiwan in the 1970s stand in for the history of the PRC better than Yunxiang Yan’s first monograph, *Private Life under Socialism*. Unlike Yang’s figurative return to “China” through her fieldwork in Beijing, Yan’s return is literal, and more specific. Xiajia village, where he conducts his fieldwork, is not an imagined nation or mother culture. It’s a real village in the PRC, and it is where Yan came of age.⁸⁹ Although Yan was born in Beijing, during the Cultural Revolution his family “was expelled from the city to a remote village due to my father’s political opinions.”⁹⁰ Yan knows better than most the impact post-1949 political history had on individual family structures in the PRC, and yet, as he began his graduate studies in anthropology at Harvard University in 1987, he inherited a field whose past research was conducted in an entirely different political context. Yan writes that his book is a critique of “existing studies of the Chinese family and kinship” that “focused on the structural principles and collective behavior of the domestic group” rather than on the individual.⁹¹ “That was at odds with my understanding of family life in the People’s Republic of China, where the family institution has undergone radical and rapid changes since 1949,” Yan writes.⁹² What he does not

⁸⁹ Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life Under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949-1999* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), xii.

⁹⁰ UCLA, “Yunxiang Yan faculty page” on UCLA.edu. Accessed on August 17, 2020:

<https://www.anthro.ucla.edu/faculty/yunxiang-yan>

⁹¹ Yan, *Private Life*, xi.

⁹² Ibid.

say is that most of the “existing studies” he’s referring to were of Taiwan or Hong Kong, *not* the People’s Republic of China.⁹³

Throughout the book, Yan remains diplomatic about the scholarly literature he’s inherited through the Anglophone anthropology of China. He ends a paragraph on the “rich” literature on “the Chinese family” with a footnote that cites Baker, Freedman, and Wolf (among others), but then closes by noting that “C. K. Yang (1959) offers perhaps the most comprehensive account of the impact of the Communist revolution on rural families in the early 1950s.”⁹⁴ Yan does not explicitly point out that C. K. Yang—whose fieldwork in Guangdong Province began two years before the revolution in 1949 and continued until he was threatened with arrest by the Communist government in 1951—is the only one of these anthropologists writing in English to have conducted fieldwork inside the PRC, as such. Instead, it’s a subtle critique, buried in a footnote: Yan understands that Wolf, Freedman, and Baker’s “China” was not necessarily governed by the same forces that shaped C. K. Yang’s “China” or the “China” that Yan grew up in.

Yet even Yan cannot resist treating these past studies as history. In a discussion of whether Xiajia villagers expected a man to take his parents’ side, Yan writes, “These ideas are nothing new (see, e.g., Freedman 1979; Levy 1949; M. Wolf 1972)” before rhetorically asking, “Did this tradition change in the 1990s?”⁹⁵ Despite his own lived experience of the consequences of CCP rule on parental relationships, Yan’s citations here draw a straight historical line from Marion Levy, Jr.’s sociological work in Republican China to Margery Wolf’s work in Taiwan, on to Freedman’s work in Hong Kong’s New Territories, and through to his own work in the

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Yan, *Private Life*, 11, N3, 244.

⁹⁵ Yan, *Private Life*, 106.

PRC in the 1990s. In fact, no such line exists. Knowing that sons in Xiajia village no longer take their parents' side in arguments does not tell us anything about what sons in the village where Wolf worked in Taiwan do; making the case that the tradition Wolf documented changed requires different ethnographic evidence, conducted in a different place. It may, in fact, be considered an entirely separate tradition. But what would it have meant for Yan, who was part of not only the first cohort of PRC-born anthropologists to begin pursuing PhDs in anthropology at universities in the USA, but also part of the first cohort of students to begin studying at Peking University after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1978, to contradict his entire field? What junior scholar would have dared to tell all the anthropologists of "China" who came before him that, despite the titles of their books, they had not, in fact, done field research in China?⁹⁶ Who would use their very first book to tell their colleagues that the families they spent decades studying were not actually "Chinese"? To some extent, the issue is that Yan has no more authority to declare what counts as "China" or "Chinese" than Hong Kong-born Chow does, for, of course, the vast nationalistic project that is "China" insists that Hong Kong and Taiwan are *just as* "Chinese" as the PRC; the word itself is the problem.

Conclusion: An Anthropology of Sinophone Places without "China"

My concluding suggestion is that the terms "China" and "Chinese" should be jettisoned altogether in favor of more precise terms that locate ethnographic studies within specific Sinophone political territories. In my own work, I always refer to "the People's Republic of China (PRC)" but find myself compromising by using "Chinese" as an adjective that means "within the PRC" (with chagrin) or "China" as a gloss for "中国 (*zhongguo*)" when quoting an

⁹⁶ This junior scholar suspects the answer is only one who expects to enjoy a much shorter and less successful academic career than Yan's!

interlocutor.⁹⁷ The Zhengzhou I studied is not Yan’s Xiajia village, which is not Yang’s Beijing, and they should not have to be. I am not arguing for a retreat to localism or for the dismantling of a scholarly field that I’ve found dynamic and generative; as Andrew Kipnis (2012) has pointed out, for anthropologists working in the PRC, convincing continuities between sites remain.⁹⁸ Nevertheless, the continuities Kipnis focuses on—education, urban building expansion, and the (censored and simplified) Chinese internet—are pointedly *not* shared by Hong Kong or Taiwan. In fact, the educational system and urban building expansion in particular are the results of specific government *policies* that create common historical experiences for people across the PRC, just as the Cultural Revolution did.

The solution is to, like Li the archaeologist did almost a century ago, use the word “China” as little as possible. At its best, “China” is a marketing hook and a source of confusion; at its worst, it’s a form of collusion that undermines Sinophone peoples’ struggles for self-determination. This does not mean that anthropologists working in the PRC have to throw out their compulsory citations of past works conducted in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Saying that Wolf and Freedman’s work have no *historical* value for the phenomenon Yan studies is not the same thing as saying that they offer *no* value; on the contrary, the *comparative* insights they provide are invaluable.⁹⁹ The jettisoning of “China” wouldn’t mean that continuities or comparisons across Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the PRC couldn’t still occur; no one studying the anthropology of Latin America denies that ethnographies of Bolivia and Colombia can illuminate each other

⁹⁷ See, e.g., Megan Steffen, “Willful Times: Unpredictability, planning, and presentism among entrepreneurs in a Chinese City” in *Economic Anthropology* 4 (2017): 251–262. I do think there’s a case for keeping “China” when critiquing the object of the eternal nation referred to by the people anthropologists work with in the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan; however, reporting or analyzing uses of “China” are different from accepting “China” as *fact*.

⁹⁸ Andrew Kipnis, “Constructing Commonality: Standardization and Modernization in Chinese Nation-Building” in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol.71, No. 3 (2012): 731-755.

⁹⁹ For historical insights and continuities, scholars could turn instead to *history*.

just because they're identified as taking place in different political territories.¹⁰⁰ Even more importantly, jettisoning “China” also allows anthropologists to extricate themselves from the nationalist project that imagines all Sinophone territories as diasporic communities waiting to inevitably “return home” to PRC rule.

The problem of how to study “China” is not particular to any decade, and it has not gotten any easier. The “Chinese people,” as Li showed in 1928, cannot be reduced to the territory they putatively occupy, and yet, as Mueggler demonstrated in 2001, the unifying influence of a single government over an otherwise diverse set of peoples cannot be ignored. Even those who find an idea of Chinese national unity defined against them, like Rofel and, in his own way, Hsu, or those that find that it includes them, like Yang, have illuminated the diversity of events and fates experienced within that fictive, unifying nation. For anthropologists like Sangren, who want to define Chinese culture as structurally timeless, the very conditions of fieldwork—in his case, conducted in Taiwan, away from the PRC—betray the influence of the anthropologist's contemporary circumstances upon his work. And as Chow's work shows, even the most insightful, penetrating critiques can prove stunningly impotent in the face of actual political events—just five years after Chow's book was published, Hong Kong was “reunified” with the PRC, and this year, the National Security Law all but revoked the PRC's initial promise that the island would be governed under a “One Country, Two Systems” policy. Against such realities, anthropologists working in territories that might claim to represent all of “China” need to be vigilant, to do as little harm as they can, and to take care when citing past scholarly works for, as I said at the outset, this field's past happened in different countries.

¹⁰⁰ See, for instance, Michael Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

Acknowledgements: Thank you to Sonia Ryang, Amber Szymczyk, and two anonymous reviewers for their help and critical insights. Thanks also to Claudia Huang and Annie Malcolm, without whom this essay could not have been revitalized, and to Joel Rozen, who helped coax it into being. This essay is based on work done in 2012 at Princeton University under the supervision of John Borneman, Isabelle Clark-Decès, Carol Greenhouse, and Abdellah Hammoudi; it is also heavily influenced by a seminar I took with Steven Chung and conversations I had with Miyabi Goto. I am grateful to them for their guidance, and any remaining shortcomings are my own responsibility.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso, 1983.
- Baker, Hugh. *A Chinese Lineage Village: Sheung Shui*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1968.
- Buyandelger, Manduhai. "Dealing with uncertainty: Shamans, marginal capitalism, and the remaking of history in postsocialist Mongolia," *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (2007):127-147.
- Chow, Rey. *Writing Diaspora: tactics of intervention in contemporary cultural studies*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993.
- Chun, Allen. "Fuck Chineseness: On the Ambiguities of Ethnicity as Culture as Identity," *boundary 2*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (1996):111-138.
- Farquhar, Judith B. and James L. Hevia. "Culture and Postwar American Historiography of China," *positions*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1993): 486-525.

- Freedman, Maurice.. *Chinese lineage and society; Fukien and Kwangtung*. London: Althone, 1966.
- Guldin, Gregory Eliyu. *Saga of Anthropology in China: from Malinowski to Moscow to Mao*. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1994.
- Harrell, Stevan. "The Anthropology of Reform and the Reform of Anthropology: Anthropological Narratives of Recovery and Progress in China," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 30 (2001):139-161.
- Hong, Keelung and Stephen O. Murray. *Looking through Taiwan: American Anthropologists' Collusion with Ethnic Domination*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008.
- Hsu, Francis. *Under the Ancestors' Shadow: Chinese Culture and Personality*, Second Edition. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1971 [1948].
- Kipnis, Andrew. "Constructing Commonality: Standardization and Modernization in Chinese Nation-Building," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol.71, No. 3 (2012): 731-755.
- Lee, Alex Jong-Seok. "East Asian Savage: Untouched Orientalism and Imperial Anthropology, Introduction to the Special Issue: Anthropology and East Asia," in this issue.
- Li Ji. *Formation of the Chinese people; an anthropological inquiry*. New York: Russell & Russell 1967 [1928].
- Mueggler, Erik. *The Age of Wild Ghosts: Memory, Violence, and Place in Southwest China*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007.
- Ng, Emily. *A Time of Lost Gods: Mediumship, Madness, and the Ghost after Mao*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2020.
- Oppenheim, Robert. "Historicizing Mid-Century American Anthropology of Korea: Vincent S.R. Brandt, Stereoscopically," in this issue.

- Pieke, Frank N. "Anthropology, China, and the Chinese Century," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 43 (2014):123-138.
- Rabinow, Paul. *The Accompaniment: Assembling the Contemporary*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Rofel, Lisa. *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in the Years After Socialism*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999.
- , "The Outsider Within: Margery Wolf and Feminist Anthropology" in *American Anthropologist*, vol. 105, no. 3 (2003): 596-604.
- Ryang, Sonia. "Toward a New Anthropology of Japan: A National Frame of Study and Its Potential Use in the Study of Japan as Biopower—with the Focus on the Figure of the Korean," in this issue.
- Sangren, Paul Steven. *History and magical power in a Chinese community*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987.
- Shih, Shu-Mei. "What is Sinophone Studies?" in *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, eds. Shuh-Mei Shih, Chien-hsin Tsai, and Brian Bernards. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.
- Song, Ping. "Anthropology in China Today," *Asian Anthropology* vol. 16, issue 3 (2017): 228-241.
- Steffen, Megan. "Willful Times: Unpredictability, planning, and presentism among entrepreneurs in a central Chinese city," *Economic Anthropology*, vol. 4 (2017): 251-262.
- , "A Mystery in the Archives: The Historiography of Denial, Henrietta Schmerler's Rape and Murder, and Anthropology's Project of Prevention," forthcoming in *American Anthropologist*.

Taussig, Michael. *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1980.

UCLA. Yunxiang Yan faculty page, on UCLA.edu. Accessed on August 17, 2020:

<https://www.anthro.ucla.edu/faculty/yunxiang-yan>.

Wang, Haicheng. *Writing and the Ancient State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Wolf, Margery.. *Women and the family in rural Taiwan*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1972.

-----. *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985.

-----. *A Thrice-told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism, & Ethnographic Responsibility*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992.

-----. "Chinanotes: Engendering Anthropology" in *Field Notes: the makings of anthropology*, ed. Roger Sanjek. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1990.

Wong, Edward and Michal Forsythe. "China's Tactic to Catch a Fugitive Official: Hold His Two American Children" in the *New York Times*, November 25, 2018. Accessed August 16, 2020: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/25/us/politics/china-exit-ban.html>.

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

Yang, C. K. *Chinese Communist Society: The Family and the Village*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1965.

Yang, Mayfair Mei-hui. *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994.