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Father Mao and the Country-Family: Mixed Emotions for Fathers, Officials, and Leaders in China

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Abstract: What does it mean when Mao Zedong is called ‘father Mao’ and when ordinary people in central China put a poster of Mao in the place of the ancestors and the emperor? This article is about ordinary affection for the Chinese state, and explores changing ideas of the leader as a father and the country as a family. The first part deals with the historical transformations of such family metaphors from the late Qing dynasty to the present, describing the vernacularization and sentimentalization of the ‘Confucian order of the father/son’ in 20th century China. Against this historical background and based on fieldwork material from central China, the second part deals with the mixed emotions people have for fathers at home, local officials and national leaders now.

Keywords: Affect, Affection, China, Emotions, Mao Zedong, Political Anthropology, State

To avoid, therefore, the evils of inconstancy and versatility, ten thousand times worse than those of obstinacy and the blindest prejudice, we have *consecrated* the state, that no man should approach to look into its defects or corruptions but with due caution; that he should never dream of beginning its reformation by its subversion; that he should approach to the faults of the state as to the wounds of a father, with pious awe and trembling solicitude. By this wise prejudice we are taught to look with horror on those children of their country who are prompt rashly to hack that aged parent in pieces and put him into the kettle of magicians, in hopes that by their poisonous weeds and wild incantations they may regenerate the paternal constitutions and renovate their father's life.

Edmund Burke, *Works*, vol. 5, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906), pp. 206-207.

In farmhouses in the Enshi region of Hubei province, there is a clearly defined centre of the house, which is the back wall of the central room. This is the place of the house altar or shrine (E. *jiashen*, P. *shenkan*), which is now often replaced by a poster of Mao Zedong. In the past, people in villages of Bashan¹ had a scroll in the centre of house altar with Chinese characters saying “The position of Heaven, Earth, Emperor, Ancestors, and Teachers” (*tian di jun qin shi wei*). This scroll neatly embodies some core tenets of popular Confucian cosmology: the respect towards the principles of the cosmos (heaven and earth), the polity (emperor) and the (male) authority in local society (ancestors and teachers). Embodied in the paper scroll and enacted in ritual are a number of metaphors for authority and hierarchy, at the centre of which stands the principle of filial piety (*xiao*). Classical references from the Confucian canon point out the metaphorical equivalence between the ways the cosmos, the emperor and parental authority should be dealt with.

During the Maoist era, these house altars were taken away and replaced with pictures or posters of Mao Zedong and other revolutionary leaders.² At least the position of the Mao poster – which is still there in many farm houses in Hubei – would suggest that Mao has replaced the emperor and a series of traditional fatherly authorities. The way in which people in this region of central China refer to Mao suggests not only paternal authority, but also parental intimacy. Mao Zedong is popularly called ‘Father Mao’ (E. *Mao Laohan*’r³). Comparable to “*Lao Mao*” (“Old Mao”) in standard Mandarin, this expression can be translated as “My Old Man Mao”. Both imply familiarity and closeness, but while ‘Old Mao’ could also imply a kind of belittling informality, ‘My Old Man Mao’ clearly confers respect and reverence.

In Enshi and in the neighboring regions of Chongqing and Hunan, the term *lao-han*’r is generally used to refer to one’s own father. Mao Zedong is the only famous person this title is commonly attached to. Sometimes people did use the term for other well-known leaders, such as Liu Shaoqi or Deng Xiaoping, but not as frequently and as spontaneously as for Mao. And the term is certainly never used to refer to the emperors of the past or to contemporary leaders.

¹ I have done fieldwork in Bashan between 2005 and 2007, and revisited in 2011.

² In another paper I explore the significance of this replacement, and the potential awkwardness of the popular Confucianism embodied in the paper scroll and the rituals directed at it (Steinmüller 2010).

³ Throughout the text, Chinese words are written italicized in the standard pinyin form. Words in the Enshi dialect that differ markedly in pronunciation and meaning from standard Mandarin Chinese I have marked with an “E”. All other Chinese words in italics are part of the vocabulary of standard Mandarin, and only marked with a “P” (for *putonghua*, i.e. standard Mandarin Chinese) if it was necessary to distinguish them from the Enshi dialect (e.g. “street” is “E. *gai*” and “P. *jie*”). All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

What does it mean if people refer to Mao Zedong as ‘Father Mao’ and if they put a poster of Mao in the place of the ancestors and the emperor? I take this question as a starting point to explore changing ideas of the leader as a father and the country as a family in China, and on this basis I want to make some careful suggestions about the emotional relationships of ordinary people to the Chinese state.

In the following I describe the historical transformations of a set of metaphors in which the parent-child relationship stands in for the relationship between ruler and subject in China. I first trace the metaphorical equivalences between the father of the family and the emperor in the Confucian classics and tentatively describe a Confucian ‘order of the father’. Then I outline in broad strokes some of the changes this order underwent in Republican and Communist China in the 20th century. Against this historical backdrop, I discuss changes in family life and the relationship of ordinary people to local officials and national leaders.

I look at the affective dimension of the Chinese state through core kinship metaphors such as the father and the family. These metaphors, and the emotions they imply, are manipulated and negotiated in Confucian treaties on filial piety, in Maoist campaigns and in the contemporary propaganda discourse on the Chinese Dream. As emotion and sentiment, they belong to specific power relations in families and in wider society. Ultimately, I am interested in understanding the intersubjective intensities of such relations – what ‘flashes up’ and ‘resonates’ when people call Mao ‘My Old Man’ – and in this sense, in affect as a constitutive dimension of the social. But I am skeptical about suspending this dimension into a realm that is pre-subjective, pre-discursive and pre-representational, as suggested by various writers in the growing literature on affect (e.g. Massumi 1995, Mazarella 2010, see also the introduction to this volume). Hence I try to grasp something of these emotional intensities through a description of the historical background of these family metaphors and through an analysis of their equivalences in various scales of politics and power relations in contemporary China.⁴ Emphasizing the historical and social context of emotion and sentiment (similar to Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990), most of my examples will be from emotional discourse and discourses on emotions; the general approach of this article is therefore a ‘narrative’ and linguistic approach to emotion and sentiment (cf. Beattie 2014).

A Chinese Order of the Father/Son

‘Affective States’, or the concern with sentiments and management of emotions by state power (Stoler 2004) has a longstanding history in China. Many debates of the Mandarin elites centered on the effective harnessing of emotions for the sake of governance. Such elite discussions of the ‘Great Tradition’ were transmitted through various channels into the ‘Little Tradition’ of ordinary commoners’ everyday life. In this context, the propagation of ancestor worship and popular ritual, and its transmission and rectification by lineage elders and local intellectuals played a particularly important role (Faure 2007).

⁴ In this sense, I find myself in agreement with Mathijs Pelkmans (2013), who emphasizes the difficulties of ethnographies using ‘affect theory’ in accounting for variation and specific power arrangements.

As mentioned in the beginning, a paper scroll with the inscription ‘heaven, earth, emperor, ancestors, and teachers’ was commonly put at the centre of the house altar in many regions of central China. When interpreting the inscription in the houses of commoners, Chinese intellectuals such as the Confucian philosopher Yu Yingshi have referred to the following often-repeated lines from the book of *Xunzi*, a Confucian classic:

Ritual principles (*li*) have three roots: heaven and earth are the root of life, the ancestors are the root of commonality, rulers and teachers are the root of order. If there were no heaven and earth, how could there be life? If there were no rulers and teachers, how could there be order? If only one of those three is missing, there is no peace and security for humankind. Hence rituals (*li*) follow the heaven above and the earth below; they venerate the ancestors, and exact rulers and teachers, since these are the three roots of all ritual principles (*li*).⁵

In such descriptions of Chinese ritual, symbolic equivalences are established between the rules of the cosmos, and the behavior towards the emperor, ancestor and teachers – precisely the references that are given on the paper scroll. When burning incense in front of the scroll and bowing towards it, the same ritual act extends towards the cosmos, the polity, and the family, and separates above and below, inside and outside. When ritual (*li*) is performed in appropriate ways in all those realms, it is accompanied and reproduces emotional dispositions, the most fundamental of which is *xiao*, filial piety. If *xiao* is first the disposition of a son to his father, it has been frequently said to be at the root of the attitude and action towards superiors and rulers. The paragraph on “Filial Piety of Inferior Officials” (5) of the Classic of Filial Piety (*xiaojing*) explains:

As they serve their fathers, so they serve their mothers, and they love them equally. As they serve their fathers, so they serve their rulers, and they reverence them equally. Hence love is what is chiefly rendered to the mother, and reverence is what is chiefly rendered to the ruler, while both of these things are given to the father. Therefore when they serve their ruler with filial piety, they are loyal; when they serve their superiors with reverence, they are obedient. Not failing in this loyalty and obedience in serving those above them, they are then able to preserve their emoluments and positions, and to maintain their sacrifices. This is the filial piety of inferior officers. It is said in the Book of Poetry: Rising early and going to sleep late, do not disgrace those who gave you birth.⁶

In this text, as in many other classical texts of the Confucian tradition, the relationship between son and father, and subject and emperor is equalized symbolically. While the relationship between this elite textual tradition and the everyday social life of commoners is perhaps the most important question of the history of late imperial China, there is no doubt that the ideal of filial piety, and the metaphorical series extending from fathers to officials and emperors, was of crucial importance in the ideology of government.⁷

Elsewhere, anthropologists and other social scientists have described similar metaphorical systems as an ‘order of the father’ (Mitscherlich 1963; 1969; C. Delaney 1995; Borneman 2004): a

⁵ Quoted by Wu 1985a[1917]:110 and Yu 2004.

⁶ This is the translation by James Legge (1879:470-471), available online at <http://ctext.org/xiao-jing> [accessed 25/11/2011].

⁷ See for instance David Faure’s book on the history of state and lineage in Guangzhou with the programmatic title *Emperor and Ancestor* (2007).

symbolic order which metaphorically equates the father-figures in families, in politics and in religion. Typically, this might be described as the series of father-in-heaven, father of the country, and father of the family (in German: *Gottvater*, *Landesvater*, *Familienvater*, c.f. Borneman 2004).

Mitscherlich, Delaney, and Borneman write about Turkey and Germany; contexts which were shaped by Abrahamic religions. In the quotes above, and embodied in the paper scroll in the centre of farm houses in Hubei, we have seen a similar metaphoric series, in which the relationships of subjects to rulers and sons to fathers are equated. But there are also notable differences between the Abrahamic order of the father and the Chinese one. I take it that there are at least two main differences: the Chinese order of the father is not grounded in transcendence, that is, in the existence of god-the-father, but instead immanently, that is, in the functioning and practical necessities of families and communities. Secondly, rather than the power of the father, the Chinese order emphasizes the obedience of the son. For both arguments, my reference is Gary Hamilton (1990), who argues that patriarchy and patrimonialism in China and in Europe mean quite different things. According to Hamilton, in Europe patriarchy refers to the personal power of the father (*patria potestas*), which is justified transcendently. In China, patriarchy is the power of a role, justified immanently through the workings of a family or a polity. Perhaps risking a gross simplification, Hamilton contrasts the power of the father in Western patriarchy with the obedience of the son in Chinese patriarchy.

But the ‘order of the father/son’ in China is far from timeless. All elements of this order (the authority of the father and the emperor, the cosmological links between them, the principle of filial piety and its ritual enactment) have been subject to intense attacks by elite intellectuals since the late Qing dynasty. Systematic criticism and condemnation of these discourses was an integral part of the Communist revolution. Nevertheless elements of this order survived in popular practice and ritual. While fighting the older order of the father, the modern state in China also relied in various ways on the metaphorical equivalence between the father at home and the father in politics.

As elsewhere (cf. Delaney 1995; Carsten 2004:chapter 6; Benei 2008:89), the vocabulary and metaphors of kinship have been crucially important for producing senses of national belonging in China (e.g. Duara 1996:45-46). The influential translator and intellectual Yen Fu, for instance, wrote in 1914 that nationalism – ‘love of the country’ – should derive from traditional Chinese familism (*jiating zhuyi*) and its basic principle of filial piety (*xiao*) (Nakayama Kujiro 1940 quoted in Levenson 1969:106). Since the last years of the Qing dynasty, nationalism defined the attachment to one’s country in a new and more emotional way: instead of ‘loyalty’ to one dynasty, people should ‘love’ the country-family (as is obvious in the Chinese word for nationalism or patriotism – “love-country-ism”, *aiguo zhuyi*, and the ‘nation-state’, which is the “country-family”, *guojia*). While nationalism was still seen as separate from the chaotic world of politics in the last years of the Qing dynasty, it was linked to the party state in the rise of the nationalist party (cf. Harrison 2001: chapter 8). In this context, then, the first president of the Chinese republic, Sun Yat-sen, became the “father of the country” (*guo-fu*). The spread of the new cultural forms of the nation was couched in the language of the new government’s ideology, and the emotional attachment to the nation was systematically made equivalent to an emotional adherence to the party state.

The communist revolution further intensified the emotional links to the party-state via family metaphors. The revolution promoted new radical ideas of popular sovereignty and mass representation. Party cadres and officials in the new mass organizations were supposed to ‘serve the people’ and be present in the everyday life of the people. Whereas before the term ‘public servants’ (*gongpu*) was used for yamen runners and other ‘servants’ of local offices, now it became a term to be used for everyone in the hierarchies of state and party; from local peasant officials up to national leaders, everyone should be a ‘public servant’ (*gongpu*) and ‘serve the people’.

The ideal that local officials should be like parents to the people (*fumuguan*) had existed long before the Communist revolution. In this ideal the hierarchical relationship between officials and people both replicated and encompassed the relationship between parents and children. But the communist revolution brought local officials much closer to ordinary people. First of all, officials were just more present at the grassroots level and there were more of them, when compared with the republican era or the empire. According to official ideology the new rural cadres should “eat, live and work together with the peasants” (*yu nongmin tong chi, tong zhu, tong laodong*). Ordinary people, cadres, and national leaders were supposed to be united in the revolutionary spirit of ‘comradeship’ (*tongzhi*)⁸, self-sacrifice and modesty (*pusu*). Just like the local officials in the villages, the language of comradeship and of revolution was constantly present in everyday life.

Chairman Mao was worshipped as the ‘great leader’ (*weida lingxiu*) and the ‘red sun’ (*hong taiyang*), but he was also a ‘comrade’ who stood with the ‘masses of the people’ (*renmin qun-chong*). Against this background, it makes sense that local villagers in central China would refer to Mao Zedong as their ‘old man’ (*laohan*’r). This local expression captures well the combination of hierarchical and egalitarian elements in the political persona of Mao. He was the chairman and great leader, but he was not exactly a ‘traditional’ father or an emperor, being emotionally much closer to ordinary people than those had been.

Like the other leaders of the communist revolution, Mao was to be addressed by his professional title (chairman) and his common name. That was quite different when compared with the emperors of Chinese history. No one would have dared to directly address an emperor by his name; in fact, people were not even allowed to mention his name except using honorific titles.⁹ Mao was also not the stern father of the Confucian tradition. This tradition had emphasized the respect and obedience in the relationship with one’s father (as in the expression *yan fu ci mu*, a ‘strict father and a loving mother’); surely Mao also inspired respect and obedience, but perhaps more importantly his public representation relied on the emotional bonds created by the suffering he endured together with and for ‘the people’.

Maoism, as a form of governance, relied fundamentally on mass mobilization, in contrast to Stalinism, which emphasized institution-building and bureaucracy.¹⁰ The engineering and manage-

⁸ For the rise of comradeship in Communist China, see Vogel 1965.

⁹ Such as *shengshang* (the holy and exalted), *bixia* (your majesty), *tianzi* (the son of heaven); there were complicated sets of honorifics to refer to the emperor’s health (*‘longti*’, ‘the dragon’s body’) and his feelings (*‘longyan*’, ‘the emperor’s face’).

¹⁰ Mass mobilization, including the management of political sentiment, did also play an important role in the Soviet Union (see for instance Kotkin 1997 and Kharkhordin 1999). But Stalinism was more successful than Maoism in

ment of emotions was of crucial importance for Maoist mobilization. This kind of “emotion work” has been described as a combination of discursive and emotional innovations. Core themes, such as victimization, redemption and emancipation, were rehearsed using specific techniques of propagation, such as personalization, magnification, and moralization (Liu 2010). Accordingly, family and kinship metaphors played important roles both in the discursive and organizational innovations of Maoist governance.

While the history of these kinship metaphors (and the emotions for the state they imply) is very complex, for the sake of argument I want to emphasize that modern nationalism and the communist revolution meant a departure from a previous ‘order of the father/son’. The most obvious differences, it seems to me, are:

First, the condemnation of the previous ‘order’, including all of its elements and the principles of filial piety (*xiao*) and ritual (*li*). But even though the previous ‘order’ was attacked as ‘feudal’, it still continued to influence the way people structured their ordinary everyday practice (compare the house altar) and in some way it also influenced the new discourses of socialist governance (as rulers became ‘parents’ and the state ‘a family’).

Second, the new metaphors of the state-family came in a new vernacular language that was markedly different from classical Chinese. In imperial China, the metaphorical equivalence was primarily given in classical Chinese. Certainly there existed also vernacular discourses which drew similar equivalences (as shown in the paper scroll mentioned above). Now the metaphors were given in the vernacular print language of the nation-state (which was cleared of formal expressions and honorifics). The introduction of a standardized national language (*putonghua*), modern schooling and mass literacy, the spread of mass media (including radio, cinema, newspaper) and perhaps most importantly the extension of the state bureaucracy to the village level, came together with a qualitative change in the language – the ‘world structure’ – of family and nation.

And finally there was a qualitative difference in the way the metaphor was emotionalized; this qualitative difference could be called a ‘sentimentalization’ of the metaphor. Certainly in the past the metaphor also stood for the emotions between parents and children, the kind of emotions referred to and specifically the way in which these emotions were evoked changed. While in the past the focus was more on propriety, obedience and protection, now it was often about moral indebtedness and emotional attachment: a language of love, really (as in modern nationalism – “love-country-ism”, *aiguozhuyi*). And this language was more emotionally expressive, linked as it was to the new institutions of the nation-state, from flag-raising ceremonies to parades to communist campaigns.

Compared to the empire, the unquestionable hierarchy of ruler and subject has been transformed into an emotionalized link between the party, its leaders and the people. Both the imperial and the communist relationship are based on affective debts between the two sides, yet the language

establishing new bureaucracies of government and industry, and after the Stalinist purges the government did not mobilize the entire population in mass campaigns comparable to the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution in China (for comparisons of mobilization and bureaucracy in China and Russia, see Bernstein 1967; Schurmann 1968; Bernstein and Li 2010).

and character of the relationship has changed. The imperial hierarchy can be described in its manifestations as a series of exchanges in ritual, in tributes and in vows (cf. Gibeault forthcoming). The emotional effect of these exchanges has been called ‘*en*’ in Chinese, meaning both the benevolence shown by the ruler and the gratitude of the subject. *En* is also the ideal attitude between the state and the people in the People’s Republic, but the communist revolution further emphasized the emotional character of mutual indebtedness. In other words, the currency of the exchange has become affective, as the parental relationship to the state became vernacularized and sentimentalized.

All the violent denial of tradition notwithstanding, Mao and the communist revolution could not start from zero. They had to insert themselves into an existing system and discourse. On the one side, they created a whole new world (with new categories, new time-lines, new stories, c.f. (Apter 1993; Apter and Saich 1994; Liu 2009:133-171). Yet at the same time the previous system and discourse – including its core metaphors – also transformed Maoism. More than 30 years have passed since the death of Mao and the era of Reform and Opening has seen further changes in family structures, as well as in the meanings of family metaphors in public life. In the next section I will sketch some important changes in the family and in the polity and try to outline some of the features of the family-state metaphor in contemporary China.

Mixed Feelings for Fathers, Officials and Leaders

Having discussed the historical background of the family-state metaphor in China, the following sections deal with its current transformation in changing social and political environments. To this purpose I will summarize briefly some important transformations of family life, local and national governance, which provide the social setting of the kinship metaphor. Different to the past, the social relationships to fathers, officials, and leaders in contemporary China are characterized by a heightened sense of ambivalence, which is perhaps best called ‘mixed feelings’. In the following I describe some of the changes that took place since the 1980s with examples from my fieldwork in Bashan, Hubei Province.

The Father at Home

In Bashan, the place where I did fieldwork between 2005 and 2007, most young people do not work on the farms of their parents any longer. Some have found jobs in the local tea industry or as small traders, but the majority of young men and women leave their home for some time to work in the cities, often far away in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen.

Only in the most exceptional circumstances are marriages still arranged by parents. There might be an uncle who acts as a “go-between” (*meiren*), but often this role is only sought for the ritual purposes of the wedding, after the young have found themselves and sometimes even lived together for some time, if they have been outside the village for a long time. At such crucial occasions as family and house divisions, the young tend to be much more assertive than in the past, and part of the reason is that most of them are earning their own money outside of the village now.

Here I will not go into detail about the changes in family life and marriage decisions in particular, in Bashan (my observations are broadly in line with the accounts given by Yan Yunxiang (1997; 2003; 2010) and others about the rise of the conjugal family in rural China in the reform era). What is safe to assume is that the most striking difference from the past is that children spend less time together with their parents and have more space to take their own decisions, especially in terms of marriage, but also in other spheres. Corresponding to this is an increased sense of the negotiability of emotions, and especially younger people have become much more expressive. Yan Yunxiang describes this change in relationship to romantic love (Yan 2003: chapter 3); the relationship of children towards their parents has undergone a parallel change in which more emphasis is put on the conscious expression of emotional attachment.

Writing about the importance of conjugal love, parental love and filial piety in relationship to the problem of suicide, Wu Fei compares the old hierarchy of Neo-Confucian roles with contemporary family relationships:

In traditional China, the hierarchy in a family helped family members to live a stable family life. When a father acts like a father, a son acts like a son, a husband acts like a husband, and a wife acts like a wife, everyone gets the authority and respect that he or she is supposed to get, so the family is in harmony and justice is maintained.

While there is no such hierarchy in the modern Chinese family, familial love is as important as ever. Without the protection of the traditional hierarchy, justice in the family is maintained through subtle games of power. In such games, familial love is not only the beginning and end of domestic justice, but it is also often used as moral capital. (Wu 2009:45)

The development Wu Fei paints is one from a more unconscious hierarchy towards a more conscious negotiation of power, in which ‘love’ becomes “not only the beginning and end of domestic justice, but [...] is also often used as moral capital”.

Parallel to these transformations of emotional relationships between parents and children in families, the control and influence of local officials has also changed considerably.

Local Officials

As mentioned above, there is a longstanding Chinese tradition of the ‘good official’ who delivers justice to the people and who is like ‘a parent’ (*fumu guan*). Contemporary officials, however, are only rarely described in these terms. Up until 2003, most village cadres in Bashan were ordinary farmers from the village. They were mostly older men, who were also respected as men of standing in the village. They often acted as coordinators at family celebrations, such as weddings, funerals and house inaugurations. Younger cadres who started working in the last ten years generally don’t live in the village; they only participate very rarely in any such family celebration, and obviously do not have such close links to the people in the village.

Clearly, the standards according to which such village cadres are evaluated locally are also extremely different. Whereas the older cadres had to appeal to the judgment, the gossip and the respect, of villagers, the younger cadres are mainly responsible to their superiors in the government hierarchies. Besides those old peasant cadres and the new full-time professional cadres, there is a

new type of official very common in rural China now: the farmer, who is both a successful businessman, and a local official.

The village mayor of Zhongba is a particular example in this respect. Zhu Yuan was the first woman to be elected village mayor of Zhongba in 2006, following one year when there was no village mayor in office. Most villagers I asked about the elections told me that they are meaningless since it is the cadres themselves who will choose the village mayor. Zhu Yuan married into the village here, and her husband Yi Hongyun is a relatively wealthy man in the village, boss of two small tea factories, and one of the bigger tea traders in Zhongba.¹¹

Zhu and Yi command a very prestigious position in the village community. In their families, many networks of kin, friends and colleagues come together. And here the necessary links between the locals of the village and higher government are formed. Ordinary villagers would much rather approach them than those officials who were outsiders to the village. Hence they are also the necessary intermediaries between villagers and officials who are often not so familiar with the locals. To act as go-betweens and to ‘get things done’, officials such as Yi Hongyun and Zhu Yuan need to maintain a wide network of personal relationships with officials, businesspeople and local villagers. For this in turn, they need to be relatively well-off, otherwise they cannot engage in the necessary relationships of give-and-take required.

In the networks of this ‘power couple’, there are also some businesspeople and men with a somewhat dubious reputation. For instance, Kang ‘the second’ (*lao'er*) is an ex-convict who lives in a big house in the township and runs a restaurant there. Kang has served several prison sentences for various crimes including assaults, robbery, and battery. He is now “retired” (he says of himself) and lives an ordinary life as a family man and restaurant owner in the township. But gossip has it that he has still a lot of influence in local affairs, mainly because government and police “are afraid of him”.

Another frequent guest in the major’s house is their neighbor Fang, who has been a soldier in the PLA and participated in the Vietnam War (1979) when he was young. Now he is a farmer and does some tea business, but he is also a notorious fist fighter and he is the man to ask if you are concerned about your security in Bashan. At a birthday celebration in the house of the major we had a long chat, and over tea and cigarettes he told me stories about fights he had in the past and how to handle a brawl at family celebrations – in fact the mayor had ask him to take care of ‘security’ at this birthday party.

Such officials might indicate not the return, but the emergence of ‘the broker’ of the classical anthropological literature (cf. James 2011). The rise of brokers in local politics bespeaks a transformation of power relations that is very different from ‘paternalistic’ forms that might have been more common even in Maoist China. Various Chinese sociologists and anthropologists have written about the differences between the former peasant officials and the new farmer-businessman-official. Dong Leiming (2008) and Tan Tongxue (2010:71ff) describe the rise of

¹¹ Several of the journalist teams that have visited Zhongba have also reported this household as a model of economic success in Zhongba. According to one report published in a national magazine, Yi Hongyun makes an annual income of 150000 Yuan from his tea plantations, tea production and business.

‘elite politics’ (*yingying zhengzhi*) and the ‘rule of power’ (*lizhi zhengzhi*)¹² in rural China. Both of them compare the present situation with a (perhaps idealized) past in which there was a ‘rule of elders’. Both refer to Fei Xiaotong’s classic portrait of rural China as “China from the Soil” (1999[1946]), which included one chapter on the ‘rule of elders’ (*zhanglao tongzhi*) (Fei 1999:368-371). In this chapter, Fei describes the kind of paternal power that is most important in local communities in rural China. According to him, this kind of power is exercised neither by force nor by consent, but “a kind of power that emerges in social reproduction, educational power, or fatherly power (*babashi quanli*), what in English is called *paternalism*” (Fei 1999:368-371).¹³ This kind of ‘fatherly power’, according to Fei, is not only the power of fathers in families, but also the power of elders in local communities; which according to him are traditionally governed by a ‘rule of elders’ (*zhanglao tongzhi*). The same Chinese ethnographers I quoted above, Dong and Tan describe a transformation of local ‘rule of elders’ à la Fei towards ‘elite politics’ (*yingying zhengzhi*) and the ‘rule of power’ (*lizhi zhengzhi*). They contrast a rule of seniority according to traditional Chinese notions of moral propriety with contemporary governance in rural China in which wealth, the manipulation of human relations, and sometimes the threat and exercise of violence play decisive roles.

Bifurcation

Villagers – especially those who are not-so well-off – often compared the likes of Yi Hongyun and Zhu Yuan with the ‘good officials’ of the past. ‘Good officials’ were both the respected elders who managed community affairs, but especially the revolutionary officials of the past. As mentioned above, revolutionary cadres were supposed “to eat, live and work together with the peasants”, as the revolutionary formula had it. This formula was still pronounced for the officials of the working groups implementing the “New Countryside” programs in 2006¹⁴ – but those officials almost never ate with farmers, let alone living and working with them. Actually local officials only rarely visited farmhouses at all, especially those houses that were located a bit further away from the single tarmac road of Bashan. When complaining about the corruption of local officials, people often noted the difference to the ‘revolutionary cadres’ of the past, who had shared their meals with the peasants. Now the township officials are “fat, rich, and ‘full of

¹² Tan Tongxue describes such politics in the sense that local power holders, often also local gangsters, use force and sometimes violence to govern (Tan 2010:185-198; 403-404, 423-426).

¹³ In the original version, Fei called this kind of power “fatherly power” (*babashi quanli*). It is interesting to note that he directly referred to the English notion of paternalism, and provided the Chinese translation for this social scientific notion, rather than referring to the numerous references on filial piety in the Confucian canon. “既不是横暴性质，又不是同意性质；既不是发生于社会冲突，又不是发生于社会合作；它是发生社会继替的过程，是教化性的权力，或是说爸爸式的，英文里是 *paternalism*。” Gary Hamilton and Wang Zheng translate this passage as follows: “... there is another kind of power that is neither dictatorial nor consensual, a kind of power that arises from neither conflict nor cooperation. Instead, this kind of power emerges in the process of establishing an orderly succession in society, a kind of social reproduction, by which social power and privilege are passed from one generation to the next. A succession of this kind rests on power generated through education and through patriarchal privilege, or what is normally called ‘paternalism.’” (Fei 1992:114)

¹⁴ One of the documents outlining the objectives of the working group in Zhongba reads as follows: “[...] the members of the working group are supposed to eat, live and work together with the peasants” (Enshi City 2006b).

tricks”, a farmer would declare with indignation, “and they certainly have never come to my house.”

Local officials in Bashan not only compare badly with the good officials of the past. Another benchmark which is often held against local officials are higher officials and national leaders. Many people imagine these higher levels of government as just and benevolent. Let me give an example.

Zhao Mucai is in his early thirties and we became friendly early on in my fieldwork. Mucai had already been married, but the previous year his wife and his baby son were killed in an accident, and since then he had been living at home, working with his father. He had been outside in Fujian and Guangzhou working on construction sites, but now his greatest worry is to buy a new house of bricks and concrete and find another bride for himself. His father is not very well received by most neighbors in their hamlet, and he had many arguments and fights, mostly around the borders of their fields and the amplification of the public road here, which led through one of their fields. His mother used to write many petition letters, and with their fighting they made it twice into the newspaper of Enshi city; many neighbors think they are troublemakers.

During the evenings I spent at their home, Zhao Mucai’s mother often told me about all the suffering they had to endure at the hands of their neighbors and local officials, and about the overall corruption and malice of the local cadres. She even showed me a story that had been published about their case in the Enshi Daily newspaper. I read that she had met the head of Enshi prefecture in person, in a session that he had given for people who were coming to petition. He had received her, and she had told him all the injustice that they had to suffer in the village. The chairman immediately sent a group of officials to her village to investigate the case. The officials duly arrived to investigate the case, but when I visited the family for the last time half a year later, the legal issue remained unsolved.

“This is a capitalist society, a society for corrupt officials”, the mother said to me. At the same time she emphasized that the officials on the higher level of government are generally highly educated, they are civilized and have a “high population quality” (*suzhi gao*) – all meaning that they are good and benevolent. She backed that up by saying that she had met many officials on all levels, from the village to the prefecture level; and the best official she had met was the head of the entire prefecture of Enshi.

Such a state of affairs, in which local officials are thought of as malicious and corrupt, whereas higher levels of government are imagined as benevolent and good, has been described by Guo Xiaolin (2001) as a ‘bifurcated state’. Whereas people have closer material relations with local officials, leaders higher up in the hierarchy stand in a more ‘symbolic’ relation to everyday concerns. This separation of high and low officials resonates with ancient hopes for the ‘good local official’, embodied, for instance, in the semi-mythical figure of Judge Bao. Numerous stories exist about the figure of Bao Zheng, who was a government official in the Song dynasty. In numerous plays, novels, and folktales, Bao persecutes criminals and corrupt officials, and brings justice to ordinary people who have been wronged. One main difference between local officials in the times of Bao and contemporary China is simply their numbers: since the establishment of

the People's Republic, the local state has expanded continuously and the numbers of local officials in villages and townships is now much higher than in imperial China.¹⁵ Together with increased numbers came a much closer engagement between local populations and government officials. And with this deeper engagement, the possibilities of disappointment have also increased.

The symbolic and emotional relationship to the national leader, as paternal figure, has been transformed substantially at the same time. As I have pointed out above, the kinship metaphors used for national leaders were vernacularized and sentimentalized in Maoist campaigns, and this process continues in propaganda practice and in schooling (see next section). The more sentimental and vernacular way in which ordinary people refer to national leaders since the establishment of the People's Republic further intensifies the 'bifurcation' between the leaders high above and the local officials down below: The former are distant, yet emotionally close, whereas the latter are close, yet emotionally distant. And the management of political sentiment is still a core feature of propaganda and patriotic education in the People's Republic.

The national leader

Most schoolchildren in Bashan know one poem about Prime Minister Zhou Enlai: "Prime Minister Zhou, where are you" (*zhou zongli, ni zai nali?*).¹⁶ Composed after the death of Prime Minister Zhou, the poem commemorates the deceased leader in an extremely sentimental tone as the 'good prime minister of the people' (*renmin de hao zongli*) who visited the soldiers and the peasants and the workers and shared their joys and sufferings. The poem is said to be a tribute of the 'sons and daughters of China' to their leader. When prompted, many of my younger friends in Bashan could recite parts of the poem, and would readily admit that they felt very moved when reciting the poem and thinking about the good prime minister Zhou Enlai.

This kind of sentimental education in schools is an example for a careful management of emotions in education and propaganda. Such management still aims at the construction of familiar identifications with the state and its representatives.¹⁷ But the sentimentality towards Zhou Enlai now also has nostalgic overtones: the great leader of the past, who really cared about the people. Such sentiment, again, often contrasts the older generation of leaders with the mediocre leaders of today, and the higher levels of government with the lower. Paradoxically, it might seem, the familiarity and closeness in sentiment to the high and dead contrasts with the distance and sometimes hatred towards local leaders.

Contemporary leaders are also sometimes called by kinship terms. Wen Jiabao, the former prime minister of the People's Republic, for instance, was frequently called "grandfather Wen" (*Wen yeye*). The image he presented when he appears on TV is often that of a man of the people: Wen Jiabao plays basketball with schoolchildren, eats with students in the university canteen, and

¹⁵ cf. for instance Hamilton 1989.

¹⁶ See the Chinese text of the poem here for instance

<http://sincereandys.blog.163.com/blog/static/8584963820090965116150/>

¹⁷ Cf. Stafford 1995: chapter 6.

shares his meal with workers in the factory. And he appeared in disaster areas, such as the Sichuan earthquake of 2008¹⁸, or on sites of major social problems, such as when the milk powder scandal of 2008 erupted (one company, Sanlu, had adulterated baby's formula with melamine). The imagery he invokes is frequently that of a benevolent parental authority.

Especially Wen Jiabao's appearance with children who had been orphaned in the Sichuan earthquake was highly emotional. In one scene, widely broadcast on national TV, Wen comforts a weeping nine-year old girl, who had lost both parents in the earthquake, in a makeshift tent, surrounded by other children and government officials. The prime minister, himself close to tears, promises that the government would take care of her and her livelihood. Many Chinese friends in Bashan and elsewhere in China would say that watching this they also felt very moved. At the same time, when younger people told me they are "moved" by the prime minister's tears, and called him "grandfather", they seemed to distance themselves from such a statement at the same time. Commonly, when I asked people whether they thought that Wen Jiabao was a good leader and what they felt about his performance following the Sichuan Earthquake, people often said that they felt moved by the prime minister, that he seemed to be a 'good prime minister' (which might be a reminiscence of Zhou Enlai, who was called commonly the 'good prime minister of the people'). At the same time, others were quick to point ultimately it was just a PR show that he was performing. The assessments of Wen Jiabao seemed tinged with a touch of self-awareness and indirection, which could easily turn into a negative assessment of the prime minister's performance.

This is very different from the way in which Mao Zedong is addressed and remembered. Turning away from the programs on the TV screen, and listening to the elder generation, one can hear sentences such as "the old man Mao (Mao Laohan'r) wouldn't have it that way", in stories about the great Helmsman's heroic politics. Here the kinship address and the intentionality of the leader could never be doubted in the way that Grandfather Wen's can be; or it least the implication of (unavoidable) self-reflection was not present to the same extent.

Calling Prime Minister Wen Jiabao 'grandfather' is not quite the same as calling Mao Zedong 'my old man'. "Grandfather Wen" tends to be more a public-relations image: children on TV might call the Prime Minister 'grandfather'. And some young people send text messages for New Year or other occasions using the first names of prime minister Wen Jiabao and chairman Hu Jintao, using puns on their names, for instance *baobao* (which literally means 'treasure', but is also part of Wen Jiabao's first name; or 'Brother Tao', *taoge*, to refer to Hu Jintao). There are even websites for the 'fans of the assorted eight treasures rice pudding' (*shijin babao fan*), a word play on the first names of Hu and Wen. While such expressions also convey some kind of emotional closeness to national leaders, most people would agree that they are 'just fun' (*haowan'r*). They are more frequently used by the younger generation, who also makes more active use of text messaging and the internet.

Wen and Hu are certainly not thought of as 'father figures' in the way Mao Zedong is. When people mention them in everyday talk in Bashan, they certainly do not use the colloquial terms for father and grandfather. Much more common are instead the standard professional titles of

¹⁸ For an analysis of 'Grandpa Wen's' performance during the Sichuan earthquake, see Xu (2012).

‘prime minister’ (*zongli*) and ‘chairman’ (*zhuxi*). Yet people also frequently criticize the ‘fakeness’ and ‘superficial performance’ of politicians, including national leaders. Even though there is still an ongoing project of sentimentalization of politics, in the last decades ordinary people are increasingly worried about the sincerity of the intentions and feelings expressed by higher leaders. If the sentimentalization of Mao was experienced as something inevitable, in the China of now, where there is a multitude of possible choices in every sphere, feelings are also always potentially insincere and affective bonds fake.

We also see a clear difference between the representation of parental authority of Mao and Hu/Wen when we compare the verdicts of Chinese dissidents: If Mao has been called a ‘monster’ and a ‘socialist dictator’, Wen Jiabao has been described as “China’s best Actor” (Yu 2010). This speaks, I would argue, of the ‘mixed feelings’ produced by staged performances, when compared to the dilemmas and tragedies of Maoist political sentiment. In contemporary China, the emotions mobilized by the family-state metaphors are thus characterized by a heightened sense of ambivalence.

Conclusion: a changing order of the father

This article has dealt with the historical transformations of family metaphors, specifically the parent-child relationship, in China. Many of my examples have been from discourses about emotions and emotional discourse, broadly following a narrative approach to emotions (Beatty 2014). Yet, like most anthropologists writing about emotions, I have attempted to contextualize and historicise these emotions (Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990), that is, I have tried to put these narratives in the context of social changes in modern China. Through a description of the ‘mixed emotions’ for fathers at home, for local officials, and for national leaders, I suggest it is possible to grasp something of the affective intensities that are experienced in these relations modeled on the father-son and family metaphors in particular.

This historical and social background, then, provides some of the vectors of the emotions felt by people in ordinary life in rural China towards Mao, and other representatives of the central government. In many ways I am seeking to achieve something very similar to what others have done using notions of ‘desire’ and ‘affect’. But I am very cautious about suggesting anything beyond the adumbration of an affective environment that I have provided here. In this sense, this article has tried to delineate some of the boundaries of what is said and what is done about an emotional discourse and a discourse on emotions which link the family and the state.

It is evident that in contemporary China, metaphors such as the father and the family for national leaders and for the state continue to be salient. Sometimes they appear to directly contradict the self-interested actions of local officials. One way to avoid cognitive dissonance between the hopes for parental benevolence and not-so-parental local officials is to further bifurcate the state into father-like leaders high up, and non-parental leaders down here; as Mucai’s mother did in the example I quoted.

Yet at least in some instances, the possibility of a complete denial of the metaphor shines through: e.g. when a dissident calls Wen Jiabao “China’s best actor”, or when a farmer talks about revolutionary officials who went into farmer’s houses and compares that with one of the

local officials who is fat, rich, and ‘full of tricks’. These instances point to a complex field of affective engagements with the state and its representatives. In this article I have tried to relate this field to historical transformations of kinship metaphors in Chinese politics, and to changing power relations in Chinese society. Both form the background on which the ‘affect’ of calling Mao ‘my old man’ might be understood and, perhaps, felt.

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