

SOME BRIEF REFLECTIONS ON STRUCTURAL CONTINUITY IN CHINESE PEASANT SOCIETY

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Introduction

A NEW book by Sulamith H. Potter and Jack M. Potter portrays the life of Chinese peasants in a district of Dongguan county, about half-way between Hong Kong and Guangzhou. *China's Peasants* compares the underlying structure of the society during three different periods: pre-revolutionary (before 1949), revolutionary and Maoist (1949–76), and post-Maoist (late 1970s to early 1980s). Using villagers' personal accounts, historical documents and information gathered in fieldwork, the Potters provide a comprehensive picture of the peasants' life. In addition to discussing the great tradition, formal party ideology and policies highlighted by the state and cadres, the Potters also concentrate especially on the 'little tradition', the actual daily activities of the peasants. Indeed, their book is one of the few published anthropological texts to draw on direct observation of, and participation in, life in mainland China since 1949.

At first sight, there seem to have been big changes in the 'traditional' pattern of peasant life after the revolution and throughout the Maoist regime. One only has to think of land reform (1949–51), collectivization, the Great Leap Forward (1961–63), and the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Nevertheless, as the Potters acutely observe, these rapid changes are in many ways superficial. In a closer

investigation, one notices that there is a marked degree of continuity in the deep structure of the culture. The new socialist, collective forms of Marxist communism were subtly remoulded by Chinese minds and were indeed saturated with old structural ideas. After providing a brief summary of the main theme of the Potters' book, I want to try to suggest how one might provide a deeper understanding of the persistence of these structural forces with special reference to the notion of the 'individual', drawing, in particular, on my experience as a Chinese native of Hong Kong, particularly concerned with the study of my own culture.

A Summary of China's Peasants

Before the revolution of 1949, the peasants of the three major villages in Zengbu were organized as a localized, corporate, single-surname patrilineage (p. 252). The patrilineage thus formed the dominant social unit in the local area: all patrilineal residents were closely attached and subordinated to it. The élite and the gentry who had retired from the bureaucracy were the basic representatives of the lineage and were responsible for the daily activities of its members. They controlled its economic, social and political aspects, maintained its internal law and order and defended its interests against hostile lineages. Thus the lineage was a multi-functional organization.

During the Maoist regime, the subordination of the peasants to the lineage was opposed, since lineage organization was discouraged by the Communist Party. Under the radical collectivization movement of the Great Leap Forward, the collective production team became the only significant social organization in Zengbu. The collective production team was consciously created by the Party in order to lead the way to a new culture based on the values and ethical system of communism. It was conceived as a means towards revolutionary change, i.e. towards destroying the ideological pillars of the old culture, as seen by the new: familism, sexism, nepotism, blind marriages, clannishness and superstition (p. 95). It was intended that loyalty to the collective would replace loyalty to kin and lineage (p. 255).

In reality, no matter what form the collective took—team, brigade, higher-level cooperative or commune—it had a group of property-owning and managing, patrilineally related men at its core (p. 262). In fact, social ties formerly based on membership in a collective never superseded ties of affinal and consanguineal kinship. The old rules of patrilineal inheritance and patrilocal residence persisted unchallenged.

Potter and Potter note an even more striking connection between the content of the old lineage and the new collective (p. 263): that is, the relationship between the old lineage genealogies and the new household registers. The household

registers of brigades, like the old lineage genealogies, were documents that legitimized the membership and property rights of the men entered in them (*ibid.*).

Instead of the gentry and *élite* of the old days, today the Party controls local affairs through the cadres, who oversee such activities as the building of reservoirs, canals, embankments and pumping stations for drainage and irrigation. Indeed, the responsibilities formerly held within the lineage are now under the control of the collectives. Moreover, the cadres also act as intermediaries between the state and the public: they make persuasive visits to families reluctant about the implementation of collectivization (p. 65). This process of persuasion is actually a replication of the role the gentry and *élite* performed in the old days and is thus, again, not an innovation of the new order (*ibid.*). Through the cadres, individuals are under the total control of the production teams, brigades and communes. The individual as a team member is drawn into and subordinated to the group and is just as inseparable from family and lineage as in the days before liberation. As the Potters remark (p. 98), the new social form was inherently Chinese in enacting the same assumptions as the old.

It is possible, however, to take the argument further. The state, in fact, consciously encouraged individuals to challenge the dominant force of kinship structure. In the Cultural Revolution, children were taught to denounce their parents, the age-old institution of family and clan graveyards was discouraged and ancestral tombs were relocated (Hsü 1968: 603). In the Great Leap Forward, agricultural labour was relocated to produce iron and steel for the state. As Hsü (*ibid.*) remarks, it was the first time in Chinese history that people were encouraged to become aware of themselves as individuals in the direct service of the state rather than the family.

In the post-Mao era, the administrative reforms re-emphasized the importance of the single-lineage village, or a localized segment of a multi-village lineage, as a unit in China's rural administrative structure. The old village lineage community has been revived as an economic and administrative base (p. 257). Ancestral cults and dragon-boat races, both of which symbolize lineage identity, have also been revived. Overall, these revivals of the lineage village and its identity reveal the continuing dominance of the kinship ideology.

Although the ultimate ownership of land will remain collective under the de-collectivization movement, rights to the use of land are now being inherited by sons, following the old patrilineal inheritance rules (p. 266). The auction of rights to such collective property as land also follows the logic of the traditional relationship between the lineage and its ancestral estates and between the production team and its collective property (p. 173). The implementation of the production responsibility system in the post-Mao era, with its collective ownership and private management of the means of production, is a move towards an arrangement that resembles the handling of property and production under the pre-revolutionary lineage system. This production responsibility system is a mode of production in which households work on their own allotted share of land. The obligation to labour is derived from family membership rather than team

membership, and organizational decisions are made by the head of household rather than the team leader (p. 265).

To summarize: no matter whether before the revolution, under the Maoist regime, or after the Mao era, whether in the lineage or the collectives, the kinship system acts as a dominant multi-functional organization. Indeed, the collective team is structured and moulded on the implicit model of a traditional kinship group. As the Potters remark (p. 268), kinship structure is so dominant that it resists the sustained attacks of the revolution. To understand more deeply the persisting structural force of kinship, however, it is necessary to discuss, with some empirical examples, the notion of the individual in general. I am not going to give here an analysis of the relevant concepts like 'self', 'person' etc. I wish only to discuss the attributes and nature of this 'kinship ideology' with special reference to the individual.

The Individual in Chinese Philosophy and Society

Under the influence of Confucianism and Taoism, the Chinese have stressed equality among individuals at birth (Munro 1969: 179). Such an attitude implies that society is obliged to maintain the proper conditions for each individual to develop morally. But it does not follow that each individual should be treated equally as an adult (ibid.). This is a descriptive equality, different from the evaluative equality of the West, which implies the egalitarian treatment of all people. It is rooted in the Christian belief in the equal worth of men: God values all souls equally and does not recognize worldly hierarchical distinctions between men (ibid.: 2, 180).

The individual in Chinese society is bound by permanent ties that unite closely related members of family and clan into relationships of mutual dependence with hierarchical attributes (Hsü 1967: 291-2). This contrasts, for example, with the individual-centred American, characterized by a self-reliant personality and egalitarian attributes; his relationships with closely related human beings being only temporary. The Chinese mutual dependence relationship, with its hierarchical attributes, is rooted in the dominant dyad of father-son in the Chinese family (Hsü 1968: 583). It is also the basic content of *wu-lun*, the five main social relationships in Confucian thought: father-son, husband-wife, elder brother-younger brother, king-minister, and friend-friend. *Wu-lun* is a theoretical construct, but it affects the way people behave. In highlighting the *wu-lun*, Confucius enjoined individuals to act from the very earliest stage in the process of familial socialization according to their status in the social structure.

In each pair of social relationships within the *wu-lun*, each individual is influenced greatly by the expectations of the opposite party regarding his or her specific role positions, his hierarchical relationship between these positions, and

a code of conduct governing the relationship in terms of social norms and virtues. Indeed, the individual is supposed to act according to the famous Confucian doctrine of the rectification of names of status, *cheng ming*, which is based on the belief that once names of status have firm meanings they will serve as effective standards of conduct, so that a man in his role as a son must practise filial piety toward his father. The role expectation of each individual is thus defined in terms of his or her particular relation with a particular person.

The relationships between individuals in different kinship statuses can be compared with the ripples formed by the dropping of a stone into a pool (Fei 1947: 22-30). The place in the centre where the stone sinks represents ego's position. The ripples represent degrees of patrilineal remoteness from ego. In the innermost ripple are ego's father, mother and siblings, while other more distant relatives remain in the outer ripples (*ibid.*). Fei calls this 'differential hierarchy'.

In the Chinese social structure, the behaviour of individuals seems to be much affected, or even dominated, by their status in the social circle. The individual exists meaningfully almost solely within the context of a pair relationship or within a collective kinship category. More precisely, the individual is important only when he or she is encountering others in his or her differential, hierarchical social circle in a cluster of pair relationships. Each individual hardly has his or her own autonomy and will. This is very different from the 'individual' in the West with its characteristics of autonomy and self-direction, according to which an individual's thoughts and actions are mainly his or her own. He or she has the privacy to pursue his or her own good in his or her own way. The difference can perhaps be better understood with reference to three of the main activities of life: marriage, the birth of a child, and work.

As the Potters remark (p. 203), marriage in China is significant in social rather than personal terms. In the old days, marriage was not the concern of the individuals involved. The young were married without their consent and often against their personal wishes. Marriage is considered a collective affair, a matter between two families rather than resulting from the choice of the individuals. Indeed, individuals do not have autonomy and privacy in marriage. Apart from domestic convenience, the institution of marriage is also for the solemn purpose of 'perpetuating the descent line' (Hui-chen 1959: 88). A wedding is not an occasion for congratulations, it is a matter of generations succeeding each other (Goody 1990: 39). Marriage is a means for acquiring a woman who can give birth and perpetuate the man's descent line.

In the marriage ritual of Fukien, as described by Lin (1947: 48), the bride holds 'a bag of five happinesses', *wu-fu-tai*, containing five kinds of food, representing various desirable attributes in the production of sons: peanuts, *sheng-tzu*, symbolizing giving birth to a son; red prunes, *tsau-tzu*, symbolizing giving birth to a son as early as possible; melon-seeds, *to-tzu*, symbolizing numerous sons; and longan,¹ *lung-tzu*, symbolizing the son of the dragon, that is, a diligent

1. The fruit of the longan tree (*Nephelium longana*), akin to the lychee.

son. The bearing of descendants, as one of the core meanings in marriage, is expressed in other ways too. When my parents got married, in Hangzhou, in the Lower Yangtze River area of China, in the 1960s under the Maoist regime, my grandfather sent them a gift of a patch-work quilt. This is known as a 'quilt-cover of descendants', *tze-sun-pei*, and symbolizes the hoped-for numerous descendants. The quilt is made from 99 small pieces of colourful cloth by a woman who is prosperous and happily married with a number of sons and grandsons. The number '99' in Chinese is pronounced *chiu-chiu*, a term which also denotes 'that which is longlasting'. Thus the quilt symbolizes the hoped-for duration of the marriage. The meaning of marriage, as expressed both in the ritual and in the gift, focuses on the family as an enduring collectivity and particularly on the perpetuation of the man's lineage. The individual's self-interest and privacy are relatively unimportant compared with the interest of the family.

In addition, since the beginning of the 1980s, under the 'one child policy', each couple may have only one child. Some peasants, however, still try to have more than one, especially when the first is not a son, for a son is important for the continuance of the man's descent line. As one of the Potters' peasant informants said, 'You must have a son to carry on the family name. If you don't have a son, you won't have anyone to worship the dead parents' souls' (p. 249). Indeed, having children is not for the sake of the individual parents, but for that of the whole family, even the whole lineage. The interest of the family must come first, and this attitude is deeply internalized.

Moreover, if the cadres discovered that a pregnant woman had already had a child, they would try to mobilize her relatives to persuade her to have an abortion. The process of persuasion is directed not just towards the individual, but toward her relatives as well. This shows again that a birth is not an individual, private matter, rather it is a collective affair of the family and patrilineage. As the Potters say, the child-control policy is a system created under the pressure of population growth and does not respect the individual's exclusive rights over his or her reproductive capacity (p. 250). The concept of the rights of the individual is in fact never fully developed in Chinese culture as compared with the West; Chinese individuals mostly work according to their role and status in the interests of their family and lineage.

Next, I turn to the meaning of work for the individual in the Chinese context. As the Potters remark, in speaking of work, the villagers are speaking about the symbolic affirmation of human relationships (p. 194). Work is a value for the collective rather than the individual. Even in modern China, the individual is not fully free to choose his own job, generally it is assigned to him by the Party. Work is the symbolic medium for the expression of social connection; it affirms relationships in the most fundamental terms the villagers know (p. 195). It is believed that if human relationships at work are correctly communicated and practised, the social order will be correctly understood and practised as well. Individual satisfaction with work lags far behind the importance of working for the

family. In other words, kinship ideology and familism are more important forces than individual satisfaction.

Conclusion

To conclude, I agree with the Potters that although various social movements have superficially changed the life of the peasants and challenged the kinship structure, kinship still persists as the dominant structural core of Chinese life. Changes since the revolution of 1949 have not really disrupted the enduring form of Chinese society. From some points of view the revolution was only a rebellion.

Going further, however, I believe that the 'individual' in the Chinese context is created by his or her status in mutually dependant relationships with others, especially those within the kinship category, in a 'differential hierarchical' schema. This is very different from the Western sense of 'individual'. Indeed, the Chinese individual is dominated by his or her kinship relationships: family interests are prior to self-interest. Attitudes towards such 'private affairs' as marriage, the birth of a child, and work are dictated by the ideology of kinship rather than by the individual's independent decision. I believe that if we are to understand the persistence of the deep structural forces in Chinese society, we might usefully pay more attention to Chinese attitudes to the individual, attitudes very different from those with which people in the West are familiar.

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