

9 Implicit comparisons, or why it is inevitable to study China in comparative perspective

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There are a number of obstacles to sustained comparisons in the study of China, including the methodological nationalism of the social sciences, the Sino-centrism of Chinese studies, and the specialization of particular social science disciplines. All of them have to do with the supposed uniqueness of China. Even such a supposed singularity has to rely either on an implicit comparison, or on a rejection of comparison. In this chapter, we deal with the modes, motivations, and results of comparisons involving 'China'. We focus on the different ways in which scholars and laypersons have made comparisons involving China: including our colleagues, students, research collaborators, and we ourselves.

In our research and teaching, we have often faced the reluctance of students and scholars to allow for comparison, as well as the tendency to self-parochialize by launching Chinese concepts. Weighing different possible comparisons against each other reveals core argumentative motivations: examples from our empirical work and our teaching demonstrate the scopes, scales, and terms of comparisons that are implied in concepts of Chinese society, Chinese empire, and Chinese civilization. Ultimately, we hold that a comparative perspective is inevitable, because implicit comparisons motivate both academic debates and everyday politics, in China and elsewhere. We demonstrate how implicit comparisons are accepted as shared fictions, and what happens when they are revealed as such: core arguments made about Chinese society and Chinese empire only function as long as the comparisons necessary to the argument are left implicit.

Our first section deals with the problem of Chinese uniqueness, which ultimately has to do with the identity and essence of 'China'. The second section presents the case study of our teaching in a Masters Programme called 'China in Comparative Perspective', and specifically the challenges of comparative perspectives in teaching. The third part then deals with the implicit comparisons and shared fictions in the study of 'China', specifically in relationship to notions of 'society' and 'empire'.

What is China?

The territory occupied by the People's Republic of China since 1949 is fundamentally the same as the territory of China's last dynasty, the Qing (1644–1911): China is a land empire turned into a nation, and this is the basis of the claim of Chinese nationalists that China is a civilization-nation (e.g. Zhang 2012). Nationalism reinforces the centrality and the unity of this civilization that is recuperated from the past as 'heritage' and offers coherence and reassurance for the nation on its path through history. How is the particularity of local heritage, and the great variety of ethnic groups, cultures, and societies encompassed by the unity of this empire-nation? Because each is in China doesn't mean that it represents or is typical of 'China'. You cannot even say of what a local study is a case until you establish some dimensions of variability, such as closeness to a centre of political control or to a centre of economic accumulation. And that is just a very basic start. The temptation of the obviousness of the great entity is great enough to say of each study, of a village, a neighbourhood, or a market that it is a study of China. But beyond the contemporary People's Republic and the empires of the past, what is 'China'?

For economists and demographers, the state provides statistics, which are used for comparison with other national populations and economies. Broken down into their base units, they can also serve as parameters of variables for case studies. But though it is apparent and obvious that China is a territory governed by a single state, which like every other state conducts the perennial process of never completable unification, including economic integration, what that state consists of, how government works and the nature and extent of its agencies and authorized actors, all this also varies greatly and local studies add to the substance of variation and differentiation of the state institutions themselves. So, every local study is and must be framed by a comparison with previous and other local studies.

The anthropological study of China has clustered around particular forms of action, styles of living, and modes of reproduction: such are reciprocal and instrumental networking or 'guanxi', the ideologies of ancestors, ego-centred relationships defined by asymmetrical roles of deference and care, and rules of mediation, reciprocity, and propriety, including, for instance, 'face' (*mianzi*). Put into wider frameworks of economic class, status hierarchy, political rule, and cosmology, these can be first steps towards more far-reaching comparison. Indeed, anthropologists of China have at various times brought concepts derived from the study of social action in China into far wider comparisons, such as Maurice Freedman comparing lineage segmentation in south-eastern China under a state and its status hierarchy with lineage segmentation in the West Africa of kingdoms, chiefs, and earth cults as studied by Meyer Fortes and his colleagues in anthropology (Freedman 1958; 1979: 335).

Such comparisons are valid and worthy. But they have been almost immediately compromised by being carried back into China studies and findings about ‘China’, while being ignored in Africa studies. The anthropology, political science, and sociology of China have become auxiliary disciplines of area studies, separated from general debates in the respective disciplines (Stockman 2018). This is an obstacle to comparison. And it goes further. The burgeoning of social science disciplines in China and Taiwan has been self-parochialized by the search for home-grown analytic concepts, so that face, *guanxi*, and the differential system of relationships – to give prominent examples – remain tied to their Chinese contexts, and their possible significance ‘abroad’ ignored. Local studies are thus frequently related to questions of generalization within China; and the resulting concepts are scaled up and substantialized into ‘Chinese concepts’.

The social sciences of China do not have to reaffirm Chinese uniqueness, however. Comparison of ethnographies of ‘China’ can also lead to an interrogation of general concepts: case studies of local leaders in southern Fujian, for instance, can be used to revise and re-conceptualize Weber’s outline of charisma (Feuchtwang and Wang 2001). To do so, it is necessary to question the category of ‘China’ itself, and anthropologists, who do fieldwork and pay attention to local moral worlds, are well equipped to do so. As numerous field studies have shown, each locality differentiates itself from its neighbours by particular stories of origin and migration, by particular ways of honouring ancestors and ritually communicating with them, by its references to a pantheon of gods and celestial heights, and by its inclusion and encompassment into wider communities, societies, and civilizations. Throughout history, the most important encompassing unit for local communities rarely was ‘China’, and even today, it often is not the political unit of the People’s Republic, but rather particular visions of racialized identity, Chinese culture, or civilization.

At least since the first Chinese empire, and possibly earlier, outsiders have absorbed imperial cosmologies, or rejected them in favour of their own claims to civilizational superiority (Tapp and Lee 2010). This briefly is the way, by reference to minor differences and common criteria of scaling up, that the spatial expanse of the region can, using Marcel Mauss’ definition of ‘civilization’ as a shared mode of self-differentiation of cultures, be described as a single civilization (Feuchtwang and Rowlands 2019). Claims to a single civilization, as well as the realities of nation state rule today, have to be taken seriously: but even if we treat the corresponding civilization or nation state as a unity, we still have to examine the centring and distancing acts that create this unity. It is also imperative to distinguish between ‘Chinese civilization’ and the People’s Republic of China: even though the government of the latter explicitly claims to be the bearer of Chinese civilization today. The solidarity of nationalities (*minzu tuanjie*) here is premised on the division of the population into constituent nationalities that share the common essence of the ‘Chinese nation’ (*zhonghua minzu*). Local self-other differentiation

among those classified centrally as Han is just as much ignored as local differentiation among those centrally classified and administered as a 'minority nationality', and the subsequent differences between self-descriptions and identification by others have become a central theme in the anthropology of China.

Even so, we adamantly believe more generalizable comparison is possible. In the following, we describe how it can be done, on the basis of our experience teaching a Masters programme that puts China in comparative perspective. What is more, we believe that making comparisons is in fact inevitable, both for ordinary people and for China scholars: rather than a universal of human thought (which it might well be), we will argue that comparison is inextricably linked to our knowledge of entities such as empires and societies, including those related to 'China'. In the third part of this chapter, we thus describe how comparisons implicitly motivate our understanding of China, what kinds of comparison Chinese cases suggest, and what happens when implicit comparisons are made explicit.

China in comparative perspective

The methodological nationalism of the social sciences, the Sino-centrism of Chinese studies, and the specialization of particular social science disciplines have made it increasingly difficult to engage in sustained comparative work. Even so, comparative social science of China is possible, and this has been the guiding principle of a Masters Degree on China in Comparative Perspective which the two of us have been running since 2008. We will describe our teaching of the core course of this degree as a short ethnographic example of comparison in action. The core course is designed to (and forces students to) read theoretical frameworks from various social science disciplines on the week's topic, as well as about both China as a case in that topic *and* another appropriate comparator. The topics include industrialization and urbanization, and a series of topics such as the demographic transition, changes in kinship, family relations, and gender, the formation of a modern secular state, and others, affected by industrialization and urbanization. They also include topics that start from what might be peculiarities of the Chinese state and its politics, such as Maoism, socialism with Chinese characteristics, and the current version of state-led capitalism. For each topic, we discuss relevant theoretical frameworks, such as Carl Schmitt's theory of the partisan or Eric Wolf's and Barrington Moore's comparisons of peasant revolution, and selected comparators, questioning whether any of the 'peculiarities' are in fact peculiar to China. It is an interdisciplinary social science course and degree, but we seek to include local studies as well as macro treatments of each topic.

More than half the students who take the course are Chinese, most from the mainland, but others from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and further overseas. They often say they are taking the course because they are interested in

seeing how we, as non-Chinese, view and treat China. In effect, this is a resistance to treating the studies of China that we ask them to read as cases for more generalized comparison.

The non-Chinese students have often spent periods of a year or more in China and are keen to learn more about the country, which is yet another narrowing down. Among both, there is a tendency to seek what is exceptional to China because the exceptionality of China is a matter of pride or it is an expectation or an exotic attraction. The strength of the course is that it challenges exceptionalism, including not just Chinese but also European or North American, or for that matter Indian. For instance, we can challenge any of our Chinese students to say whether there is anything that is uniquely Chinese.

At the same time, we side with Chinese, as we would with any non-metropolitan anthropologists, in challenging by means of China studies the unstated assumptions of Euro-American social science theories and analytic concepts. But we do so only where those studies show the concepts and theories to be inadequate. For instance, does neoliberalism adequately describe the management of the market economy and the fostering of individual opportunism in China (Kipnis 2007)?

We don't accept that the origin of a theory or of a discipline or of a descriptive assumption makes it centric, Eurocentric, or Sinocentric. Neither is it sufficient simply to show that it is ethnocentric. We care more to bring critical comparison to bear and thus to improve and expand the theory or the discipline. For instance, the theory of the Chinese differentiated self and its 'role ethics'¹, put forward by the Chinese comparative anthropologist Fei Xiaotong in the 1940s (Fei 1992), predates Marilyn Strathern's 'dividual' (1988) by about 40 years. Both Fei and Strathern attack the assumptions of methodological individualism and prompt historical explanations for their own cases, as well as further studies of the comparative differences between New Guinea, post-Enlightenment Europe, and modernizing China. It's the comparison, the differences, that are stimulating, not the critique of centrism. The comparison expands the discipline and its concepts. So, even though it is difficult to take a comparative perspective because of reasons such as China's supposed uniqueness as a civilization-nation, it is possible. These are our ideals. In practice, it has been difficult to bring a comparison beyond finding what is the difference of China from its comparator. It is difficult to bring the comparison to bear on the analytic framework and turn it into a conceptual reformulation. All too often one-to-one comparisons become contained dichotomies. But even that increases the student's view over a number of weeks of comparison, for instance extending comparison and critique of the concept of industrialization by comparing eighteenth- and nineteenth-century northern Europe with the Chinese political economy of that time, as well as with the industrialization of Meiji Japan's economy and then the much more recent industrialization of the Chinese economy. Reconceptualizations of industrial productivity, of 'market', of regulated

market, of autocracy, and eventually of political economy as such are implicated.

On another level, taking a comparative perspective is not just possible, it is inevitable, because of the strength of implicit comparisons – that is, comparisons that are ignored, un-reflected, and left unspoken, but at the same time, and because of their hidden nature, provide impetus and thrust, both to academic argument and everyday politics.

Implicit comparisons in the study of China

We have already mentioned above some of the difficulties that arise when asking explicitly ‘what is China?’ As we will try to show, both in the social sciences of China, as well as in ordinary people’s everyday discourse, a number of comparisons of ‘China’ remain implicit. This has to do both with the nature of thought and communication anywhere (a problem we will not deal with in detail here, but which is addressed elsewhere in this book). Cognitive and psychological questions aside, we address the rhetorical and political issues at stake in comparison: accepting a particular comparative framework implies rejecting other possible frames. Generally, some part of the argumentative groundwork for such a comparative framework needs to remain implicit, lest the argument becomes arbitrary. In the following, we show this with examples of (implicit) comparisons of China as a society and as an empire. We will focus in particular on moments when these comparisons are made explicit and discussed in the open. The first question however has again to be, what is ‘China’?

Society and individualism

The definition of ‘Chinese society’ was the starting point for a number of influential outlines of Chinese sociology and anthropology. Fei Xiaotong’s concept of the ‘differential mode of association’ (*chaxu geju*) in his collection of essays ‘China from the Soil’ (Fei 1992) was perhaps the most famous attempt to suggest a systematic comparison between the essences of Chinese and Western sociality. It should be noted that the comparison between China and the West is entangled here with oppositions between tradition and modernity, and countryside and city, among both Chinese and non-Chinese scholars. Various anthropologists have pointed out that underlying this comparison is a series of symbolic equivalences characteristic of modernism: the peasant family in the village, the countryside as a social arena, and China as a nation, trapped in backwardness and tradition, each in turn opposed to another set of symbolic equivalences: anonymity and individualization in the city, urban life as a social arena, and Western nations, empowered by progress and modernity (Liu 2002; Wang 2007; Steinmüller 2011).

Already before Fei Xiaotong, a number of Chinese thinkers, from Kang Youwei to Liang Qichao to Liang Shuming, had used similar oppositions.

What is remarkable about the terms they used is that many of them emphasized the (supposed) organic unity of Western society in comparison to the incomplete and self-isolated individualism of Chinese society. Liang Shuming, for instance, in *The Essence of Chinese Culture* (1987, first published 1949) compared a society based on professions in the West with a society based on ethics and ritual in China. In this perspective, family-based ethics and the ritual affirmation of social roles cannot create the formal rules required by modern institutions and specialized professions, and therefore Chinese society lacks the cohesion of Western society. He concludes that China should introduce Western science and democracy, so as to be able to build the social cohesion that is necessary for national strength.

Studying Chinese society as outsiders, Western social scientists similarly struggled with comparisons between ‘China’ and a somewhat idealized ‘West’. And just like their colleagues in China, Western anthropologists frequently collapsed the opposition between ‘the West’ and ‘China’ into the opposition of ‘modernity’, and ‘tradition’. These were crucial questions in the sustained attempt of Maurice Freedman to apply anthropological and sociological concepts to the study of rural China. As with many other anthropologists of his generation, Freedman never questioned the implicit methodological nationalism of Durkheimian sociology. In his classical anthropological outlines of the lineage in Chinese society (1958, 1966), as well as his studies of popular religion, marriage, geomancy, and funerals (1974, 1979), Freedman paid a lot of attention to empirical variation, as well as to the influence of the imperial state on local society. He noted variation, differentiation, and status hierarchy but kept them within bounds by a fundamental reliance on the basic legacy of Durkheim’s influence on British social anthropology, that is, the assumption of a social whole, in relationship to which the functions of various sub-systems are explained.² This assumption of an ethnically based social whole was later criticized, including in his posthumous *Festschrift* (Feuchtwang and Baker 1991): perhaps Freedman ignored such risks, but the idea of the social organism attached to a supposedly ‘traditional’ society offered a particularist essence for China within the framework of universal modernity. The core assumption of Durkheimian sociology – that societies are social totalities in equilibrium – therefore supported the classification of the world into nation state units.

While social scientists, more or less implicitly, contrasted Chinese society with Western society – either as lacking the organic solidarity and the supposed unity of Western society (Fei, Liang), or implying an abstract unity of traditional society (Freedman) – similar concepts also motivated Chinese politicians and thinkers to advocate change. Sun Yat-sen had famously claimed that the Chinese people were just like ‘a pile of loose sand’ (*yi pan san sha*): self-centred, bound by kinship and place, and held back by poverty and ignorance – and hence the challenge was to ‘unite’ the people so as to create a strong nation.

This brings us to Chinese social analysis and implicit comparisons in the context of revolutionary China. Even though Marxist historical philosophy centred on class struggle, Maoism as a political movement aimed similarly at uniting the people within the communist state under the guidance of the vanguard party. It should be emphasized that many Chinese peasants got accustomed to the word ‘society’ in the form ‘society-ism’, i.e. socialism (*shehui zhuyi*), and they learned about it in the campaigns and movements of the 50s, 60s, and 70s. The communist revolution achieved an unprecedented state presence in local society, with much higher numbers of officials per population than ever before in Chinese history and was thus a major unifier of society.

Much has changed since the policies of reform and opening took hold in the 1980s. A new pluralism of lifestyles and consumer choice has arrived in China. But the meanings and uses of the word ‘society’ still have something to do with this historical background. There is a broad contrast between ‘society’ (*shehui*) in official discourses, where it refers to a harmonious unity, and ‘society’ in popular discourse, where it basically refers to a jungle of strangers that can’t be trusted (as when parents warn their children to prepare before ‘entering society’, ‘*zou shang shehui*’). In the same vein, it is immediately understandable to the Chinese public that the motive of murderers who committed spree killings in nursery schools was to ‘take revenge against society’ (Steinmüller and Wu 2011). Both imply comparison. The Chinese state promotes its style of governing the social as a model that no longer needs to be compared to the civil society of electoral democracies. The jungle of strangers accepts a version of individualism that is purported to be evident in a global jungle.

A similar, implicit, comparison, as the one that motivated Chinese social scientists in the first half of the twentieth century (such as Fei Xiaotong), is at the heart of such popular discourses about ‘society’ in China today: while ‘society’, at an abstract level, and supposedly in ‘the West’, is an organic social whole, contemporary Chinese ‘society’ is an a-moral arena in which individuals rely on their own personal connections. It is worth noting that Durkheim and other social scientists of his time shared similar preoccupations, in particular, the moral confusion and disintegration – the ‘anomie’ – of modern industrial society. A preoccupation similar to Durkheim’s own is driving ordinary people, as well as social scientists, in their condemnations of ‘amoral individualism’ (Yan 2003, 2010): what we see is a set of implicit comparisons at work, between morality and amorality, and between society and individualism. Making the comparison explicit and pointing out that ‘society’ (whether as organic unity or anomic jungle) and ‘individualism’ (as in individual duties, or simply selfishness) are convenient fictions can be very disruptive, but also immensely productive for purposes of social analysis.

Other social scientists have suggested discarding the concept of ‘society’ altogether – or at least the Durkheimian version of it, as a social whole uniting and limiting individuals. The anthropologist Wang Mingming, for

instance, suggests studying ‘China’ as ‘all under heaven’ (*tianxia*), a ‘super-society system’, that is, as a civilization (Wang 2015). This is part of his outline of a new historical anthropology of China, calling for a renewed anthropological engagement with the historical transformations of core institutions (e.g. kinship, ritual, and exchange) and a turn away from the modernist preoccupation with contemporary development (e.g. urbanization, capitalism, and globalization) (Wang 2005).

Against the fundamental assumptions of modernist social science of a dialectic between individual and society (including its Cartesian dualism and methodological nationalism), Wang proposes a concept of civilization, which is fundamentally hierarchical and relational. The advantages of this proposal are palpable in the study of imperial cosmologies (Wang 2006) and the interaction of a civilizational centre with its peripheries and outsiders (Wang 2008). Such a Chinese concept of ‘civilization’ can also serve as a helpful reminder that empire and nation state, civilization and society, are not neatly separated by the arrival of modernity. It is also enlightening to look at the introduction of the concept of ‘society’ to China, and the entanglement of notions of ‘society’ and ‘civilization’. And here we arrive at another fundamental point for comparative study, the proposition that denial of comparability is characteristic of civilization and empire – and perhaps also the study of civilization and empire. Inherent within any civilization is its claim to be unique, or uniquely ‘flourishing’ (*hua*) as Chinese proponents write of the core territories of the empire.

Empire and the compulsion to find coherence

In Chinese history, a crucial question has been the unity and disunity of the Chinese empire – what held the empire together? A classical approach to this question was the study of social transmission between the ‘great tradition’ of the literati and the ‘little tradition’ of the commoners (first proposed by Robert Redfield 1956). Yet few scholars explicitly tackled the study of both. More commonly, they focused on either the ‘great tradition’ of scholars, or the ‘little tradition’ of commoners. This division of labour is partly due to the approaches of different disciplines, in particular history and anthropology. Anthropologists, based on their methodology of fieldwork, even in historical studies, often neglected the impact of the scholarly tradition on rural communities.

James Watson, for instance, in his introduction to a famous volume of historical and ethnographic studies of death rituals in Taiwan and mainland China (Watson and Rawski 1988) detected in them all a core sequence, a conformity which, he suggested, amounted to an assertion of Chinese identity. Watson argued that it was primarily the following of correct practices (‘orthopraxy’), rather than correct beliefs (‘orthodoxy’) that was essential to Chinese identity (Watson 1988). Even though traditional funerary practice in Han Chinese communities broadly corresponds to Watson’s sequence,

there are also notable exceptions and regional differences (Sutton 2007). And even if local practices are uniform, the general question remains what such uniformity means. In a way, Watson's argument rests on a theoretical impossibility: practices that are executed without having meaning or value to their practitioners. The meanings of funerals, however, often speak of an aspiration to orthodoxy, and the social impact of written text. Rather than the defining feature of 'Chinese ritual', orthopraxy is actually what distinguishes commoners from intellectuals, as Angela Zito (1993) points out: ordinary people primarily act, and intellectuals primarily work with texts. Both are concerned with practice and meaning, and the ideological separation of orthopraxy and orthodoxy helps solidify the social distinction between commoners and intellectuals. Zito, therefore, lays bare the consequences of a comparison left implicit: only by not revealing this comparison is it possible to claim that 'orthopraxy' defines Chineseness.

On another level, Watson's argument is propelled by a second implicit comparison, which is that between different forms and meanings of ritual, and the question of how ritual creates coherence: obviously, orthopraxy is the opposite of orthodoxy, but does this opposition mean that in acting correctly (orthopraxy), beliefs are absent? That there are no ideas or concepts involved in ordinary ritual in China? Watson comes close to claiming so but escapes this non sequitur by downplaying the possible comparison between Chinese ritual and ritual elsewhere: for instance, rituals in which statements of faith are repeated as orthopraxy, or acts of liturgy that become part of orthodoxy. Hence, Chinese ritual as 'orthopraxy' retains a pristine uniqueness, and argumentative strength.

This China-confined comparison also raises other important questions for wider lateral comparison beyond China: if there are particularly Chinese forms of orthopraxy, of cultural transmission, and of the interactions between commoners and elites in general, how would they compare to the same features in other imperial traditions? On this basis, can we compare entire 'civilizations' or 'empires'? Such questions have been neglected or, rather, suppressed by generations of anthropologists and historians: this occurred, we argue, when scholars essentialized the practices of the 'little tradition' (as Watson did) or vice versa, when they adopted the perspective of mandarin rulers. The latter problem, in fact, seems intrinsic to the very premises of the great and little tradition as outlined by Redfield (1956), where 'peasant culture' is described as a 'part-culture' in relation to the whole of a respective 'great tradition'.

Implicit but suppressed comparisons are at the heart of the question of the unity and cohesion of 'China' throughout history. From the perspective of the centre, there is a new imperative of the civilizational nation state: note differences as an internal comparison, which can be the ground for showing internal coherence. But it is open to question where to stop the observation of variation between and differentiation of local cultures. The borders of the civilization-nation are not an acceptable stopping point, because similar

local cultures are found on the other side, in Mongolia, or Korea, or Vietnam, or Myanmar. Even though apparently the People's Republic of China today and the Qing dynasty before 1911 had almost the same boundaries, the nature of these boundaries and the relationships between periphery and imperial centre then are surely different from the boundaries and categories in the People's Republic today. Most answers to such comparative questions about the nature of the Chinese empire, however, are a precondition for developing concepts to describe it as a whole: and hence Wang Mingming's notion of a relational 'civilization' is an exception because it breaks down every hard distinction between peripheral cultures and classified nationalities, including the majority nationality of Han Chinese.

Similarly, few social anthropologists have made social transmission, both ways between the 'great' and 'little' traditions an explicit focus of their studies of China (but see Ward 1977). Engagement with the sociology of cultural transmission within civilizations, and the interaction of 'great' and 'little' tradition, has remained a side show of academic debate with a few notable exceptions, such as Steven Sangren's (1984) attempt at a synthesis. His outline led into a complexity that was rarely taken up by other anthropologists after him, except in one notable contribution again by Wang Mingming who took a comparative route to remark on the continuity of little traditions across Eurasia (Wang Mingming 2017). While Sangren suggests unifying the study of religion, markets, and society for an understanding of the dynamics between local society and imperial centre, other scholars have continued to focus on either of these aspects. Meanwhile in the study of popular religion in China, the question of unity and diversity within Chinese traditions remains central (Weller 1987; Feuchtwang 2001).

Feuchtwang (2001), for instance, argued that it was precisely the incongruity between the local and the imperial models that was at the core of both political conflict and unity: local deities were often more carnal and martial, as against the ideological harmony of Confucian propriety promoted by the empire. Precisely, such differences could be turned against each other and provide the background for protest, rebellion, and repression. But this too has been left in Sangren's side road and it was confined by the wish to generalize about China.

The Communist revolution of the twentieth century used much of the symbolism of earlier peasant rebellions, such as the colour red and the imagery of sworn brotherhood against the corruption of a dynasty in decline. When reading accounts of everyday violence and rebellion in central China throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties, such as William Rowe's magisterial study *Crimson Rain* (2006), the implicit comparison with Mao Zedong as a messianic peasant rebel – turned – emperor is apparent.

Ordinary people, explicitly or implicitly, make similar comparisons between today's rulers and the emperors of the past. One friend in Hubei, for instance, told Hans Steinmüller that his grandfather had lived 'under five emperors': Pu Yi, the last emperor of the Qing dynasty; Sun Yat-sen, the

father of the Republic; Yuan Shikai (who crowned himself emperor in 1915); Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the Republic of China, and then Mao Zedong. Another neighbour said ‘the last emperor, Zhu Rongji, changed the fortune of China’s peasants’. Obviously, in public, the presidents and chairmen of China are not called emperors, as this would be an unmistakable contradiction to the principle of popular sovereignty in the ‘People’s Republic’. Yet, it was challenging to the regime itself to strike a balance between having a supreme leader and limiting the cult of a person, under Mao Zedong (Leese 2011), and the same issue is evident under Xi Jinping today.

These implicit comparisons go deeper, however, than just calling communist party leaders ‘emperors’. If the communist revolution itself relied on earlier imageries of peasant rebellion, similar registers of language and performance are widely used in contemporary China. These include, for instance, the persona and attitudes of the ‘rivers and lakes’ (*jianghu*), a Chinese genre of knights errant. Ordinary people, writers, businessmen,³ and others often invoke these characters, or even style themselves according to the ethics of chivalric romance. These ethics are based on the personal allegiances, trust, and obedience between sworn brothers, which are said to be more sincere than the mendacity of life at the court, or official party discourse today (Osburg 2016).

What is perhaps implicit in such invocations is a comparison of actual behaviour with imperial propriety: the core claim of the *jianghu* is to uphold ethical authenticity against the mores of decay. The stories of *jianghu*, of personal devotion and bravery, obtain their vigour from implicit comparisons, that is, comparisons that are never spelt out, such as the comparisons between commoners and elite, and between cultural ideals and present reality. Indeed, the implicit comparison is put to practical use: to laud and to criticize a certain state of affairs.

Comparisons with imperial China are not only used to criticize the politics of the day. They are also used to emphasize the cultural continuity of Chinese civilization in the service of the civilization-nation. When describing the Chinese approach to international politics as a ‘tianxia system’, for instance, the political philosopher Zhao Tingyang (2005) might be simply defending Chinese hegemony.⁴ Perhaps the most ambitious statement in this sense is the book by the historian and philosopher Gan Yang, *Unifying the Three Traditions* (2007), which argues that there is fundamental unity that connects Confucianism, Maoism, and Dengism – ultimately all based on the same essential civilizational core. These are the officially endorsable continuities of the centre, which attempt to but do not inclusively incorporate the continuity of little traditions, which not only share some of the same references, but also others not included such as those of fortune-telling and other condemned superstitions that have their own civilizational, cosmological centrality.

A characteristic of these civilizational and imperial metaphors is denial of comparison. Here we can begin to make explicit the comparison of empires

and civilizations, starting with a negative example and going onto a potentially productive example, one that could become a comparison. Empires don't like to be compared, as they aspire to universal validity. The problem is obvious in some hyper-nationalist outlines of China as a civilization. Moluo's book *China Stands Up* (2010) asks for an end to the critique of China's national character. He argues that throughout the twentieth century, many intellectuals unfavourably compared China to the West and, in fact, were bound by a common assumption that China was fundamentally inferior, what he calls the 'theory of [national] depravity' (*liegen lun*). Moluo's suggestion, then, is simply to forget and erase this history, for the sake of national pride and strength.

In the new historical anthropology of China, we see a similar tendency, even though it is infinitely subtler.⁵ We already mentioned above Wang Mingming's suggestion to study China using Chinese notions of civilization, such as 'all under heaven' (*tianxia*), imperial ritual, and the tribute system. Wang and his students have produced a series of important analyses of the transformations of imperial ritual and cosmology (Wang 2012), the intermediary circles of social exchange at the Chinese periphery (Wang 2008), stranger-kings at the periphery of Chinese empires (Liang 2009), and of many other topics within a larger framework of a relational civilization. In Wang Mingming's own work, the focus is on particular Chinese understandings of myth – he has for instance suggested that legends about imperial exchanges can be analysed as a set of structural directions and transformations, or what he calls a 'directionology' (Wang 2014). This study is enlightening and refreshing, as it turns around the principal foci of attention of much of the study of China (most fundamentally, in Wang's historicization of particular Chinese views of 'the West', long before the emergence of a Eurocentric, i.e. 'Western-centric', world). Yet the persuasive power of Wang's argument relies to some extent on the absence of a systematic comparison with other imperial formations and their cosmologies of civilization. In fact, the concept of 'directionology', as one of the most specific theoretical outlines of this school of thought, characteristically stands by itself, even though arguably other imperial spaces and polities could be shown to share similar features – e.g. in the exchanges between imperial centre and periphery and how they structure space (Wheatley 1971), and in the cosmology of galactic polities (Tambiah 1977).

Implicit comparisons, shared fictions, and complicity

As we have seen, comparisons of societies and empires are not the preserve of social scientists, but are crucially important to everyday, practical politics. As long as comparisons remain implicit, they can be used as 'shared fictions', which allow for political struggle. Implicit comparisons are convenient lies, that is, lies that are not intended to deceive, but which simply conceal, or tacitly bypass, their comparative context. Robert Weller has recently emphasized the importance of such shared fictions in informal politics in

China (Weller 2017): political actors often share the convenient lie that they are acting within the law and within the boundaries of what is acceptable, when in fact it is obvious that their actions push the boundaries of law and convention, or squarely go against the requirements of either. The implicit comparison is with what is formally ruled and officially expected. Weller emphasizes the pervasiveness of such shared fictions and their flip-side, which is that they are tacitly acknowledged by the authorities. The social dynamics of shared fictions are very similar to what Steinmüller (2013) has discussed as the work of ‘communities of complicity’, that is, communities that are formed on the basis of a shared local knowledge that is condemned by public discourse: for instance, villagers who gamble for high stakes yet describe the same as entertainment and amusement to outsiders, or officials who take part in local worship and family celebrations, while deploring rural superstition and wasteful custom in public.

As we have tried to show here, implicit comparisons can be the stuff of which such complicity is made. Both in informal politics, and in scholarly discourse, revealing the terms of such comparisons can be a political move itself. Revealing those comparisons is tantamount to exposing a lie and explicating the scale and scope of such a comparison means to destroy the political strength and coherence of the argument that relies on this comparison. If, for instance, someone was to ask every time the word ‘society’ is used, ‘what is the scope and scale of comparison on which your notion of “society” relies?’, it would nullify the use of ‘society’ in a political struggle, which relies on the indisputability of the value of the term. The same is true even more categorically for ‘empire’, and concepts related to imperial governance, ritual, and civilization: using the words ‘dynasty’ (*wangchao*) or ‘emperor’ (*huangdi*) to speak about contemporary Chinese politics amounts to implicit criticism; and to open ‘empire’ and ‘civilization’ out to historical comparison makes the historical contingency of Chinese empire and civilization explicit, and an assessment, including in normative terms, possible. Similarly, when the focus turns to the comparison of different empires and civilizations, it will be difficult to maintain the belief in the uniqueness of the Chinese path.

There are a number of ‘shared fictions’ that are based on implicit comparisons and which have been central to the study of China. The first one we have discussed is the fiction that ‘China’ is a society lacking the organic unity of Western society. If not attached to ‘the West’, the ideal of society as an organic unity itself might be described as an ‘implicit comparison’. And it is this shared fiction which has motivated numerous Chinese sociologists and ordinary people who are worried about social anomie and individualism.

Some Chinese historians and anthropologists have suggested debunking this shared fiction of society and replacing it with others, in particular civilization and empire. But here we have identified another series of comparisons that are never spelt out in detail: (1) the comparison of little tradition and great tradition, and their respective modes of transmission;

(2) the comparison of different civilizations and empires. But the contrary is even more evident: the strength of not comparing. The argument about ‘orthopraxy’, for instance, relies on the lack of comparison between little and great tradition; and the strength of many arguments made about Chinese cosmology relies on the lack of comparison with other imperial cosmologies.

Conclusion

The question of what ‘China’ is, and what ‘the Chinese people’ are like, motivates everyday distinctions drawn between locals and outsiders, as well as political and academic debates. We have tried to demonstrate that both informal politics and academic argument often rely on the persuasiveness of implicit comparisons. Such implicit comparisons are the shared fictions on which Sino-centrism and methodological nationalism rely. Making such implicit comparisons explicit has motivated a number of anthropological debates, such as those around the unity of Chinese popular religion. Revealing such implicit comparisons is an explicitly political move. If ‘political’ refers to the power games that pitch actors against each other into different camps, then pointing out the invisible fencelines that give coherence to the opponent’s position is indeed the ultimate political move. Such revelations are central to everyday politics in villages, as well as to academic debates in seminar rooms. We have shown the effects of this play between concealing and revealing comparative frames in relationship to notions of ‘society’ and ‘empire’ in China. Core arguments made by ordinary people and scholars alike rely on leaving some elements of comparison untouched and unsaid.

We have observed a series of cases showing how comparisons are rejected and suppressed. The tendency to resist comparison was exposed already in the 1920s by Marcel Mauss: ‘Societies live by borrowing from each other, but they define themselves rather by the refusal of borrowing than by its acceptance’ (Mauss 1920: 242–251). This is true within the spreads of variation between cultures that constitute a civilization. It is also true of the centring that characterizes every civilization, and in particular a nationalized civilization, as well as a regional culture and its claims to uniqueness. Its occurrence elsewhere should be of interest to anthropology. So too should be the necessary lies, or fictions of reference to the state and to the social as tokens of contention and rule. Their use as political tokens of descriptive truth can be a common ground for comparisons between empires, between nation states, and between non-state social formations.

Notes

- 1 Numerous anthropologists and sociologists have used Fei’s concept; the philosopher Roger Ames has recommended developing Fei’s relational ethics into a general understanding of Confucian role ethics (2011).

- 2 Freedman also wrote about China as a ‘complex society’ and a ‘civilization’, but very much in the colloquial sense of ‘oriental civilization’, that is, an aggregate of societies, which might require particular methods (and particular attention to written sources about history and variation), but emphatically not the dismissal of the core assumption of a social totality (which motivated anthropological holism and had been developed and tested in the studies of relatively small societies). Note for instance the following passage from his Malinowski lecture in 1963

I am not sure that I myself know what a complex society is, or, more accurately, where along a continuum from most to least simple a complex society can be said to fall; but I think I know when I am in the presence of a civilization. In a civilization an ethnographer cannot do what ethnographers have done elsewhere; total society is beyond his individual grasp. And yet, if he is to be informative when he pronounces on his findings, he must have had access to material bearing on the total society and be able to bring his own work into relation with it. It is in this limited sense that anthropologists working on China must aim at the total society. Of course, the more competently they equip themselves in history and sociology, the larger the circuit they will be able to cover, although it is not necessary to assume that their activities as straightforward field ethnographers of the old type are of no use in the grand enterprise.

(Freedman 1963: 10–11)

- 3 Under the leadership of CEO Ma Yun, employees of the hugely successful internet market Alibaba are encouraged to adopt nicknames, usually based on the martial art novels of Jin Yong, i.e. the *jianghu* genre (Lee 2018).
- 4 Zhao Tingyang’s ‘tianxia system’ builds on the outlines of Fairbank (1968) and others of the imperial tribute system of ‘tianxia’, ‘all under heaven’. For a criticism of the culturalist, sino-centric, and normative assumptions, see Zhang 2011.
- 5 For an overview of contemporary Chinese anthropology see Ji and Liang (2018) and Zhang (2018).

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