Some Chinese Puzzles

Looking at China

From Marco Polo to the present, Occidentals have been fascinated by China. Why this should be so is not entirely clear, for there are after all many other societies just as, if not more, exotic than China. Perhaps China has been alien enough to serve as foil to Europe but not so alien as to be totally incommensurable or incomprehensible.[1] For centuries China has connoted reversal and opposition, an extreme and limiting case of whatever quality (from effective public administration, to gastronomy, to patience, to revolutionary purity) the Occidentals happen to be concerned with. In popular thought the Chinese have a reputation for doing everything backwards, from writing to serving the soup course. Many travelers' accounts, from Marco Polo to the visitors to the People's Republic in the 1970s, have had a through-the-looking-glass quality, which no doubt helps account for their enduring attraction.

In such accounts, as well of those of such foreign residents as missionaries, the Chinese are presented not only as a mirror-people doing everything backwards but as possessing a paradoxical mixture of opposing and mutually contradictory qualities. One of the best examples of the genre, the Reverend Arthur Smith's *Chinese Characteristics,* bears such chapter titles as "Flexible Inflexibility," "The Talent for Misunderstanding," and "Mutual Suspicion." Part of the charm and value of Smith's work, which is the product of a very acute and profoundly ambivalent observer of Chinese life, lies in his constant playing with contradiction and paradox, so that his portrait of the Chinese character gains in

depth and nuance what it loses in simple directness. In the chapter on "Mutual Suspicion" (which follows that on "Mutual Responsibility") he says that "while the Chinese are gifted with a capacity for combination which at times seems to suggest the union of chemical atoms, it is easy to ascertain by careful inquiry at the proper sources and proper times that the Chinese do not by any means trust one another in the implicit way which the external phenomena might imply."[2]

Smith never really faces up to the question of how any people who are so deficient in public spirit, sincerity, or sympathy, and whose relations with each other are marked by the extreme degree of mutual suspicion that he attributes to them can possibly live together at all, far less exhibit "a capacity for combination which at times seems to suggest the union of chemical atoms." But he is hardly alone in this regard, for contradictory images of Chinese society run through almost all the Western literature on China. On the one hand, the Chinese are seen as excessively "group-oriented," with all individuals so thoroughly socialized as to be "submerged," in their tight little groups. As a people they are familistic, clannish, and tend to form guilds, tongs, secret societies, and communes, all of which function smoothly and efficiently. On the other hand, the Chinese are also portrayed as an aggregation of undisciplined, anarchic individuals. They won't queue up, refuse to commit themselves to churches or to armies, haggle over every least thing, refuse to rescue drowning people, and generally carry on in a perpetual Chinese fire drill. Each characterization can be supported by examples, illustrations, and anecdotes, and further reading (or experience) only leads us further into paradox.

The Anthropological Perspective

One way out of this intellectual mire comes with the realization that such labels as "group-oriented" or "undisciplined" always assume an implicit comparison with some other group, usually that of the observer. Making the standards explicit helps a great deal, for all that the labels are usually saying is that neither Chinese family members nor, for a typical example of anarchy, crowds waiting for a ship, train, or bus, behave as the foreign observer thinks families or crowds behave in his own society. The labels, so full of terms like "absence of" or "excess of" are no more than a crude, initial notation of cultural difference and an expression of puzzlement. As such they may serve as a useful start in the

attempt to understand the foreign culture. This is the purpose of many of Arthur Smith's bald (and, to contemporary sensibilities, outrageous) chapter titles and initial sentences, which are subsequently modified and qualified as Smith attempts, with varying success, to explain the reasons for the initially baffling behavior. But if, as is all too often the case, the labels are taken for explanatory principles rather than observations of cultural difference, then they become obstacles to further understanding. And the Chinese are rendered, in Frederick Gearing's apt term, "unbelievable," and we are further estranged from them.[3]

The next step out of the blind alley of describing other cultures either by listing what they are not (a procedure that Gearing condemns as nondescription because it renders the people so characterized inconceivable and, in a way, nonhuman), or as tissues of contradictions is provided by some fairly simple notions that have been the core of cultural anthropology for the past half century. They come down to looking at behavior in its proper context (explanation, it has been said, is putting things in context) and finding out what the behavior that seems puzzling means to the people doing it. One tries to elucidate the goals of the actors and the way the alien culture assigns meaning to the goals and acts.

Doing this is not necessarily easy, in part because in any culture much of the pattern that lies behind or guides the motivation of actors is implicit and taken for granted. It must be inferred, usually by a detached external observer. The usual illustration of this point is the grammar or phonological structure of a language, which shapes the utterances of native speakers even if they are quite unaware of it. This is elementary, and another elementary notion, dating back to Durkheim and other early-twentieth-century French sociologists, argues that every society has ways of symbolizing or representing itself, and that people everywhere have ways of describing and thinking about their own society, even if they lack sociology. Ritual is often interpreted in this way, as providing, among other things, a sort of folk sociology, a way of symbolically presenting social structure, cohesion and conflict.

We thus come to the idea of a "native model" of, along with other things, society. In small-scale, relatively undifferentiated societies the "native model" is often expressed primarily or only through ritual, which expresses themes of social solidarity, exchange, and reciprocity. Rituals are interpreted by the outside observer by being translated into statements, propositions, or exhortations about social relations. Textbook examples are ancestor cults and wedding and funeral rituals, which involve the defi-

nition and reassignment of social statuses. In more complex societies or civilizations (usually defined as those with cities, money, writing, a formal state, and extensive division of labor) the "native model" of the society can be expected to be more explicit and elaborated, as well as more detached from the realm of ritual and religion. It may be found in written documents such as treatises on government or in legal codes.

Confucianism as Sociology

The most obvious place to look for an explicit and elaborated "native model" of Chinese society is Confucianism. Confucianism, in all its schools and over two millennia, takes the proper ordering of society and human relations as its main subject. It is essentially a prescription for a harmonious and orderly society. It contains a theory of human nature, of learning and social influence, and of social structure. In the past, foreigners, struggling to fit Chinese culture into their own categories, sometimes argued whether Confucianism was a religion or a philosophy. I see it as, among other things, a sociology, one that can with relative ease be translated into the language of Western sociology. But, as a complete guide to or model of Chinese society, it is inadequate.

The Sung Neo-Confucianism that served as the officially sponsored orthodoxy in the Ch'ing dynasty saw man and society as integral parts of the larger cosmic order. That natural order, summed up as the Tao and described as a network of principles or regularities called li, included ethics and social hierarchies. In the Neo-Confucian system, that trees bud in the spring and water runs downhill were descriptive statements of natural regularities in the same way as statements that sons are filial and rulers are superior to ministers. The social order, everything from the rules of kinship, to the structure of the state, to the etiquette of funerals, was an aspect of the natural order.

Societies commonly justify their internal arrangements and hierarchies by asserting them to be reflections or consequences of a larger natural or supernatural system, and in this sense there is nothing unusual about the Chinese case. But the way that natural order is conceptualized and described clearly makes a difference. A. C. Graham speaks of the Chinese tendency to think in terms of the interdependent rather than the isolated; of wholes divisible in various ways rather than collections of units; of opposites as complementary rather than contradictory; and of the changing (but in

cycles rather than developing) rather than the static.[4] The natural order is always thought of as a system, whose component parts and subsystems relate to each other through subtle gradations of mutual influence. The ultimate order, the Tao, is constantly changing, as are the relations between the constituent parts. Rather than the characteristically Occidental images of geometrical forms or molds and templates, the metaphor for the Tao would be a mobile, slowly rotating, or perhaps a fractal orrery. It follows therefore that human society is always thought of as a system and man always seen in a social context. Confucian thinkers do not begin with atomistic individuals and then have to worry about how to create society; they assume society. Nor do they worry themselves about the relation between the individual and society, for they do not use such polar terms. Humans are by definition always involved in society and interacting with others. All discussions of human nature assume a continual, reciprocal process of action and reaction between any one person and all others in the vicinity. Characteristically Confucian terms include *Hsiang*, mutuality and *Shu*, reciprocity or empathy, a key term in the *Analects*. In Confucian discourse these are given ethical weight, as principles of social life that should be recognized and guide action. On a less idealistic level there is *Pao*, strict reciprocity.[5]

Subject to the influence of other people, humans are malleable. They may be educated, developed, and cultivated as well as led astray and corrupted by bad company. Although early Confucians disagreed about whether humans' "original nature" was good, bad, or neutral, all agreed that it could be improved by education and exposure to good examples. Hence the great attention Confucianists pay to education, socialization, and all processes of social influence. In the Confucian system man is not born free; rather, he is born raw or unformed, becoming truly human only through education and contact with society.

Even though Confucian thought stresses the systemic quality of the natural and hence the social order, and considers the social order prior to the individual, who is socialized into the only possible society for human beings, it does not necessarily follow that humans are seen as totally passive, entirely the creatures of their environment, or that the particular social arrangements found at any distinct time or place necessarily represent the best of all possible worlds. With its bias toward organic wholeness and conflation of social norms with natural laws the Neo-Confucian system has some intellectual problems coping with social disorder, conflict, and evil.[6] Nevertheless it recognizes them, makes clear dis-

tinctions between good and bad social arrangements and individual conduct, and recognizes a human capacity for choice and free will. Any concrete society is seen as the consequence of human choices. If people, educated in the principles of human society, choose the proper definition of roles and hierarchies the result is a peaceful and harmonious society, but if they choose improperly or refuse to follow the "natural" principles the result is disorder, conflict, and chaos.

Confucianists desire harmony, but this is not to be achieved by doing away with all distinctions. Just as the skillful farmer takes into account the proper times of planting and harvest and the varieties of crops, so the social engineer takes into account the variable qualities of human beings and the necessary differentiation of society. Confucian harmony is seen in terms of differentiated social units and individuals, all cooperating for the common good.

As a sociology, Confucianism contains the elements of a theory of roles and the division of labor, although these notions are not elaborated very much beyond the family or the gross distinction between ruler and ruled. What we now speak of as roles and role-sets, Confucianism discusses as *li. Li*, a semantically complex term, is difficult to translate directly. It is most often glossed as "propriety," but this is inadequate. The term originally referred to the code of etiquette and conduct of the nobility of the Chou dynasty, which included the conduct of rites and rules of politesse. In Confucian hands the canons of feudal etiquette were moralized and their meaning extended and redefined.

In general *li* refer to the customary definition of social roles and the approved patterns of behavior between individuals standing in definite relations to each other, as father and son or husband and wife. Three related ideas are subsumed. *Li* are an ordering of society so that each individual knows his place and hence his rights and duties; *li* are a code of morality, acting not so much through external sanctions as through the individual conscience; and *li* are an ideal of social harmony, emphasizing the reciprocal obligations that tie men together.[7]

Li are rules for one's behavior toward specific other people. They are norms for particularistic, dyadic relationships. *Li* grade off in intensity and precision of definition from the family out to total strangers. Like most moral prescriptions they are not precisely defined. Mothers-in-law are "tender" and daughters-in-law are "dutiful." *Li* are norms for relations that are, in our own terminology, functionally diffuse or multiplex, that involve the whole person over an extended period of time. *Li* define the most impor-

tant social relationships, those common to all people. These are the classical Five Relationships: father-son; ruler-subject; brother-brother; husband-wife; friend-friend. Three of these are kinship roles, obtaining within a single family, and four of the five are hierarchical. Sons submit to fathers; subjects to rulers; younger brothers to their elders; and wives to husbands. Harmony is assured by the obedience of the subordinates. The key relationships can be arranged in order of precedence. A man's father comes before his brother and his brother before his wife. The priority of the political relation is ambiguous and a source of continual tension within the Confucian system. In expositions such as the eighteenth-century colloquial version of the *Sacred Edict*, the first two relationships, father-son and ruler-subject, receive the most attention, and the final one, friend-friend, not only comes in last place but is little discussed. The single relation between equals, and the only one to be created by the choice of the parties to it, is acknowledged but no more.

If one reads the Confucian Classics and such moralistic but widely disseminated tracts as the colloquial version of the *Sacred Edict* (composed in the early eighteenth century by Wang Yu-p'u, salt commissioner in Shensi) one gets a good idea of the way kinship and families were supposed to be ("mothers-in-law are tender") as well as the way (the Way?) the empire was supposed to be governed. But between the family and the empire the social terrain is vague. It was assumed that there was a link, for in the famous chain-stitch reasoning of the *Ta Hsueh* if all the families were at peace with themselves, then the empire would surely be at peace, but the nature of the link or synapse between families and the empire is never really discussed. And although Confucians were quite sensitive to social learning and to reference groups, the composition of such reference groups as villages is never spelled out.

One might expect a guide to the correct ordering of society to devote some attention to the communities in which people live, are socialized, and act as social beings, influencing and being influenced. But this aspect of Chinese society, which has been a part of that society for as long as there has been anything that could be called Chinese society, is glossed over in the Confucian schema. Chapter 3 of the *Sacred Edict* begins by asking, "What are those things we call local communities (*hsiang-tang*)?" It answers that it is the people, the inhabitants of villages, hamlets, neighborhoods, and streets. "Their fields adjoin; their houses touch; they meet as they go out and come in; they hear each other's cocks and dogs; they marry each other; they help each other in case of fire,

flood or theft."[8] A community is those individual people who interact frequently, but instead of drawing lines and discussing stations and duties within the village in the spirit of the ancient sages who instituted *Li*, the author stresses village or neighborhood solidarity and plays down distinctions. "Although some are close (agnates) and some more distant, some are in-laws (*ch'in-ch'i*, that is, matrilaterals and affines) pulled in from elsewhere, and some are just friends who've been together for a long time, still, in all (you should) treat them all kindly and warmly." "If people would only consider everyone in the community as one corporate body (*ch'eng yi-ke jen*)"[9]

Although villages and Chinese communities are known to have been internally differentiated along lines of patrilineal descent, neighborhood, wealth, and length of residence in the community, the colloquial version of the *Sacred Edict* stresses only community solidarity, describing the community as an undifferentiated skein of personal ties. Given that the immediate purpose of the text is to discourage strife and contention, the stress on an imputed community solidarity is rhetorically appropriate. But, it also highlights one of the shortcomings of Confucianism as a sociology and as a model of Chinese society. The argument, which is repeated in chapter after chapter of the text, is to first show that two contending parties belong to the same category, such as agnate, villager, or member of the same occupation. It is then asserted that all members of this category must have common interests, and that any internal contention or dispute is therefore foolish and an example of narrow selfishness rather than concern for the common welfare. The category, whether all descendants in the male line of a man who died four generations ago, or all cobblers, is assumed to be a group, an organic whole. Principles appropriate to one relationship are extended to others. Filial piety covers all members of a lineage, and it is argued, in contradiction to the idea, common in exposition of the *li*, of graded differentiation that the relation with a distant agnate is at bottom "the same" as that with one's own uterine brother. The assumption of complete unity of interest on the basis of sharing one of a great many possible features is good rhetoric but poor logic.

More to the point, this way of talking about, and perhaps of thinking about, society does not lead one to consider the possibility of conflicts of interest between groups, or of membership in more than one group, or of the possibilities of individuals' having multiple and overlapping memberships and allegiances. As long as one stays within the field of the Five Relationships, roles are so

defined and priorities so set that (except for priority on loyalty to the ruler or to one's father or son) role conflict is rendered nearly impossible as long as everyone plays his part. The possibility of tension or disharmony between obligations to one group, such as an extended family, and obligations to another group, such as an occupational association is not even entertained.

The colloquial version of the *Sacred Edict* is, to be sure, special pleading and its clear purpose was indoctrination and not abstract social science. But then the Classics themselves were intended to be used as guides for action, and they share with the *Sacred Edict* the goal of a stable society. In the forms of argument it employs and its preference for lumping rather than splitting, the colloquial *Sacred Edict* is representative of much Confucian writing. To the extent that Confucianism provided the major categories that people in Chinese culture and society used to apprehend their own society and to conceptualize their own lives in that society, the adequacy of those categories for the description of that society is a topic of some significance. This is the reason for considering Confucianism as a sociology.

As sociologies go, Confucianism is quite a respectable one, of the structuralist-functionalist variety. It begins with the idea of a social system, considers shared value orientations the foundation of social solidarity, contains a well-articulated functionalist theory of ritual, and an initially clear concept of roles and role-sets. It appreciates the importance of the proper performance of roles and of the distinctions between roles and the actors playing or occupying them—a king is a king because he acts like a proper king, not because his father was king before him. It is also strong in what we might call social psychology and small group studies, devoting much attention to socialization, mutual influence, and the way attitudes are reinforced and changed by group pressures. One could make a case for the Chinese invention of sociology and of functionalism, along with the better known inventions such as paper, printing, and gunpowder. But, although a respectable sociology, Confucianism was not a perfect one. Some of its weaknesses, like its difficulty in handling conflict or change, are common to all varieties of structural-functionalism, while others, such as its failure to include most roles outside the ascribed and hierarchical bounds of kinship, are peculiar to itself. A consequence of this is that Confucianism, in and of itself, never gave a very accurate or complete picture or model of Chinese society.

Confucianism thinks of society largely in terms of dyadic relations. (Recall the "definition" of the local community given in the

Sacred Edict.) Such dyadic ties are not those freely established by isolated individuals; rather, they occur within pre-existing, highly corporate groups, such as the extended family or the ruler's court and administration. Confucianists seem to see their society as composed of an indefinite number of identically organized kinship units, each with a clear boundary and a neat internal hierarchy based on sex and age. The topics of concern are the internal structure of such social segments and the way they define their boundaries and maintain themselves over time (hence fathers, sons, and funerals). The relations between segments are not a matter of concern and, save for the assumption that all segments are subject to a common ruler, the topic is not discussed. Confucians take kinship seriously, but they are descent theorists, not alliance theorists.[10] No wonder Radcliffe-Brown was so fond of quoting Hsun-tze and other Confucian sages!

Confucians are more interested in what men have in common than in how they differ, and are more taken with sharing than with exchange. So, although they recognize a functional distinction between the rulers and the ruled, they only grudgingly acknowledge the existence of artisans and merchants, and rank them below scholars and farmers. They do not develop the idea of division of labor and of organic solidarity. Nor, in spite of their concern for mutuality and reciprocity do they make very much of exchange. Confucianism thus lacks a model of any sort of limited, functionally specific, contractual social relation. It also lacks a model of any sort of social group other than such ascriptive, corporate, and primary ones as families or perhaps small and isolated hamlets. This means that it is impossible to use Confucian concepts or terminology to talk about a marketplace, a city, a wholesaler and his customers, a formal association, or a rotating credit society.

When one thinks about it, this seems rather odd. It is not surprising that the social theory of an elite should describe that classes own practices as "natural" or that it should value social harmony, stability, and tradition, which in practice means peasants who accept their station and pay their rent and taxes on time. Nor is it surprising that the ideology of a class of bureaucrats and landowners should deprecate trade and urban life, or that it should do so by holding up as an ideal a mythical and archaic rural gemeinschaft. What is surprising about the Confucian model is its success, given the lack of fit and extreme variance between it and the realities of Chinese society.

The picture of society one gets in Confucian writing and argumentation is one of people living in small, self-sufficient communities where kinship is the main principle of social structure and where there is little or no commerce or state regulation. This would seem to describe the non-Chinese "barbarian" communities of the southern mountains or perhaps the northern steppes far better than the society of imperial China. Confucianism provides a vocabulary and set of concepts for describing the sorts of small-scale "tribal" societies often studied by anthropologists. It would work for discussing the Tallensi, the Iroquois, or the Baganda, where there is little division of labor save by age and sex, where kinship does regulate most of social life, where settlements are largely self-sufficient, ritual looms large in community life, and rulers have to depend to a large degree on consensus and moral example.

But, Chinese society has been for the past two millennia or so a large complex one, with a monetary economy, elaborate and very rational (in Weber's sense of the term) state structures, cities, and a network of communication that tied together an entire subcontinent. Confucianism perversely seems to ignore precisely those institutions that held China together and made it an integrated society rather than an aggregate of self-sufficient villages. A problem thus emerges. If there was a native model of Chinese society, a set of terms and concepts that members of that society used to conceptualize it and describe themselves to themselves, then that model, those concepts, included something other than the Confucianism of the classical texts. What that model was, how it is to be found and articulated, and how it relates to Confucianism remains open.

Any system of thought that lasted as long as Confucianism did must have been doing something right, but just what that was is not immediately clear. The assumption thus far has been that because people in late traditional China considered Confucianism to be of supreme importance and because the content of Confucian thought overlapped with much of Western sociology, the way to begin was to translate Confucianism into the vocabulary of Western sociology. Explicating Confucianism as a sociology is worth doing, but it does not provide a guide to Chinese society and does not solve the basic question of cross-cultural comprehension. Instead it sets new problems. But these problems have the advantage of being grounded in that particular culture and can be used as starting points for further investigation and research. To me,

this represents a step toward eventual understanding of the ways Chinese describe their own society to themselves.

Confucianism and Culture

I think that the immediate way out of the paradox of the manifest unsuitability of Confucianism for the description of Chinese society is to argue that I have taken it out of context, and that after all the average mandarin who had received a Confucian education had also learned a great many other things about how his society operated and how to operate within it. Confucianism is not wrong, or irrelevant, or nothing but a "false consciousness," but it is only one part of a culture. I doubt that my hypothetical mandarin who lived for at least part of his life in a city, had a good grasp of finance, routinely established relations of mutual confidence with people who were not his kinsmen, was a member of several limited-purpose associations, and had a brother who was a successful rice merchant, was aware that those aspects of his life were not covered by Confucian terminology. Nor did he perceive any major disjunction between those aspects of his life that fell within the ambit of Confucian categories and those that lay beyond it.

The problem for an outsider trying to understand Chinese culture is that one part of the native model has been written down and made much of, while others, equally important for guiding and understanding actual behavior, are not usually written down and are not made the objects of conscious attention. Apprehending that or any alien culture is thus like looking at a raised relief in strong side illumination. Some features of the design will be brightly illuminated and stand out while others remain in deep shadow. Those parts of the culture that correspond to the design elements in the shadow zone are learned through normal, diffuse socialization rather than through memorization of a text and are taken for granted by members of the culture as perfectly "natural" ways to behave.

I am arguing that the written text alone is not enough, something that should be clear to anyone who has ever tried to cook or work on an automobile with only a book for a guide. Some anthropologists speak of culture as something like a computer program and consider the task of the ethnographer to be the elucidation of the program. Others in a similar line of reasoning build on Durkheim's notion of culture as prior to and outside individuals, and as carried or coded in rituals or significant symbols that are,

as Geertz puts it, "as public as marriage, as observable as agriculture."[11] The problem here is that the other culture's programs or symbols, and even its written texts, which are meant to guide members of that culture, always take a very great deal for granted. They never begin to attain the length and painful explicitness that marks a real computer program, or, to use another metaphor for culture, a piece of the genetic code. It follows then that if we try to analyze the supposed program or code outside of its proper social context we are liable to misinterpret it. Here I am reminded of a quite original dissertation that demonstrates the difficulty of writing a "program" or "ethnoscientific" description of so seemingly straightforward a set of rules as those used by a Japanese cabinetmaker to choose wood.[12]

In late traditional China, Confucianism was but one part of a cultural field; it was one set of answers to unspoken questions, and we cannot understand what it meant to the members of that society unless we know what they saw as alternatives and what sorts of behavior they took for granted as normal and natural. Confucianism was nothing if not formal, explicit, and articulate. In an obvious way it was opposed to those elements of the culture that were heterodox, deviant, and expressive of the interests of the lower depths rather than the commanding heights. But, in a less obvious way, it was also by its very explicitness in contrast to the informal and inarticulate assumptions about what sorts of behavior were normal and natural and therefore not worthy of comment and attention. The only way to learn about those sides of Chinese society that fall outside the Confucian framework is through fieldwork or through careful analysis of such written materials as contracts or guild constitutions. And the prerequisite for either endeavor is conceptual clarity.

The Convergence of Confucianism and Academic Sociology and Anthropology

In the Chinese case we want to know about how people established relations of mutual trust with those not their kinsmen; how they organized formal associations; how commerce was conducted; and how urban society was structured. All of these strike me as reasonable topics for inquiry, but there is less literature on them than one might expect. We know a good deal about some aspects of Chinese life, such as the families of farmers, and very

little about others, such as cities. Our picture of Chinese society and life is marked by a high degree of chiaroscuro. One reason for this uneven illumination and knowledge is, I think, the congruity and mutual reinforcement between the Chinese conscious model and the theoretical assumptions of academic, usually foreign, anthropologists.

The Chinese, as Confucians, picked certain aspects of their own society to focus their attention on and were consequently quite aware of them and ready to discuss them. The prime example here is the family. The foreigners, as anthropologists (in Chinese studies the distinction between anthropology and sociology has never been terribly strong) were generally trained as functionalists and were professionally competent at the analysis of families, kinship, villages, and ritual, all topics dear to the Confucian heart. Standard anthropological theory and techniques seemed to work quite well for analyzing Chinese society. In the hands of my late mentor Maurice Freedman, anthropological models developed in the Sudan and the northern Gold Coast (Evans-Pritchard and Meyer Fortes) proved remarkably helpful for understanding the lineages and ancestor cults of southeastern China, while an argument developed to explain why the Zande of the Sudan and Uganda believe in witchcraft served to illuminate the theory and practice of Chinese geomancy.[13] Young Chinese intellectuals took to sociology and anthropology with relative ease, and by 1937 sociology—which included the village studies of such sociologists/anthropologists as Fei Hsiao-t'ung, Lin Yueh-hua, Hsu Langkuang (Francis L. K. Hsu) and Martin Yang—was flourishing in China.[14] Some very good fieldwork was done in China even during the Second World War, and when I had occasion to go over such English-language journals as the *Chinese Social and Political Science Review* and the *Yenching Journal of Social Studies* for the late 1930s and the 1940s I was very impressed at the high quality of the work, most all of which was done on a shoestring in the middle of a war.

For China then, the gap between the native model and the outside observer's "scientific" model was smaller than it sometimes is. After all, structural-functionalism *was* the native model. To the extent that it has been possible for studies of Chinese kinship and marriage, lineage and ancestors to attain a high degree of sophistication, and for the conclusions of such studies to enter the anthropological literature fairly readily, this has been a good thing. Families, villages, lineages, and ancestors are all well worth studying, and anthropological models really do illuminate their working

and make those aspects of Chinese life intelligible. I found that undergraduates in anthropology courses were able to grasp the logic of Chinese marriage and even such esoterica as ghost marriage with relative ease.

But, to the extent that the powerful combination of the articulate Chinese model of their society and the theoretical bent of foreign scholars has acted to turn our attention away from some aspects of Chinese society, the theoretical convergence has not been a good thing. All too often foreign observers have taken the Confucian picture of what should be for a description of what is. Or, in a more sophisticated error, they have accepted the Confucian definition of what is most significant. This applies for obvious reasons to travelers and such foreign residents as missionaries who are content to accept what their Chinese hosts tell them. It also applies to serious scholars, for whom the years of toil necessary for an outsider to master written Chinese and grasp Chinese categories may lead to a degree of acculturation.

This issue is touched on in an instructive essay on the comparison of Chinese and Islamic societies by Ira Lapidus, a historian specializing in the Islamic Middle East.[15] He is concerned with "the basic assumptions and explicit or implicit paradigms by which historians of China conceive Chinese culture." He finds a set of ordered antinomies, such as: Confucian/Legalist; bureaucrat/local notable; central/local; public/private; and administrative, imposed structures/natural, self-generated structures. All the potentially contradictory elements were balanced and the whole society represented an example of balanced tension. "It is generally assumed that China is an integrated, well-ordered, and fundamentally harmonious society." "The image of Chinese society which emerges in the historiography is not quite an architectural pile, but rather one of Calder's mobiles with well-fashioned pieces trembling in balance or swinging in circles. . . . Yet, though in constant movement the mobile as a whole floats gracefully, a complete form, a harmonious totality assuming innumerable variant configurations without loss of its inherent unity. It moves in eternity. This, I think, is the historians' implicit image of China. It may be China's image of itself."

"The hierarchical and dialectic view of Chinese society corresponds to one of the traditional Chinese ways of seeing the world. In a similar way, the network view accords with the conceptual world of Islamic culture. . . . Thus the preferred metaphors of Chinese and Islamic historians are not accidental. They correspond to the cultural style and the world view of each civilization—and in

fact may derive from the historians' familiarity with the societies they study."

If we continue with Lapidus' elegant metaphor of China as a mobile, then Confucianism is one of the "well-fashioned pieces." But if it is taken out of the mobile, analyzed as a free-standing structure, or taken for the master plan or armature of a single structure, then it is misread. I think this has often been done, and the consequence has been to obscure our understanding of Chinese society. One of the cliches of Western description of China is that the Chinese are deficient in individuality, that they are excessively absorbed or submerged in their group. This picture of Chinese man corresponds very nicely with the "oversocialized conception of man" that Dennis Wrong attributed to the dominant American structuralist-functionalist sociology of the 1950s.[16] Confucian man is indeed oversocialized, but he never existed in the real world any more than the actors of Parsons' Social System who go about trying their best to meet each other's expectations. Both Confucian man and Parsonian man (who would get along with each other quite well) are models, sketches, ways to direct our attention to one aspect of social life.

Confucianists made much of family and kinship, and their moralistic stress accords with the common tendency to label the Chinese as "familistic." We often see such statements as "In China the family is the foundation of society." Mr. Lapidus, who was certainly a good student of the English-language literature on China, speaks of "the basic framework of society-family kinship, lineage, and clan association. Local communities were based on lineage."[17] I would not characterize the basic framework of Chinese society in this way. Although as a social anthropologist I cannot but be aware of the significance of kinship, I have never quite understood what statements such as "the family is the foundation of the social order" are supposed to mean. To be sure, most people in China belonged to families and family membership was a very significant aspect of every person's identity, but I fail to see what is so distinctively Chinese about this. Most human beings after all belong to families, and the families usually loom large in people's lives. Families are about as close to a human universal as one is liable to find, and in that sense they are like breathing or elbows—very important and fundamental, but not something the possession or practice of which distinguishes one human society from all others.

"Familistic" is not a term of art in social anthropology, and the application of such a label to the Chinese seems to depend on an

implicit comparison with some other society, presumably one's own. What the term seems to mean is that the Chinese, in some undefined way, pay more attention to or take more seriously their families than we do. Maybe, but one would have to be a lot more specific about just what is meant by "takes more seriously" or "pays more attention to" or "we." American undergraduates confidently asserted that the Chinese were more familistic than they, while ignoring their own financial dependence on their families at an age when most Chinese were supporting themselves. They also ignored matters such as that many of them were present at the university only because their parents could pay the tuition, could afford to reside in the right secondary school districts, or that they were admitted only because their parents or grandparents were alumni. It was not good manners to discuss these matters in public at American universities, but it is hard to see why they are any less evidence of familism than inheriting rice fields or preferring arranged marriages. The evidence for Chinese familism seems to come down to the importance of inherited property, the prevalence of arranged marriages, the frequent conjunction of family and enterprise, and postmarital residence in the parental household, but these are hardly habits peculiar to China.

In a comparative, cross-cultural perspective there is little if anything that is unique or distinctive about Chinese family structure or kinship, which is a fairly common patrilineal type. Chinese families have a great deal in common with Hindu and Arab families, but we never seem to label those societies as familistic even though Saudi Arabia is governed by a lineage and three generations of one family served as prime ministers of the Republic of India. If I wanted to choose a distinctively "Chinese" feature of that society, the family is the last place I'd look.

It is sometimes asserted that the family and kinship are of especial importance in China because many other sorts of relationships or social institutions are modeled on the family or represent the extension of kinship norms and forms. It is true that Chinese villagers commonly addressed each other by kinship terms; Chinese sometimes form sworn brotherhoods and sisterhoods; and imperial spokesmen made fairly labored arguments that filial piety should be extended to the emperor. But otherwise, I see little evidence that such common Chinese sorts of relationships as those between landlords and tenants, creditors and debtors, partners in a business, masters and apprentices, or allies in a faction were modeled on kinship. Nor, so far as I can tell, did such common Chinese associations as irrigation associations, temple cults,

rotating credit associations, guilds, same-place associations, or even surname associations resemble families in any significant way.[18] These matters will be discussed throughout the remainder of this work, but if I may anticipate my conclusions I will say that many common Chinese associations and relations shared the same form and might be considered to reflect the same model, but that model was not kinship.

The unintended consequence of taking Confucianism too literally and of concentrating on topics most amenable to anthropological analysis has been to mislead even such sensitive and well-read students of things Chinese as Mr. Lapidus. To be sure, he does not entirely accept the sinologists' picture of China and he suggests that we might profit from looking at China with a perspective similar to that developed for the study of Islamic society, which stresses the importance of *ad-hoc* relations between individuals and groups and of temporary networks linking component groups.[19] In Firth's terms, it might be enlightening to look at Chinese social organization as well as at social structure.[20] Doing this would also help to correct the schizoid views of the Chinese as either excessively socialized or totally anarchical, for a careful look at such matters as behavior in the marketplace or in the city, or in factional contests should, as a matter of anthropological faith and first principles, reveal such behavior to be patterned and orderly, even if not directly explicable in terms of the Confucian model. The following chapters look at precisely such topics in the ethnographic context of a Taiwanese city.

Notes

1. This point is made provocatively, if not entirely convincingly, in Andrew March, *The Idea of China* (New York: Praeger, 1974). The topic is also discussed in William Appleton, *A Cycle of Cathay* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951); in Raymond Dawson, *The Chinese Chameleon* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967); and in Michael Edwardes, *East-West Passage* (New York: Taplinger, 1971).

2. Arthur H. Smith, *Chinese Characteristics* (New York: Fleming E. Revell, 1884), p. 246.

3. Frederick O. Gearing, *The Face of the Fox* (Chicago: Aldine, 1970), pp. 109–110.

4. A. C. Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers: Ch'eng Ming-tao and Ch'eng Yi-ch'uan* (London: Lund Humphries, 1958), p. ix.

5. See Yang Lien-sheng, "The Concept of 'Pao' as a Basis for Social Relations in China," in J. K. Fairbank, ed., *Chinese Thought and Institutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).

6. On this, see Thomas A. Metzger, *Escape from Predicament: Neo-Confucianism and China's Evolving Political Culture* (New York, Colombia University Press, 1977), pp. 108–113.

7. See Sybille van der Sprenkel, *Legal Institutions in Manchu China* (London: London School of Economics Monographs in Social Anthropology, No. 24, 1962), pp. 30–33.

8. Ibid., p. 29.

9. Ibid., pp. 31, 37.

10. On the distinction between descent theory and alliance theory in the study of kinship, see David M. Schneider. "Some Muddles in the Models: or How the System Really Works," in Michael Banton, ed., *The Relevance of Models for Social Anthropology* (Association of Social Anthropologists Monograph No. 1) (London: Tavistock, 1965), pp. 25–85.

11. Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in Michael Banton, ed., *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (Association of Social Anthropologists Monograph No. 3) (London: Tavistock, 1968), p. 5.

12. Carol A. A. Link, *Japanese Cabinetmaking: A Dynamic System of Decision and Interactions in a Technical Context.* Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, 1975.

13. Maurice Freedman, *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China* (London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology, No. 18) (London: Athlone Press, 1958); Maurice Freedman, *Chinese Lineage and Society: Fukien and Kwangtung* (London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology, No. 33) (London: Athlone Press, 1966).

14. Ambrose Y. King, "The Development and Death of Chinese Academic Sociology," *Modern Asian Studies* 12, 1 (Feb. 1978), pp. 37–58.

15. Ira M. Lapidus, "Hierarchies and Networks: A Comparison of Chinese and Islamic Societies," in Frederic Wakeman and

Carolyn Grant, eds. *Conflict and Control in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 26–42.

16. Dennis Wrong, "The Oversocialized Concept of Man in Modern Sociology," *American Sociological Review* 26 (April 1961), pp. 183–193. Reprinted in Dennis Wrong, *Skeptical Sociology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976).

17. Lapidus, 1975, p. 29.

18. Morton Fried made this point at some length in 1953 in *The Fabric of Chinese Society* but it seems necessary to keep on repeating it.

19. Lapidus, 1975, p. 42.

20. Raymond Firth, "Social Organization and Social Change," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 84, 1954, pp. 1–20. Reprinted in Firth, *Essays on Social Organization and Values* (London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology, No. 28) (London: Athlone Press, 1964).