

# Anthropology in Mainland China in the Past Decade: A Brief Report

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Anthropology began to be known to Chinese intellectuals through translations near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1930s and 1940s, the discipline enjoyed a period of expansion. During this period, a new generation of Chinese anthropologists emerged, that produced many internationally recognized works. In the 1950s, anthropology was restructured by the ideological apparatus of the communist state as a part of *minzu yanjiu* (nationality studies), whose chief aim was to classify and order ethnic groups (nationalities) in China. In the 1960s and most of the 1970s, anthropology was repressed as a “bourgeois subject” (*zichan jieji xueke*). Around 1979, after over twenty years of absence, anthropology reappeared in mainland China.

In the 1980s, the advocates of anthropology in China were a generation of historians and ethnologists who had studied under the first generation of Chinese anthropologists such as Wu Wenzao, Li Anzhai, Fei Xiaotong, Lin Yaohua, and Lin Huixiang. In 1979, in Beijing, the Chinese Ethnological Society, whose chief calling was to revitalize evolutionist social historical studies of national minorities and their historical relations with the Chinese majority (the Han), was endorsed as an official organization. In 1980, anthropologists — mainly those from south China — jointly established

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the Chinese Anthropological Society and placed its secretariat in Xiamen University, where anthropology had gained considerable support. In 1981, the first national conference of anthropology in China was held in Xiamen; Zhongshan University and Xiamen University created their own departments of anthropology in 1981 and 1984 respectively. Some old classics and new textbooks of Western anthropology were translated, and anthropologists from the West and from Taiwan and Hong Kong were invited to deliver lectures to Chinese professors and students. Discussions of the political usefulness of anthropology for China's reforms also took place.

The achievements of the 1980s should not be underestimated. Nonetheless, somehow the "disciplinary reconstruction movement" (*xueke chongjian yundong*) proved to be far from successful. Between 1989 and the early 1990s, due to complex ideological, political, economic, and educational institutional reasons, anthropology re-entered a period of crisis. One of the symptoms of this crisis was the elimination of Xiamen University's department of anthropology in 1989. Another was a long pause in the work of building departments and research centers. For several years, publications of anthropological works also underwent a decline. The situation did not change until the mid-1990s.

Since the mid-1990s, anthropology on the mainland has enjoyed a more continuous and prosperous period of development. The beginning of this was the promotion of anthropological concepts by scholars working in non-anthropological disciplines. Especially in comparative literature (or comparative cultural studies) and in legal cultural studies, old and new ideas from Western anthropology were translated and discussed, with the hope of inspiring a re-conceptualization of Chinese culture. Within anthropological circles, things also began to change in a positive direction. In 1992, in Peking University, the Institute of Sociology and Anthropology, which had been established by China's most well-known sociologist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Fei Xiaotong, to promote "the Chinese school of sociology," created a Center for Anthropology and Folklore. Since 1995, with the support of the Ministry of Education, the Ford Foundation and the Wenner-Gren Foundation, ISA organized six advanced workshops on social and cultural anthropology. Many major anthropologists from abroad have been invited to speak to young anthropologists from different regions of the country, and many prominent scholars from comparative literature and legal cultural studies have also been included in the lists of workshop participants.

Driven by these dynamics in anthropological and non-anthropological circles, anthropology as a discipline has come into a new stage of development.

As Harrell has noted, “since the mid-1990s, there has been a further shift, with the establishment of more anthropology programs” (2001: 141). Apart from Zhongshan University and Peking University, many other universities have created their own departments, institutes, or sections for anthropology. Notably, the Central University for Nationalities, Yunnan University, Guangxi College for Nationalities, Shanghai University, Nanjing University, Sichuan University, Wuhan University, Northwestern University for Nationalities, Beijing Normal University, Qinghua University, Shandong University, and many other places, all have developed anew their own programs of anthropology. In major national social science research institutions such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), more than one programs of anthropology have been organized. CASS’s Institute of Sociology created its Center for Cultural Anthropology in 2002 and soon its Institute of Nationality Studies, which had been more conservative concerning the promotion of Western-style anthropology, changed its name into the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology.

In the past decade, along with the extension of its “sphere of influence,” anthropology on the mainland has made significant progress in teaching, research, publication, and conferences, as I will discuss in the following sections.

## **Teaching**

One aspect of the work of departments, institutes, and centers has been the development of teaching programs. In the past ten years, many universities have developed their own programs in anthropology. Sociology, archaeology, history, law, and literature departments in many universities have also begun to offer their own introductory anthropology courses. In the 1980s, both the anthropology departments in Zhongshan University and Xiamen University had offered undergraduate courses in anthropology. Since the mid-1990s, Yunnan University and the Central University for Nationalities have also made anthropology degrees available. Just recently (April 2005), Xiamen University’s department of anthropology has been re-established, and has decided to reformulate its undergraduate curricula. Graduate degrees in anthropology have also been

developed. Zhongshan University, Xiamen University, Central University for Nationalities, and Peking University began in the mid-1980s to train graduate students to work in the field of anthropology, but the doctoral degrees that these universities offered were not in anthropology but in history or sociology. Since the mid-1990s, M.A and Ph.D programs in anthropology have been formally approved by the Ministry of Education, so these universities have had to develop independent graduate teaching programs. Also, except for Zhongshan University, which has insisted on the “four field ideal,” many programs have turned their attention towards more focused training in social and cultural anthropology. In the 1980s, the training of anthropology was limited to introductory courses. Since the mid-1990s, specialized courses in kinship and social organization, economic anthropology, political anthropology, religious anthropology, ecological anthropology, and the anthropology of tourism and globalization have been emphasized. More and more, ethnographic fieldwork has become a requirement for doctoral degree studies. Ph.D theses are written in Chinese and are basically unknown to scholars outside the Chinese-speaking world, but they are of increasingly high quality.

## Research

In the past decade, anthropological research has also advanced in positive directions. Among the various topics of study, ethnographic and social historical studies of Han communities in the so-called “Eastern parts” (*dongbu*) of China have been the most eye-catching. Lineage, popular ritual, and state-society relationships, which have received attention from Western anthropologists since the 1950s, have become popular research topics among Chinese anthropologists. Influenced by younger anthropologists who obtained their Ph.D degrees in the West and Japan in the reform decades, many anthropologists are now keenly interested in new topics such as social memory, ethnicity, political economy, gender, urbanism, everyday life, and life history. The so-called “Western parts” (*xibu*) of China have recently re-emerged as a core region for ethnographic studies. Many anthropologists working in this region have continued to concentrate on historical studies of national minorities. But more and more scholars have become involved in applied studies of development and tourism, and have turned to Western sources for reflecting on “Chinese problems” such as modernity, state nationalism, ethnic identity, and globalization.

As before, most research projects have focused on the Chinese

“national self” and have a “nativistic character” (Wang 2002). Their major interest has been in the “inner” — the Han — and “outer” — the non-Han — zones of Chinese civilization. Along the boundaries between the Han and non-Han, there had been a division of labor prior to 1949, with the “Northern School” (Bei Pai), led by Wu Wenzao of Yanjing University, paying more attention to rural communities, and the Southern School (Nan Pai) concentrating on ethno-historical studies of ethnic groups. In the 1950s, anthropologists from both pre-1949 schools were sent to conduct “nationality identification” (*minzu shibie*) research among ethnic minorities (Wang 2000). In the 1980s, both rural studies and nationality (*minzu*) studies were re-promoted. But at that stage, dialogue between the two schools was rarely heard. By contrast, since the mid-1990s there has been an obvious shift towards a synthesis. In the past decade, there has been, in addition, a move back toward pre-1949 anthropology. Classical examples of Chinese ethnography have been reprinted and have regained their popularity. Many anthropologists have re-studied the famous sites of pre-1949 ethnographic research. In most cases, these studies have been conducted without reference to Western ethnographic re-studies, in a way simply to follow up the post-1949 social changes, or simply to revisit the field site without rethinking the interpretive models to be used. Nonetheless, these re-visits have contributed to a newly emerging trend toward theoretical rethinking in the past few years (Wang 2005).

## **Publications and Journals**

Certain ideological restrictions on publishing critical ethnographies have remained in place, but other obstacles of the 1980s have mostly been cleared. The decrease of difficulties in publishing has resulted in a rapid increase in the number of anthropological books in the bookshops. Translations of Western, and to a lesser extent Japanese works on anthropology have continued to grow in number. In the 1980s, books translated and published were mainly American evolutionist, historical particularist, and neo-evolutionist classics. Since the mid-1990s, structural anthropology, interpretive anthropology, historical anthropology, and postmodern anthropology have become central to translation projects. Many publishing houses have played an important role in producing anthropological monographs written by Chinese scholars themselves. To publishing houses such as Sanlian, Shanghai People’s Publishing House, Chinese Social Science Press, Nationality Press, and many university

presses, rural anthropology and ethnographic notes on ethnic minority cultures have provided the most interesting titles for publication.

In 2000, at the national conference of anthropology held in Xiamen, the Chinese Anthropological Society made a decision to create a specialized journal of Chinese anthropology and in 2002 it succeeded in publishing its first issue (the journal is entitled *Renwen Shijie*, or *The World of Culture*). Regrettably, the second issue is still waiting to be edited. In spite of the lack of a specialized journal of anthropology, many multi-disciplinary academic journals — including university bulletins — have created special columns on the subject. In the north, *Sociology Research* (CASS), *Nationality Research* (CASS), *Du Shu* (Sanlian), *Northwestern Nationality Research* (Lanzhou), and *Folklore Research* (Shandong) have included many research articles and book reviews written by anthropologists. Most bulletins of universities for nationalities have developed extensive sections of anthropology. Among these bulletins, the *Bulletin of Guangxi College for Nationalities* and the humanities and social science journal of Yunnan University (*Sixiang Zhanxian*) have been the most active among all in publicizing anthropology.

## Seminars and Conferences

Most departments, institutes, and centers of anthropology on the mainland have organized their own seminars (although none of these seminars have thus far been held on a regular weekly basis) and conferences. Since the 1980s, the Chinese Anthropological Society has organized six national conferences. In the late 1990s, the influential “National Advanced Workshop on Social and Cultural Anthropology” toured from Beijing to the southwest, southeast, and northeast areas of the country, and was a success. The topics discussed during the workshop periods included anthropological theory, fieldwork, interpretation, cross-cultural comparison, and regional anthropology in China. Most of the lectures and papers presented at the workshops have been published in special collections (included in the Sociology and Anthropology Series, Peking University). The Advanced Forum for Anthropologists initially created in Guangxi has also toured other parts of China and become influential. In addition, since the mid-1990s, there have also been more specialized conferences or workshops, deriving from large international joint research projects.

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In view of the growing number of anthropologists and of teaching, research, and translation products in the past decade, the prosperity of anthropology in mainland China can be said to be unprecedented. At present, the Chinese anthropological circle has come to comprise diverse groups of anthropologists, who have come from different generations and educational backgrounds. In 1989, when Jacques Lemoine wrote his review, he expressed worry about “the difficulty of finding successors among youthful students” (1989: 111). After 15 years, his worry seems altogether out of date. Old style ethno-historians and ethnologists have continued some of their earlier practices such as studying *minzu wenti* (nationality issues). A new generation of social and cultural anthropologists, either trained abroad or in Chinese universities, has produced interesting monographs and research articles on more contemporary topics. Undoubtedly, tensions between and within different generations continue to exist, but such tensions seem not to have much impact on the productivity of Chinese anthropological circles. Reconsiderations of the place of anthropology in Chinese history have also emerged as a new topic of research, and many texts have involved debates concerning theoretical issues raised by anthropologists in other countries such as the indigenization of anthropology, ethnic identity, and globalization.

Like the Chinese economy, Chinese anthropology is booming and, if it has any problems, they may have also derived from being “over-heated.” Reflecting on his experience in promoting sociology in post-reform China, the late Fei Xiaotong recently criticized post-reform Chinese sociology as something that has been too “rapidly accomplished” (*su cheng*) to have sufficient knowledge accumulation necessary for setting a good foundation for its own construction. A discipline that has been “rapidly accomplished” is bound to lack a solid foundation of knowledge (Fei 2001). Like Chinese sociology, post-reform Chinese anthropology has also been “rapidly accomplished.” In mainland China, systematically trained anthropologists are still a minority and, to a great extent, the productivity of anthropologists has been more noteworthy than the quality of their products. Teaching programs that have aimed to benefit students have often been disrupted by internal and external problems. The enterprise of Chinese anthropology will continue to expand in the near future, and teaching and researching staff and students, as well as research projects, monographs, articles, and translations, will continue to increase. But I would venture to predict that, for the very reason that Fei has

specified, the discipline will also once again encounter some of the problems that it experienced in the late 1980s. How can we create an “anthropology with Chinese characteristics” without totally de-anthropologizing it? How can we make anthropology “useful” and “popular” without also making it a sort of propaganda, or a part of the work of the state? Such questions remain to be debated.

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