Chapter 1

Cultural Change in China

In northern China, starting at the ancient battleground near Fort Shanhai and stretching across wind-swept expanses of virgin mountains and empty deserts nearly all the way to Mongolia, lies the Great Wall. Or more accurately, what is left of that mammoth stone structure put together by Emperor Qin. For some two thousand years, the Great Wall proudly stood guard, protecting the Han Chinese against the nomadic horsemen of the north, and silently watching the rise and fall of many a dynasty.

For people who lived away from the northern borders, the Great Wall was only a fable. Most Chinese never saw the Great Wall. But they knew the folklore about a maiden, Meng Jiangnu, who went on her long journey to look for her husband who had been drafted by Emperor Qin to build the Great Wall. She trekked from one end of the wall to the other, only to be led to the ground where her husband was buried. She threw herself on his tomb and uttered such a loud cry that the Great Wall came tumbling down.

For centuries Chinese were sheltered by another Great Wall. This was not a wall of stones and mortar, but a wall of symbols and ideas, of traditional values and beliefs, that stood just as firm and strong in the minds of Chinese. This cultural bulwark held Chinese society together for milleniums, shielding Chinese life from external encroachment and internal erosion. Just as the stone Great Wall reflected an inward looking mentality of China's ruling elite, the cultural Great Wall had become a mantle that protected the Chinese from innovation and change. The confining consequences became painfully apparent during the last century when China was compelled to open its door to a fast changing world outside.

Traditional Chinese culture began its slow but inevitable erosion

in the mid-19th century. The period of political chaos following the fall of the Manchu Dynasty in 1912 created more confusion and initiated a soul searching among Chinese intellectuals. The eight years of war with Japan, from 1937 to 1945, gravely undermined the structural roots of Chinese society and paved the way for the defeat of the Kuomintang and the establishment of the People's Republic of China. It was during the reign of Chairman Mao Zedong that Chinese people, inspired by his idealistic concept of a Communist utopia and propelled by his charismatic leadership, participated in a prolonged and traumatic process of radical social transformation. For the first time in history, traditional Chinese culture was forced to undergo major changes of unprecedented dimensions, all within a short span of decades.

The collapse of the stone Great Wall in answer to the heart-rending cries of maiden Meng Jiangnu was only a fable. The destruction of the cultural Great Wall by Mao and his millions of followers is a reality. But this is a reality that has not been objectively documented. Cultural change in contemporary China has been the topic of much scholarly discourse and public debate in and outside China (Chu and Hsu, 1979; Wang, 1980; Cai, 1987; Li, 1987; Link, 1987; Tang, 1987; Tu, 1987; Xiao, 1987; Liu and Lin, 1988; Liu, 1989; Ogden, 1989; Whyte, 1989; Yang, 1990). *The River Elegy* (Su and Wang, 1988), a controversial six-part television documentary that aired in China in the summer of 1988, touched off a storm of protest as well as waves of ground-swelling support. These discussions and debates (Cai, 1988; Yi, 1989; Yu, 1989) have sometimes taken place in an emotionally charged atmosphere marked by a dearth of concrete data. The research findings which we present in this volume, based on a comprehensive survey undertaken in November and December 1987, illustrate in a manner as objective and concrete as possible the nature of contemporary Chinese culture as it stands today. Using the survey results as a data base, we can assess both the extent and the process of change which traditional Chinese culture has undergone. This is the objective of our research.

Concept of Culture

Empirical studies of cultural change are relatively few, partly because the concept of culture usually carries diverse meanings. In their critical reviews of the concepts of culture up until the early 1950s, Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) identified 164 definitions. The monumental work of Kroeber and Kluckhohn has not been updated. Among the more recent contributions are Schwartz and Ewald (1968), Rokeach (1969), Rokeach (1973), Vermeersch (1977), Bernardi (1977), Markarian (1977),

Rokeach (1979), Hall, Hobson, Lowe, and Willis (1980), Melischek, Rosengren, and Stappers (1984), Ball–Rokeach, Rokeach, and Grube (1984), Carey (1989), and Inglehart (1990).

While early works by anthropologists tended to see culture in terms of discrete traits and artifacts, many of the recent theoretical approaches address the concept of culture in more abstract and general terms. Culture is learned and shared and functions as an integrated whole. It is conceptualized as a design for living, a function of social life, a social heritage, an artificial environment, a mode of communication, a set of guiding standards for social behavior, in an imposed arbitrary form. In identifying the common characteristics that apply to the enormous variations of cultures in human life, these approaches generally leave out the substantive features by which a particular culture can be concretely observed. Knowing that culture is a design for living, for example, does not give much direction if one wants to observe and understand the culture of Chinese people.

Because these theoretical concepts examine culture in a general approach, they are not directly appropriate for a concrete study of cultural change. To say that culture is learned and shared and functions as an integrated whole seems to have a timeless basis of universal validity. This general characteristic of culture does not change. To empirically study culture and cultural change, we need to begin by identifying the concrete dimensions and processes of culture, including the manner in which it is learned and shared. These concrete dimensions and processes not only vary from society to society, but change over time. If culture is a set of guiding standards for social behavior, then we need a concrete framework by which we can identify those standards and observe their processes of change.

In the synthesized definition they offered, Kroeber and Kluckhohn moved in this concrete direction when they identified the essential core of culture as consisting of traditional ideas, especially their attached values, as well as patterns of behavior, explicit and implicit. When we treat culture as a phenomenon for empirical observation in the general population of a society, the synthesized definition proposed by Kroeber and Kluckhohn still stands. In his initial analysis of cultural change in China, Chu (1979) took this definition by Kroeber and Kluckhohn as a point of departure and proposed to define culture as an integrated conceptual framework for guiding an empirical study of cultural change.

Chu began by looking at culture as a way of life, a behavioral concept implicit in Kroeber and Kluckhohn. He took an approach similar to a tripartite classification of culture that Kroeber and Kluckhohn identified in the works of Tessmann (1930), Menghin (1931), Boas (1938),

and Murdock (1941). The American anthropologist Leslie White (1974) took basically the same approach in his definition of culture, which he considered to exist (1) within human organisms, i.e., concepts, beliefs, emotions, attitudes, (2) within processes of social interactions, and (3) within material objects. Using the self as an anchor point, Chu identified three major components in the life of any self. One consists of the social relations between the individual self and his significant others. Much of our behavior takes place within these social relations, including family relations. Partly by necessity and partly by choice, these social relations are further cast in the context of two other major components:

(1) materials and objects in the physical environment that the self relies on for survival and that, through the extent of technology, mediate social relations, and

(2) ideas, including ideology, values, and religious beliefs—both cognitive and evaluative—that (a) influence the way the self perceives the social and physical environments and (b) set priorities for social relations and the pursuit of materials and objects in the physical environment. The three major components Chu has proposed are similar to the social, material, and spiritual culture identified by Menghin and used by Tessmann in his study of East Peruvian tribes.

The relationships between the self, on the one hand, and the significant others, materials and objects, and ideas, on the other, are represented in figure 1.1.

The bold lines represent the direct relations, that is, how the self interacts with the significant others, how the self uses the materials and objects in the physical environment and is in turn influenced by them, and how the self embraces certain ideas as relevant for social and material relations. The thin lines represent perceived relations, or
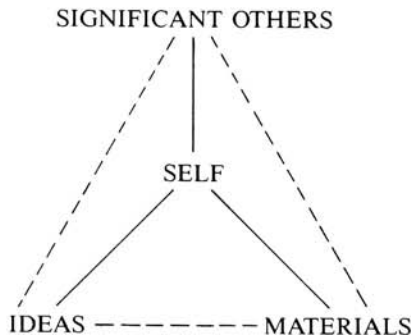
SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

SELF

IDEAS — — — — — — MATERIALS

Figure 1.1   Paradigm of Cultural Components

linkages, that exist in the perceptual field of the self. They are important even though they may not fully correspond to reality, because it is often the perception rather than reality that influences our behavior. Are the significant others seen as endorsing the same ideas the self embraces? Are the significant others seen as cooperating or competing with the self in the pursuit of material gains? Is the self's pursuit of materials and objects seen as consistent with the prevailing ideology?

Culture, expressed as a way of life, encompasses the totality of these complex relations, both substantive and perceptual, which regulate the behavioral patterns of a cultural group. These relations are so intricately intertwined that they tend to be fused at the observational level. Conceptually, they are distinguishable and can serve as a cogent framework in which we sort out and organize our empirical observations.

These relations form a holistic structural entity. The social relations, which are the human ties that hold a cultural group together, are built upon two other components as cornerstones: The material component is essential for physical survival and nurture, and the ideological component sets these relations in a normative frame of order and at the same time gives life a measure of meaning. It is in the context of social relations that material life is sustained and ideologies are maintained. Human culture is unique because both social relations and material life are influenced and regulated by our ideas, that is, knowledge, beliefs, and values which very much dominate our way of life. What makes one culture distinctively different from others stems primarily from the domain of ideas, even though the differences become manifest in both social relations and material relations at the observational level.

Cultural Change—A Structural–Functional Perspective

We follow a structural–functional perspective in analyzing the processes of cultural change. Function as a concept refers to the manner in which the social processes in an institution contribute to the operation of (a) the individual role players who participate in the institution, and/or (b) other structural components in the broad social system of which the institution is a part. Aberle et. al. (1950) have proposed certain functional prerequisites which they consider essential for all societies. Merton (1961) speaks of manifest and latent functions. Because the theoretical writings of Parsons (1951), Radcliffe–Brown (1952), Levy (1952) and others focus on the interrelated nature of various structural components of a social system, the structural–functional

approach is sometimes mistaken for espousing a static view of society. This structural interrelatedness, however, refers not to a static equilibrium, but to a moving dynamics, in the sense that change in one structural component is likely to be followed by changes in some other components. The concept of change is thus inherent in the structural–functional approach, as made clear by Parsons (1951) and Smelser (1968) when they discuss processes of change of social systems. In fact, even in the early writings of Malinowski (1922, 1938, 1945), his functional theory of culture was centrally concerned with change. Among recent works, Chu (1977) has followed this perspective in his analysis of the roles of communication in bringing about radical structural change in Mao's China. Almond, Powell and their colleagues (1984) have applied the structural–functional approach in their comparative analyses of the political systems and change in Europe, Russia, China, Mexico and Africa.

From a holistic functional point of view, culture can be seen as a system of collective survival. As such, culture has two salient features. It must be adaptive to changes in the external environment and internal conditions. A culture that fails to adapt to these changes will run the risk of extinction. Thus, change is very much an inherent characteristic of any culture. However, a culture must also be resistant to change, at least to some extent. A culture that is readily adaptive to every change in the environment will have no basis for stability and continuity. Resistance to change, ironically, is as necessary for survival of a culture as is adaptability. It is these two seemingly contradictory features that make the study of cultural change both fascinating and difficult.

In a structural perspective, a cultural system, whether its social relations, material relations, or the ideological domain, consists of constraining components and incentive components. Constraining components, by and large, are those that prevent people from reaching what they want. Incentive components are those that motivate people to reach what they want. Together they regulate human behavior and maintain social order. Constraining and incentive components can be either structural or ideological, figure 1.2.

Many constraining components are structural in nature. One particular constraining component is the legal system. Other than that, most structural components are embedded in the class structure and apply unevenly to different social classes. The land-tenure system in most traditional societies is an example. For tenants who toil on the land and receive a meager income there is almost no chance for them and their children to break out of their bondage of poverty. Another common constraining component resides in the division between men and women.
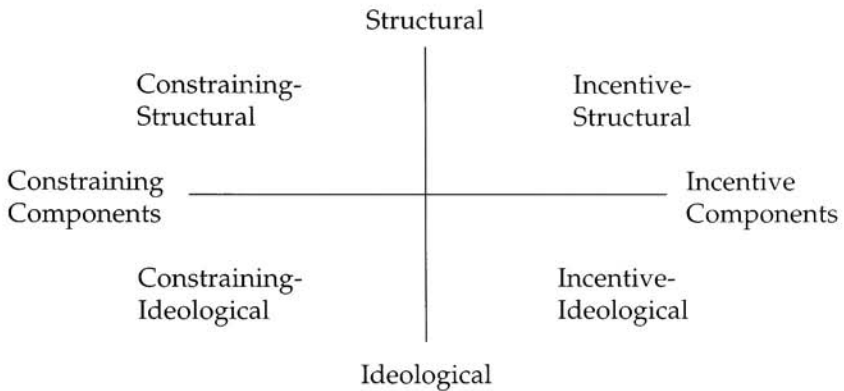
Structural

	Structural	

Constraining-
Structural

Incentive-
Structural

Constraining   Incentive
Components   Components

Constraining-
Ideological

Incentive-
Ideological

Ideological

Figure 1.2   Structural and Ideological Constraints and Incentives

But constraining components can be rooted in the ideological domain, functioning as a cognitive foundation of the structural components, sometimes in a powerful way. The traditional Chinese belief that one's life was destined by fate made it easier for most people to accept their state of misery without challenging it. Similarly, the Buddhist belief that people have power and wealth because of their karma lends support to a popular conception, that is, the way to deal with power is to appease it, rather than challenge or confront it, because one cannot fight karma. The belief in fate and karma becomes a powerful ideological constraint that reinforces the existing social structure.

Some incentive components are structural. In traditional Chinese society, except for the offspring of a few despised occupational groups, such as prostitutes, opera players who were female impersonators, and bath-house attendants who scrubbed the customers' backs and manicured their toenails, all male children were allowed to take the state examinations, which opened the door to upward mobility. In Chinese history many rose to high positions by this route.

Other incentive components are ideological. The traditional Chinese belief that one must bring glory to one's ancestors served as a powerful incentive for Chinese to excel in whatever they were doing. We have suggested that the Buddhist belief in karma can be seen as an ideological constraint. By accepting one's karma, one endures inequities even though one may not approve, because one's personal condition at any moment in time is believed to be the result of one's past actions and thoughts. An integral part of the Buddhist belief in karma is the notion of merit making. If one makes merit, generally by offering food to monks or making contributions to temples, there is the hope that the accumulated merits may overbalance the bad deeds and thoughts of the past and

bring about a change for the better, for the next life if not for this life. Thus the belief in karma, as embodied in the custom of merit making, gives people incentive to endure the current life conditions, no matter how miserable, with the expectation that their next life will be endowed with riches, power, and prestige. The Buddhist belief in karma, in this instance, serves both as ideological constraint and incentive.

It is easy to see why incentive components are necessary. Whether structural or ideological, they provide rewards—material or symbolic—for carrying on life and performing those tasks that are essential for collective survival. Yet in the perspective of social order and cultural stability, the constraining components are equally impor-tant. By setting up constraints on social relations and on the pursuit of material ends, these structural and ideological components minimize conflicts and contribute to the maintenance of order in society.

The constraining and incentive components in a culture may seem just as contradictory as are adaptability and resistance to change. But they must co-exist. Both perform important system-sustaining functions. The specific manner in which constraining and incentive components coexist in a particular culture and the conditions under which they maintain a delicate balance of system-sustaining functions will be fascinating topics for research. If that delicate balance is destroyed, contradictions between the constraining components and incentive components will be accentuated, and the result could be sys-tem destroying rather than system sustaining.

A culture responds to changes in either the external environment or internal conditions. Cultural change can be seen as an interplay between initial changes in the constraining and incentive components on the one hand, and individual and institutional responses to such changes on the other (see figure 1.3).
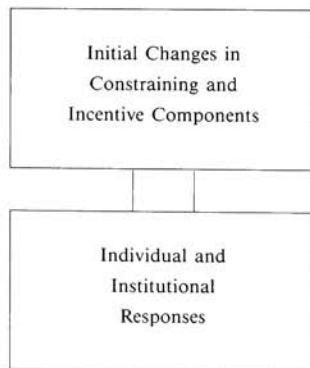

Figure 1.3   Processes of Cultural Change

Hypothesis

Following our conceptual framework of culture and cultural change, we propose this general hypothesis:

> In traditional Chinese culture there were constraining components and incentive components. Some were structural, others ideological. As these constraining and incentive components are altered, Chinese people change their social relations, material relations, values, beliefs, and attitudes to adapt. Thus Chinese culture changes. A number of factors, such as age, sex, education, economic status, and urbanization mediate in the way individuals relate to both the old and new constraining and incentive components, and thus have an impact on the nature of cultural change.
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> In China, communication plays a central role in the processes of cultural change in two major perspectives. Political communication was used intensively in the days of Mao Zedong to change the ideological foundation of traditional Chinese culture. In the post-Mao years of economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese mass media has become a conduit for Western influence on Chinese culture.

Major events in China since 1949 can be seen in the perspective of structural changes in constraining and incentive components. The agrarian land reform and the expropriation of urban business removed the landlords and businessmen from China's social class and lifted two major structural constraints from rural peasants and urban workers. However, China's Communist Party placed them under equally confining structural constraints in the People's Communes and state enterprises. Landlords and business owners, stripped of their properties, completely lost their power and authority, which were taken over by Party cadres. It took the Cultural Revolution to remove the Party cadres from their positions of authority. Chaos lasted for years. Although order was eventually restored, the traditional Chinese concept of authority was cast in doubt.

Political communication has played a major part in the change process. Beginning in the early 1950s, the Party started a series of ideological campaigns to attack traditional cultural values and beliefs. These campaigns came one after another, culminating in 1966 with the Cultural Revolution as a traumatic climax. Confucian teachings were criticized in many of these campaigns. Toward the end of the Cultural Revolution decade, a direct attack was made on Confucius himself as part of an internal power struggle. An overall objective of the ideologi-

cal campaigns was represented by Chairman Mao's motto: "if you do not destroy (the old), you do not establish (the new)." Mao wanted to destroy the old so that he could establish a new set of Communist-inspired ideologies. Mao's strategy seemed to have left a distinctive impact on Chinese culture not because his new ideologies were found appealing to Chinese people but because his class struggle tactics of accusations and confrontations set up behavioral patterns that proved to be contrary to the traditional Chinese way of moderation and harmony. Mao's idea that government should wholeheartedly serve the people did not seem to be embraced by the Chinese. Instead, highly restrictive ideological confines came to dominate the economic, social, and political life of China for some three decades. The results, it seems, were the destruction of the old without the establishment of something new and positive.

From these events, it appears that old structural constraints were replaced with new limitations, possibly somewhat more restrictive. If the traditional Confucian ideology set clear boundaries on Chinese social behavior, then the ideological tenets of Mao seemed to put up new barriers that were just as rigid, if not more so. What seems a curious parallel between the old and the new was their similar lack of cultural incentives, both structural and ideological. In traditional China, the state examination system was one of the few established avenues of upward mobility. Education in Mao's China, however, did not necessarily serve this same function. A college degree was not a guarantee for a desirable job assignment and promotion. During the Cultural Revolution, a degree could be the source of a social stigma branding the educated as "stinky No. 9" and relegating them to the bottom of China's social ladder. A sure way to distinguish oneself, at considerable risk of retaliation if not handled skilfully, was to severely attack others during criticism campaigns. Getting ahead often meant participating in an intense internecine warfare as part of China's organizational life. This new structural incentive offered reward for competition through destruction.

In olden day China, people were motivated to excel by a desire to bring glory to their ancestors. This traditional value served as one of the few ideological incentives of the past. The Party's attack on ancestors, however, particularly during the Cultural Revolution, has put this Confucian value under a dark cloud. Because Mao's ideal of wholeheartedly serving the people did not seem to receive much more than lip service, the Chinese were left without any strong ideological incentives of their own, until the arrival of a new ideology from the West in the early 1980s as Deng Xiaoping introduced his economic reforms (Whyte, 1989).

As popularly perceived by Chinese people, Western ideology is not a set of clearly articulated principles and standards. Rather, it is presented as a lifestyle of unmistakable affluence, marked by a high standard of material comfort and a remarkable degree of personal freedom, which Chinese audiences have seen in American films and television programs. This lifestyle is somehow associated with words like "capitalism" and "democracy," even though few Chinese understand how capitalism works in the United States or how democracy is practiced in the West. It is nevertheless an ideology because it consists of captivating images and powerful ideas. What seems to have vividly impressed Chinese people is a sharp contrast between what they see around them in their own lives and what they see on the video screens. Some forty years of dedication and toiling labor under their Communist leadership has brought them not the socialist utopia that has been promised but little more than a bare subsistence. Yet this strange world outside—even though it has been corrupted by the evils of capitalism, as the Chinese have been repeatedly told—presents a dazzling array of just about everything they would like to have. This new Western ideology, imprecise and unclear as it may seem, enters Chinese society in the context of an ideological vacuum, as it were, and finds an audience, especially the young, at a moment when they are particularly vulnerable to its influence. This influence is difficult to resist because its validity seems to be well established by what people can see. Whether it corresponds to reality does not seem to matter.

This is, in short, the new social and political environment in which Chinese people find themselves today. How they adapt to this complex mixture of constraining and incentive components, some old and some new, and how they respond to an array of messages, some Communist and some Western, is reflected in their social relations, material relations, values, beliefs, and attitudes. These, in turn, will vary among Chinese according to different age groups with their dissimilar socialization experiences, male and female characteristics, urban versus rural areas, diverse educational and income levels, and different accesses to official mass media and Western cultural influence.

Our research provides concrete data to help us understand contemporary Chinese culture as well as assess its processes of change.