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Abstract

China’s modernization brings to the fore the challenges of nationalism, state building and social integration. This article traces the development of Chinese society and culture since the dissolution of the Qing empire in 1911 through the collective period after 1949 and the reforms since 1978. The article focuses in particular on the changes in the social, cultural, political and ethnic diversity of Chinese society, the impact of market capitalism on life, work and social organization, the impact of China on the world and the world’s impact on China, and the challenges currently facing Chinese society.

Key words

China, anthropology, sociology, society, culture, ethnicity, minorities, nation, tourism, Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan, People’s Republic of China, Manchu, migration, transnationalism, modernization, work units, collectives, community building, inequality, mobility, education, health care, housing, land, protest, environment, aging, one-child-policy, language, media, social media, internet, gender, family, marriage, sexuality, consumerism, life styles, cosmopolitanism, popular culture, religion

Article

1. Introduction

Modern China is a country that is heir to the vast empire conquered by a non-Chinese group called the Manchus, whose origins were in what is now China’s Northeast, or Manchuria. The Qing dynasty that they established lasted from 1644 to 1911. The Manchus incorporated in their empire large non-Chinese territories, such as Manchuria, Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Taiwan. All that these territories had in common was some form of allegiance to the emperor, regardless of their culture, ethnic orientation, religion, or even political system.
The heritage of empire makes contemporary China a political entity that struggles to find a political form. This task is made even more difficult by the legacy of Western and Japanese imperialism and the Cold War during the last two centuries. Taiwan (asserting itself as an independent republic), Hong Kong and Macao (with the status of special administrative region), but also Tibet, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia and Guangxi (all autonomous regions) claim or have been given various degrees of autonomy or independence from the government of the People’s Republic of China. As a modern nation-state China therefore is anything but a finished product, and is probably best described as a work in progress.

China is also a civilization, connected to but by no means coterminous with any contemporary political unit that calls itself China. Viewed from this angle, China and being Chinese are not just a matter of belonging, but also of becoming. This has at least two aspects. Chinese culture, goods, influence and people have for centuries fanned out far beyond the reach of the Chinese state, mixing and mingling with other cultures and civilizations in a variety of settings all across the world.

This article asks three broad questions. What unites and what divides China as a country, society and culture? What are the distinguishing features of China’s developing modernities? What is the impact of globalization on China, and what impact on the world do Chinese society and culture have? Below, each question will be discussed in a separate section. The article will draw mainly on recent anthropological research, supplemented with work by sociologists, social geographers, historians, and political scientists.

Anthropologists of China have long been drawn to China, fascinated by its scale and complexity. Yet for most of the 20th century anthropologists mainly tended to view China through village studies, communities that were seen as largely self-contained and bound together by the bonds of family (major ethnographies include Ahern 1973; Cohen 1976; Lin 1998; Wolf 1968). Connections between these communities existed, of course, but were seen as largely limited to traditional patterns of trade (Skinner 1964), inter-village marriage and supra-local kinship organization (Freedman 1958; 1966; Fried 1953) and religious networks (Sangren 1987). Anthropologists for the most part ignored the impact of either the traditional or early modern state, with the exception of some of the work on Chinese towns and local elites (Fei 1953) and the interactions between Chinese popular, official and organized religion (Feuchtwang 1977; Yang 1961). This tendency was strengthened by the fact that, until the early 1980s, the People’s Republic did not allow foreign researchers in. China anthropologists had to be content with proxy fieldwork in Taiwan or Hong Kong or among overseas Chinese, where they sought to reconstruct pre-revolutionary Chinese society from artificial slices of culture carefully dissected from complex and rapidly modernizing societies outside China itself.1 It has only been in the last 30 years that China anthropologists have squarely dealt with contemporary society and culture in the People’s Republic.

2. Unities and diversities

China is a continent-sized country. Since the first unification of China in 221 BCE, ruling dynasties expanded and unified their empires either directly through warfare, tribute relationships and the recognition of indigenous rulers, or indirectly because of the effect of migration, intermarriage, trade, road building, land reclamation and cultural assimilation. As a result, over the centuries China incorporated a rich variety of peoples and cultures. These peoples adopted aspects of Chinese culture, such as ancestor worship, cosmology, religion, or gender relations, gradually translating differences between Chinese and non-Chinese into part of the endless diversity of Chinese culture. Other groups, however, stayed beyond imperial rule, either by choice or exclusion. These non-Chinese “barbarians” living within or immediately adjacent to the empire owed neither tax nor corvée labor, but could also not count on imperial protection and the opportunities for upward mobility that Confucian education offered their elites. These processes have been best documented for parts of China that were firmly incorporated during the last dynasty of the Qing, such as Taiwan or Yunnan (Brown 2004; Giersch 2006; see also the articles in Crossley et al 2006).

Early Chinese nationalists around the turn of the 20th century imagined the new Chinese nation as the successor of the empire, thus opting for a “maximal” definition of the nation and its territory that required from the onset recognition and accommodation of non-Chinese groups and territories in the new nation (Crossley 2005). The Chinese nation built after the fall of the Qing in 1911 therefore incorporates two very different, at times even conflicting narratives. The Chinese nation was to be the home of the Chinese, a safe haven and instrument to undo the injustices of Manchu alien rule and “national humiliation” by Western and Japanese imperialists after the Opium Wars. The nation would unify all Chinese and restore China’s rightful place in the world. But the Chinese nation was also imagined as the reincarnation of an empire consisting of groups no longer glued together by dynastic rule, but by the cultural, economic and political dominance of the Han majority.

After coming to power in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) continued to embrace these two conceptualizations of the nation. The CCP views China as a composite ‘multi-nation country’ (duo minzu guojia), consisting of 55 “minority nationalities” (shaoshu minzu) and one majority nationality, the Han. The identification of these nationalities took place mostly in the 1950s; since then they have remained largely fixed with individual membership determined by birth. Minorities were given certain rights and privileges (including the right to practice their own culture and religion) and also a degree of self-administration (autonomy) of the provinces, prefectures, or counties where they lived (Heberer 1989).

In contradistinction to the many different minorities, China’s majority population is universally called Han. Yet their culture and language display a rich diversity, predominantly rooted in regional variety (Cantonese, Fujianese, Pekingese, Shanghainese, etc.). In addition, Han Chinese are also divided along ethnic (cf. the Hakka of Southeastern China, see Constable 1996) or religious (cf. Muslim Chinese, see Gladney 2004) lines that uncomfortably straddle the divide between the Han majority and the non-Han minorities. China’s minority policies thus not only emphasized the minority-majority distinction, but also put an almost total ban on the political expression of regional or cultural differences among the Han.
The recognition of minority nationalities is part of an elaborate administrative system that was set up after 1949 to regulate and manage forms of diversity: religious, cultural and ethnic. This system is supervised by the Chinese Communist Party through its United Front Department. After the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, the system was reinstated and even strengthened and it continues to play an important role until the present day, turning forms of diversity into bureaucratic statuses that come with highly regulated rights, duties, privileges and restrictions. In addition to 56 nationalities, China thus has practitioners of five recognized religions (Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Buddhism and Taoism; Yang 2012), compatriots from Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, overseas Chinese, returned overseas Chinese and their dependents (Barabantseva 2011), and even foreign friends and guests (Brady 2003).

During the collective period (1949-1978) society was forced into the straightjacket of a socialist planned economy. Industry, agriculture, trade and services were nationalized or collectivized. The establishment of the household registration system, unified job allocation and rationing of foodstuffs and many other consumption goods tied people to one place: the rural population in their villages as members of their collective team, brigade and commune (Heins Potter & Potter 1990), the urban population in their town or city of residence as members of their “work unit” (gongzuo danwei, Bray 2005). Except for times of great upheaval, such as the famines of the Great Leap Forward between 1958 and 1962 or the political mayhem of the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1969, mobility was subject to bureaucratic allocation, either as part of the economic plan or through more informal arrangements made by individual work units or collectives.

After 1949, diversity became much less prominent and politically relevant in Chinese society than it had been before. Minorities, religions, overseas Chinese and foreigners were contained in their own separate places and spaces. Social life mainly took place in the main building blocks of society, urban neighborhoods and work units and rural villages and collectives. Due to the restrictions put on mobility, Chinese from different places and backgrounds mixed and met much less frequently. Furthermore, with the establishment of a unified administration under the leadership of the Communist Party, native place (with its associated linguistic, cultural and religious aspects) ceased to be a principle of organization and vehicle of political participation among city populations (about pre-1949 China on this point, see Rowe 1989).

This picture of strict regulation and containment of social life in general and diversity and mobility more in particular changed after the start of reform in 1978. This happened slowly at first, but quickly gained speed, particularly during the second phase of reform that started in 1992-1993. In the countryside the reforms unleashed the enormous entrepreneurial potential of China’s rural population that had remained bottled up for 30 years. In the early 1980s, land was decollectivized, giving farmers not only much better incentives to step up agricultural production, but also the freedom to decide whether to stay on the farm, start another business, work for a local enterprise, or move elsewhere in search of work or business opportunities. In the 1980s, millions of farmers found their way to China’s cities, working in construction, manufacturing, petty trade and other jobs that the established city population, entitled as they were to state employment, did not have or did not want to do. In the 1990s, reforms targeted the urban sector and a further opening up to the world economy. The result was an urban investment boom and the rapid growth of the export-processing
sector. At the same time the rural population suffered from declining agricultural prices, land expropriation for development projects, deteriorating services and increasingly rapacious government (Bernstein & Lü 2003). As a result and despite an initial surge in urban unemployment, the “floating population” (liudong renkou) of rural-urban migrants grew to well over 100 million, reaching around 200 million, or about one-sixth of China’s total population of 1.3 billion, in the 2000s.

Members of the floating population are second-class citizens. The barriers to internal migration thrown up between cities and the countryside by the household registration system are in many ways comparable to the impact of national borders on international migration. Despite that fact that by now many rural migrants have lived in a city for many years, they continue not to be denied the entitlements of permanent city dwellers like a house rented from or purchased from the work unit, health care and health insurance and education. Rural migrants therefore continue to be tied to the soil of their village of origin: their key entitlements and obligations continue to be had not where they happen to live but where they are from and where one or more members of their family (parents, spouse, or children) quite often continue to reside and work the land (Chan 1994).

Rural-urban migration brings people from many different places together in China’s larger and smaller cities, (re)producing forms of diversity that could not develop during the collective period. However, pre-revolutionary forms of organization and representation (native place organizations, guilds) have not reappeared and migrants are largely powerless in the face of the established population and the local authorities. The best know case is “Zhejiang village” (Zhejiang cun) in Beijing in the 1990s, a community of often very successful traders and entrepreneurs from the area around the city of Wenzhou in Zhejiang province. The Beijing authorities deemed their presence a nuisance and even a threat. Throughout the 1990s, the police repeatedly raided the area, demolishing houses, the wholesale market and workshops that made up the “village” (Xiang 2005).

Migration and mobility are by no means limited to rural-urban migration to China’s industrial centers in the eastern coastal areas. Politically very important is the long-standing migration from China’s interior to peripheral, originally non-Chinese territories, such as Tibet, Xinjiang and Inner-Mongolia. Much of this is state-planned or state-induced, an element in the strategic incorporation of these areas into the Chinese nation-state (Rossabi 2004). The reforms period has added increasing flows of non-state planned migration of entrepreneurs, skilled workers and professionals, farmers, traders and tourists (Halskov Hansen 2005; Schein 2000). Non-Han Chinese are now becoming minorities even in many of their own autonomous areas, a politically combustible development especially in Xinjiang and Tibet where the Chinese presence is the most controversial and where tensions have traditionally been high.

During the reform period, Chinese not only started to migrate to destinations inside the country itself, but also abroad. In the 19th century after the defeat by Western imperial powers during the Opium Wars of 1842 and 1860s, China had been forced to open up the outside world. This starting some of the largest emigration flows of the century, with Chinese fanning out to destinations all across the world (McKeown 1999). In 1949, China quickly shut itself off from further emigration, but emigration
quickly rebounded in the 1980s, reaching levels in the early 21st century unprecedented even at the peak of emigration 150 years earlier. China now is one of the most important sending countries. Apart from sheer numbers, the most important fact about Chinese international migration today is the diversity of migratory flows. Migrants now hail from all over China, and include business and government expatriates, investors and entrepreneurs, students, professionals, contract workers, unskilled job seekers, and family migrants. Added to this must be the vastly larger number of Chinese who travel abroad for shorter periods as tourists or visitors on business, on exchange programmes, or as members of delegations. The world is indeed becoming a Chinese space, with long-term emigration being a vital, but by no means the only component (Chu 2010; Fong 2011; Nyiri 2010).

More recently, international migration to rather than from China has been added to the mix. Since the mid-1990s a rising number of foreigners lives in China, many of whom do so long-term or even permanently. These immigrants are attracted by the opportunities of investment, employment, trade, or business. Others come to China for the promise of a better life or a politically more stable environment. International migrants still are only a minute fraction of China’s huge population, but according to the 2010 census their absolute number has already surpassed the 1 million mark. Moreover, foreigners are highly concentrated in specific parts of the country, such as Guangzhou, Shanghai, or Beijing. In these places, foreigners have become a long-term and important aspect of the urban landscape, contributing to the increasing diversity of cultural, religious, linguistic and even political life. In the last ten years China’s large coastal cities have become global cities, cosmopolitan hubs that attract people from all over East and Southeast Asia and beyond (Pieke 2012).

Despite the persistence of the household registration system and minority policies that continue to be predicated on the assumption that it is the norm that people stay where they belong and have specific ascribed and unalterable statuses. Chinese society has changed almost beyond recognition over the past 20 years. Indeed, the paradigms of migration and diversity no longer seem adequate to describe many of these developments, especially in the last 10 to 15 years. Social and spatial mobility have become increasingly normal, an enduring aspect of life in China. A new generation of rural migrants – often the children of parents who were migrants themselves in the 1980s or 1990s – no longer seems content with temporary employment in the expectation of an eventual return to the village. Indeed, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish these highly rural migrants and city high school and college graduates who travel across China in search for work and a career, often staying in one place for no more than a few weeks or months (Siu 2007). China is moving rapidly in the direction of a nationally integrated job market, where regional and rural-urban differences no longer define and limit one’s chances, aspirations and destinations.

3. Unfolding modernities

The gradual dissolution of the work units and village collectives has broken down many of the old barriers and certainties of socialist society. In their stead a society is developing where the population consists of families, households and individuals who are free to achieve their life goals in ways and places of their own choosing. We should not mistake this for a gradual demise of the socialist system under the impact of market capitalism: in China, capitalism and socialist governance have proven to be
symbiotic rather than antagonistic (Pieke 2009). Yet despite the strengthening of the regime of Chinese Communist Party and the absence of a multi-party democracy and human rights, substantial gains in personal, economic and even political freedom have been real and sustained.

China has become a highly aspirational society with rapidly growing and increasingly wealthy and self-conscious middle and upper classes (Goodman 2008). For many such middle class Chinese, especially in the eastern coastal regions, modernity is both an achieved status and a promise of a better future. A belief in the opportunities to move up in the world by dint of hard work, thrift and ability is widely shared among the population, even among the most disadvantaged groups and in the face of rising inequality and the absence of a level playing field (Whyte 2010). The state promotes a discourse on the greater or lesser “quality” (suzhi) of the population, individuals and groups. The concept of “quality” quite deliberately conflates many different vectors and explanations of success (education, wealth, genetic makeup, rural or urban residence to name just a few). “Quality” discourse puts the blame for backwardness on those who are deemed backwards. It points to a strategy to achieve national strength and modernity that raises the “quality” of the population, in effect telling the losers of the reform process to catch up or else be permanently left behind (Anagnost 2004).

Perhaps the most visible example is education. Rising standards of living and the marketization of education have impelled hundreds of millions of middle class families to invest all their resources in the education of their one child. The aim is to score high enough in the nation-wide college entrance examination to get into a good university, and beyond that perhaps the opportunity to study abroad. For many families education has become a bottomless pit that they will continue to throw money in, often regardless of the expected return on the education received, a will to elite status with strong echoes of a Confucian past (Fong 2004; Kipnis 2011).

Housing is another aspect of the fundamental changes that have taken place. Rural Chinese always owned their own homes, but in the second half of the 1990s urban work units ceased to rent highly subsidized housing to their members. China became a nation of home owners. Residence now reflects choice, wealth, power and status, leading to a spatial sorting of the population in different types of neighborhoods that looks more and more like capitalist societies (Zhang 2010). Quite often, this is anything but a smooth process. Demonstrations, petitions and law suits against the demolition of old neighborhoods or the appropriation of rural land for development are rife; indeed, land and housing demolition are the most important issue of political contestation in China today (Hsing 2010; O’Brien & Li 2006). In conjunction with this shift, the government has responded to the weakening of work units to building up residential “communities” (shequ) as a key interface between local government and the population. In these new communities, local police, government agencies, property management agencies and home-owners associations are jointly responsible for local governance (Read 2012).

In rural China the hand of government weighs less heavily as in urban areas. Villages are no longer collective units of agricultural production, but continue to be central as units of residence, land rights and other entitlements. In the 1980s, villages played a crucial role in fostering enterprises, either privately or collectively owned; some of the
more successful among them evolved into genuine business conglomerates with a
diverse portfolio of holdings. Although the age of such “super-villages” seems to have
passed, villages located close to (or even enveloped by) cities control valuable land
that they can turn into a substantial source of income for the village and its members
(Hsing 2010; Siu 2007). After the reforms many villages have reinvented pre-
revolutionary ways to recreate and celebrate their sense of community. Fueled by the
increased wealth brought by the reforms, patrilineal kin groups, Christian churches,
popular religious temples, festivals and celebrations have become crucial aspects of
village life and governance, with formal village heads or party secretaries frequently
doubling up as lineage leaders, temple elders, or organizes of fairs, festival, or ritual
celebrations (Ashiwara & Wank 2009; Chau 2006; Jing 1996; Tsai 2007).

In 1949, China had only just started on the road to nation-building. By 1978, after
thirty years of unification and political integration, China had progressed
immeasurably farther. A unified spoken and written national language was now taught
in most high schools and universities across the country. An elaborate network of
national and local media (newspapers, radio, TV) reached into virtually all areas and
households. A sense of Chinese identity was shared across the country regardless of
the many local, ethnic and religious identities that existed. Yet it was only the
generations after the start of the reforms that fully became nationally Chinese. For the
first time, large numbers of children grew up speaking standard Chinese (Mandarin)
as their first language rather than a local dialect. Travel, tourism, and migration
created spaces and experiences that encompassed China as a whole (on tourism, see
Nyiri 2006). The commercialization of the mass media meant that national TV began
to cater to popular tastes, creating audiences of hundreds of millions of households for
shows, soaps and movies. More recently, the internet and social media have united
Chinese across the country into a plethora of virtual communities around any issue,
interest, or hobby imaginable. The hand of government censorship usually does not
weigh as heavily as is often thought and largely is limited to attempts at organizing
collective action or explicitly political activities (Yang 2009; Zhou 2006). Against this
background, it is not all that surprising that the 1990s and 2000s have been the age of
the growth of popular nationalism, which sometimes is virulently jingoistic or even
racist. Some of this is no doubt due to careful nurturing and manipulation by the
regime, but a more important explanation seems to be that for many people only in
this era China began to exist and be experienced as a lived-in reality (Gries 2004).

The erosion of work units and collectives, social and spatial mobility and the
emergence of a national space have been complemented by the individualization of
Chinese society, or, as Chinese sociologists sometimes put it, Chinese have changed
from being “people of work units” (danwei ren) to “people of society” (shehui ren).
Individualization in China is sometimes linked to a deterioration of social norms and a
lack of social responsibility and at odds with traditional Chinese culture that
emphasizes group membership (especially the family) and the relatedness of the social
person (cf. Yan 2010). Norms of reciprocity and social obligations, already under
pressure during the collective and early reform period when they often deteriorated
into the instrumental use of “personal connections” (guanxi, see Yang 1994), are now
thought to be further in decline. Market exchanges and contractual obligations backed
up by the rule of law leave less space for favoritism and the manipulation of personal
relations (Gold et al 2002). In the private sphere, the traditional Chinese emphasis in
the Chinese family on the obligations between parents and children has given way to
personal choice in marriage and the primacy of conjugal relations between husband and wife (Yan 2003).

In terms of gender relations the reforms have proved to be a mixed blessing. While the Maoist period was certainly not a feminist utopia, increasing labor participation and education of women nevertheless meant a huge improvement. In certain respects, the reform period further improved the position of women, especially in the cities. With the one-child policy (Greenhalgh & Winckler 2005) many couples are raising a single daughter and cannot and do not want to treat her any different than they would if their single child had been a son. However, in many other places things were not quite so simple. Rural couples in need of a son to continue the family line and as security for old age often feel forced to abort, abandon or not register a baby daughter. China’s sex ratio is now dangerously skewed with in some places 150 or so men for every 100 women. Tens of millions of children and young adults, many more of them women than men, were born illegally and have none or only very few rights.

The forces of the market and social inequality also impinge on gender relations. Rural-to-urban migration has provided a way for many young rural women to become socially and financially independent from their parents, husbands, or parents-in-law. However, many of these women find themselves into potentially very exploitative situations as live-in domestic help, in sweatshops, or in the sex industry (Yan 2008; Zheng 2009). The wealth, social inequality and scarcity of women generated by the reforms and the one-child policy have led to many forms of commercialization and commodification of women and sexuality. These include a steep hike in brideprice for marriage, concubinage, prostitution, and smuggling or trafficking of women. This is rapidly developing a transnational dimension. Women from for instance North Korea or Southeast Asia come to China to marry Chinese men, while others end up the sex industry. Conversely, married Taiwanese or Hong Kong men are known to maintain a mistress in Shanghai or the Pearl River Delta (Grillot 2012; Shen 2005)

Modernization, wealth, individualization and social and spatial mobility create a whole new diversity of life styles. Like in other developed societies, these life styles are techniques of the self that are driven personal choice and inclination rather than ascription and are informed by fashion, mass media, peer groups and popular culture. Some of these life styles define communities of belonging within the anonymous environment of China’s megacities; others are a matter of individual consumer choice and identity construction (Gerth 2010). Sexual orientation and preference (Jeffreys 2006), modern art or pop music De Kloet 2010) and conversionary religions (Buddhism, Christianity, syncretic sects, Goosaert & Palmere 2011) are only some of the examples. The vast majority of such communities have little if any interest in political participation or activism. Nevertheless, the example of the Falungong demonstrations in 1999 shows that their impact can be very sudden and substantial, enough to trigger immediate suppression from the authorities.

China’s modernization of the last 30 years has been an unprecedented story of sustained success. Chinese have become immeasurably wealthier than they have ever been. Yet some real problems have emerged that in the long term threaten to undo many if not most of the quality of life gains of reform. Most elusive are the twin issues of environmental degradation and long-term demographic imbalances. Air, water and soil in many areas are now so polluted that they have become virtually
uninhabitable. In many places the environment has become a major cause of local political contention; added to this should be the rising discontent about food safety, particularly after scandals with tampered baby formula in 2006 and 2008. The Chinese authorities are now increasingly aware that a “pollute now, pay later” attitude no longer works and an impressive regulatory framework has been put into place. Yet genuine and sustainable solutions of the many problems have to be weighed against the competitive advantage of major sectors of the economy. In other places the damage already is irreparable or, perversely, pollution has become so much part of life that the local population either are ignorant of its harmful effects or has become so dependent on payoffs from polluting factories that they actually resist change (Lora-Wainwright 2009; Weller 2006; Yan 2012).

Demographically, China lives on a time-bomb. Until 2013, the economy benefited from a demographic dividend (relatively few old and young people and thus a large working-age population). This dividend has now run out. Henceforth there will be a population deficit with relatively small cohorts of young people entering the labor force and relative large cohorts of pensioners leaving it (Park et al 2010). This problem is only in part a normal aspect of the demographic transition that all developing countries go through. It is made much worse by 30 years of strict, state-mandated family planning that still has not been abandoned for reasons that with each passing year become increasingly obscure (Greenhalgh 2008).

Whether China is able to overcome the challenges that lie ahead is not just a Chinese problem. China’s global impact is now such that what will happen there will be felt by us all. A stable, prosperous and confident China is in everybody’s best interest.

Bibliography


