Theory and the Study of Modern Chinese History

Four Traps and a Question

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I think of myself as an empirical historian above all else. The starting point of my own work has always been to identify a substantial body of hitherto unexplored or little explored materials and to generate new empirical information from such materials. I have turned to theory mainly as an aid to develop, through engagement and dialogue with it, my own concepts based on the empirical findings. Epistemologically, I have consciously tried to proceed from empirical research to theory and back to empirical findings rather than the reverse. I do not see myself as a theorist and am not qualified to speak about theory in any theoretical way. All I can write about here is my own experience, the lessons I have drawn, and the issues and questions that have remained for me.

Theory, I have found, can be exciting to read and use, but it can also be corruptive. It can lead to creative thinking but also to mechanical application. It can open big vistas and questions, but it can also lead too easily to ready answers and gross simplifications. It can help forge unexpected connections, but it can also impose untenable ones. It can lead to dialogues with colleagues beyond the confines of our China field, but it can also open the way to subtle yet powerful ideological influences. It can make us broadly comparative, but it can also pigeon-

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hole our perspectives into narrowly Western-centric or sinocentric ones. Its use is much like a difficult journey full of exhilarating possibilities and rewards, yet also fraught with traps and dangers.

Let me start by recounting some of the most alluring traps of theory-use that I can recall from my own experience. For purposes of presentation, I have categorized them into four major ones—uncritical use, ideological use, Western-centrism, and culturalism, including sinocentrism.

UNCRITICAL USE

My own graduate training, at the University of Washington, was entirely empirical: emphasizing the search for new information on selected topics, the reading of texts and documents, the use of bibliographic tools, careful footnoting, and the like. There was no exposure to theory. I do not believe this was the result of conscious design in the University of Washington's program; rather, it was the consequence of the historical styles of my mentors there.

I can recall my first contact "in the field" (for dissertation research in Japan and Taiwan) with graduate students coming from other institutions, especially those in the social sciences who had had systematic exposure to theoretical literature. Their reaction to me was something like "smart guy, but poorly trained," and mine to them, in self-defense, was "facile lightweights." I would hold out against theory for some years yet, righteous and defensive about the training I had received.

When I finally took to the reading of theory some years later after my first book, on Liang Qichao (Huang, 1972), I found it immediately exciting. By contrast with the empirical historical scholarship I had read and the rather impoverished state of conceptualization in our field in the 1960s, social science theory seemed sophisticated, rich, multivariate, and powerful. It was a different world from the narrow monographs of our field at that time.

Once exposed to theory, I was eager to consume any and all. And, like someone who had journeyed to wonderful places others had only heard about, I was eager to talk about and even flaunt my newfound "insights." The temptation was great to show how "with it" theoreti-

cally I had become. With that came the impulse to apply ready-made models to my work.

I can recall especially the appeals of concepts like "proletarianization," "class coalitions," "modern state-making," and "moral economy." The temptation to employ them wholesale in my research was the greater because they did indeed help make sense of a good part of the material I was gathering about the Chinese countryside. Readers of my North China book (Huang, 1985) can easily see the influence of each of those ideas.

On hindsight, if my use of those constructs retained some measure of critical discrimination, the credit must go to the richness of the sources I was using. The greatest strength of the Mantetsu survey materials was in their abundant detail.[1] It was difficult to force all that information into neat models of Marxist and "substantivist" theory, however flexibly and creatively they had been reinterpreted by the likes of Barrington Moore, Charles Tilly, and James Scott. The peasant farm, for example, could usefully be understood with the formalist notions of portfolio management (involving diversification and long- and short-term investments), not just the Chayanovian model of the family production-consumption unit or the Marxist picture of the exploited cultivator. I would end by writing about "the three faces" of the peasant. The fact is that the Mantetsu materials captured large pieces of rural life as it was lived and that life was simply too complex and multidimensional to fit easily and completely into any one ready-made model. In the end, my North China book took an eclectic approach, drawing on bits and pieces of a variety of theoretical traditions whenever they helped make sense of the evidence.

IDEOLOGICAL USE

Quite aside from the scholarly allure of theory, there were also unavoidable ideological attractions. In those heady days of the anti-Vietnam War movement, many of us were engaged in a fundamental questioning of the assumptions of American society and, by extension, of the reigning paradigms of our field, especially of "modernization" and "Western impact." We were drawn powerfully to alternative conceptualizations, most especially to Marxist ideas and theories, to

the counterparadigms of social revolution and anti-imperialist national liberation.

Few of us, however, were so "vulgar" as to employ wholesale crudely officialized Stalinist or Maoist ideologies, for we thought of ourselves as critical scholars. We were drawn instead to sophisticated academic theorists such as Charles Tilly (1975a, 1975b, 1979) and Jeffrey Paige (1975), who made flexible and refined use of class theory, teaching us to think of class as process and not fixed quantity, of class action as involving changing "coalitions," and of class relations as involving changing sets of production relations. And, instead of thinking of the state as a mere agent of the "ruling class," we learned to see it as a semiautonomous agent not collapsible into any one class or coalition of classes. (This was long before the coming of Theda Skocpol's [1979] work, which made explicit what had been implicitly clear in Tilly.) Those creative reinterpretations and refinements of Marxist theory added greatly to its intellectual appeal.

Even more important, perhaps, was the contribution of the "progressive" "substantivist" theorists who brought to light the alternative logics of peasant economy as opposed to capitalist economy and of village community and morality as opposed to urban society and market ethics. There were A. V. Chayanov's (1986 [1925]) insights into peasant family farms, James Scott's (1976) into community and the moral dimensions of economy, as well as E. P. Thompson's (1966) into the process and the nonmaterial dimensions of class and community formation. Those insights greatly enriched our conceptual alternatives.

In hindsight, it might be fair to say that the influence on our field of someone like Charles Tilly (beginning with an entire generation of graduate students at the University of Michigan) was attributable above all to his simultaneous use not only of Marxist but also of substantivist theories. His criticisms of reigning formalist/capitalist/modernization theory were that much more powerful because they drew not on just one but both alternative traditions. The alliance between Marxist and substantivist ideas that was forged in Tilly's (1975a, 1975b, 1979) work certainly added to the appeal that both sets of ideas held for me.

But I would be dishonest if I were to point to just the intellectual appeals of those ideas and discount their ideological attraction. On an emotional as well as intellectual level, we were appalled by the evident

misuse of American power in Vietnam; (in good American fashion) we identified with the underdog, the struggles of a people for national liberation against overwhelming odds. And, almost by extension, we came to question the presumptions of self-righteous modernization theory as it had been applied to China. The Chinese Revolution, we came to believe, was also a struggle by victims against domestic and foreign oppression. Our attraction to the Marxist-substantivist academic theorists perhaps owed as much to ideological as to intellectual reasons.

Here again, to the degree that my two peasant books (Huang, 1985, 1990) managed to avoid the excesses of ideologically driven scholarship, credit should probably go first to my empirical training: no careful reading of the Mantetsu materials can result in any picture of simple class struggle in Chinese villages as depicted by officialized Maoism.[2] There was some influence, as well, of the negative example of the purely ideologically driven "scholarship" of China's Cultural Revolution decade. Last but not least, my two books had the benefit of being written mainly in the late 1970s and the 1980s, in a much calmer political climate than the late 1960s and early 1970s.

But for me there is still very much a lesson about the relationship between theory and ideology. Ours was (and remains even in this "post-Communist" present) a highly ideological world. Ideological influences permeated not just the official pronouncements of the two superpowers of the time but also their journalism and, even more powerfully, the very language of academic and daily discourse. There were, to be sure, great differences between Maoist China and its contemporary America. In China, there was no separation between academic theory and official ideology; one necessarily encroached on the other. Academic theory could not, did not, claim an autonomous realm. Theory (*lilun*) was overtly ideological. In the United States, academic theory enjoyed considerable freedom and autonomy from official ideology. Ours was a much more pluralistic intellectual environment. But that did not mean that academic theory could truly be entirely separate from ideology. Indeed, the influence of ideology could sometimes be greater precisely because it is cloaked as academic theory. The difference between China and the United States in terms of ideological influence on scholarship was a matter mainly of degree. The connection between academic theory and political ideology was

much more subtle in the United States, but it was most certainly there nonetheless.

I would soon learn that no matter how empirical my work was, in raising theoretical issues it unavoidably provoked ideological sensibilities. A quick look over the various exchanges and symposia that my North China and Yangzi delta (Huang, 1990) books provoked, most especially those with Ramon Myers in the *Journal of Asian Studies* (Huang, 1991a) and with others in the symposium in *Republican China* (Huang, 1992), should illustrate the point. How could anyone find so much validity in Marxist theory? How dare anyone challenge the cardinal principles of capitalism? How could anyone find value in collective agriculture? In the Chinese scholarly world, my books were honored by two conferences and a series of symposia discussions, but they have received their share of criticisms, especially from those ideologically committed to the paradigm of "incipient capitalism."[3] In Taiwan, there was something of a belated replay of earlier American ideological criticisms on the occasion of the publication of the "complex characters edition" of my work.[4]

The lesson for me personally was that ideological implications are an unavoidable accompaniment of theory use. Theory can lead us to bigger and more fundamental questions. In so doing, however, it also brings us unavoidably into the realm of ideological issues. We cannot avoid criticisms from those thus provoked. That is just part and parcel of the costs of theory use.

What we can avoid, however, is falling into the trap of doing ideologically driven scholarship. Here again, my own best protection was probably the very rich source materials I used and my own empirical predilections. The complex reality shown by my sources and my own commitments to the ideals of empirical scholarship precluded the acceptance of ideological observations and inferences as substitutes for research findings. For example, contrary to the predictions of Marxist theory, I simply could not find in "managerial farming" substantial advances in productivity, despite its use of the "capitalist production relations" of wage labor (Huang, 1985: esp. chap. 8). Nevertheless, no matter how insistently empirical, engagement with theoretical issues brought me unavoidably into ideological debates.

WESTERN-CENTRISM

Modern ideologies and academic theories, of course, have been very much dominated by the West European and Anglo-American world from which have come both the orthodox concepts and the counters to those concepts. Modernization theory came from the idealized abstraction of Western experience into a universalist model; its main counter, Marxist theory, came no less from the West. Twentieth-century revolutions against Western imperialism drew their guidance not from the ideologies and theories of indigenous traditions but from the alien West.

In much of the theoretical literature of the West, whether establishmentarian or revolutionary, China has not been the subject but rather "the other," employed more as a foil than for its own sake.[5] Whether in Marx, in Max Weber, or in more recent theorists, China has frequently been employed as a clarifying device to bring out, by way of contrast, themes dear to the theorist. Thus, for Marx, China was governed by the "Asiatic mode of production," which stood outside the feudalism-to-capitalism transition of the Western world (Marx, 1968). And, for Weber, China's cities were administrative rather than commercial-productive centers, its laws substantive or instrumentalist rather than formalist, and its organizing logic irrational rather than "rational" as in the early modern and modern West (more below).

By their use of China as the example of "the other," theorists such as Marx and Weber influenced us either to follow their lead by arguing that China was not like the West or to argue the opposite by maintaining that China was just like the West. Whether in agreement or in opposition, we have been influenced by the original either-or binary discursive structure they established. One is drawn into one or the other position almost unwittingly. Our China field was no exception.

The first response of our field was a generation of scholarship that followed the lead of the Western theorists to see China as "the other." The organizing question for that generation became simply: Why did China fail to modernize like the West? It left unchallenged the juxtaposed opposition between China and the West. It took that opposition as the given to be explained. The answers proffered ran from "Chinese

ethnocentrism" to "Confucianism ran counter to the demands of modernization" to "official supervision, merchant management."[6]

That generation of scholarship provoked, in turn, counterarguments from the opposite pole of the original binary framework. Instead of agreeing that China was different from the West, scholars countered that it was just like the West. One good example is the way in which Weber's characterization of Chinese cities as merely administrative was countered by an effort to demonstrate how a major commercial city formed in China before contact with the West. The intent was to show that China too had its "early modern" period no less than the West (Rowe, 1984, 1989). More recently, there has been the effort to find in late imperial China a "public sphere" or "civil society," tantamount to what might be termed "incipient democracy."[7]

These well-intentioned efforts were perhaps motivated above all by the desire to assert China's equivalence to the West. I myself had been powerfully drawn to these tendencies, whether in looking for proletarianization, incipient capitalism, or, more recently, Western-style civil law in premodern China. Given the structure of the dominant theoretical discourse, the only way to counter the denigration of China as "the other" seemed to be to maintain that it was just like the West.

For nationalistic scholars inside China, the search for equivalence for China long predated the response of American scholars. Marx's "Asiatic mode of production" was early on directly challenged by the model of "incipient capitalism": to wit, that China was developing in the same direction as early modern Europe until Western imperialism skewed it off that proper path of development. The point there, in addition to the obvious anti-imperialist one, was that "we had it too."[8]

The emotional dictate to search for equivalence for China, whether by Chinese nationalists or China scholars, is in many ways perhaps even more powerful than the influences of Marxist counter-ideology. The latter is more obvious, if only because of our heightened sensibilities from the cold war. But emotional pride in and identification with our subject are not so obvious, especially since those sentiments are never overtly expressed but always dressed in ostensibly value-free academic terms.

Yet, it should be evident that the position that China was "the same" as the West is really no less Western-centric than that it was "the other." In both, the standard of value is taken for granted to be that defined by the West. In both, the theoretical and ideological frames of reference are Western in origin. In both, the arguments are predicated on Western-centric assumptions.

It is not enough, however, merely to point out that such arguments are Western-centric. After all, they could be Western-centric and still true at the same time. Normative overtones aside, Marx could be perfectly correct that late imperial China evinced few substantial impulses toward capitalist development of the sort he found in early modern England and Europe. And Weber could similarly be right that China did not follow the pattern of "rationalization" that he discerned in the early modern West. The same applies to the opposite arguments that try to equate China with the West.

For myself, the problem with Marx and Weber was finally an empirical one. Marx expected capitalist productive forces to accompany capitalist production relations, but that was simply not the case in late imperial rural China. Marx (or at least the ideologized Marx) further expected capitalist development to accompany vigorous commercialization, but that again was simply not true in late imperial China.[9] Similarly, Weber expected the rule of law to be the consequence of formalist rationality; otherwise, there would be just arbitrary *kadi* justice. But China had a developed tradition of the rule of law, without formalist rationalization.[10]

My problem with those who have argued against Marx and Weber by maintaining that China was just like the West is also an empirical one. The fact that late imperial China saw the coupling of empirical phenomena that are paradoxical from Western theoretical perspectives means that it could no more be reduced to "the same as the West" than to "the other." There were in late imperial China capitalist production relations, commercialization, and rule of law, just as in the early modern West. But, unlike the West, those were not accompanied by productivity breakthroughs, capitalist development, or formalist rationality. To maintain that China was the same as the West is as empirically wrong as the opposite.

CULTURALISM

Another trap, currently perhaps even stronger in its influence in Chinese studies than Western-centrism, is culturalism, including both the sinocentrism of old sinological studies and the culturalism of recent radical "cultural studies."

SINOCENTRISM

My teachers at the University of Washington were more sinologists than historians. They were individuals who had spent decades to master the texts of China's "Great Tradition," who identified quite thoroughly with an old China that had been a world and civilization unto itself. They were entirely comfortable with the presumption of China's uniqueness and of the superiority of its high culture. They were committed to their subject both emotionally and intellectually.[11] If they read Western works, it was generally the classics, for they approached Western civilization in the same manner as they had China's. Their reaction to contemporary social science theorizing was mainly to ignore it as irrelevant; they saw no need to trouble themselves with comparisons drawn by theorists who knew so little about China.

It was indeed their worldview that I called upon in my dissertation-research days in Taiwan to defend myself against criticisms from the more theoretically oriented social science colleagues I met. I too was content with my classical studies with Aisingoro Yü-chün, my intellectual identification with the Confucian elite, my chosen field of intellectual history, and my occasional readings of Western classics.[12] I felt and reacted in ways that my teachers did: these other students were ill-trained in Chinese, not to speak of classical Chinese; they had little respect for evidence and texts; and they were prone to facile conceptualizing. It was in that frame of mind that I wrote my dissertation on Liang Qichao.[13]

My objections today to the old sinological intellectual history are much the same as those that caused me to leave it for social-economic history 25 years ago. It seems to me to concern itself strictly with high culture, to the disregard of the common folk. It pays little or no attention to material life. Its opposition to social history, today as

yesterday, is often ideologically motivated by anti-communism. In its insistence on Chinese exceptionalism, finally, it rejects virtually all social science theory. It would leave our field in sinological insularity.[14]

But the fact is that we write and teach in a Western context, for readers and students coming with Western assumptions. For us to make sense of our subject, we must compare China with the West. Whether we do so explicitly or not, we are in fact constantly comparing China with the West, if only in our choice of words and of nuance. Explicit engagement with the Western theoretical literature seems to me actually the best way to communicate with our audience, for that literature helps make clear assumptions that are often implicit in our readers and students. If we want our students to understand China in terms other than those dictated by Western assumptions, we must talk to those assumptions.

CULTURAL STUDIES

Beginning in the 1980s, there has come to the China field, albeit somewhat belatedly when compared to other fields, the influence of postmodernism and deconstructionism, capsuled in a new vogue of "cultural studies." A major source of inspiration is Edward Said's (1978) reflexive critiques of "Orientalism." Western studies of the Orient, Said showed, were inextricably linked to the history of imperialism. The construction of the East as the backward other anticipated and rationalized imperialist and colonial domination. Modern social science theories, especially modernization theory, were heirs to that tradition and remained self-serving attempts at a master narrative centered on the West. Contemporary scholarship, no less than popular representations and pre-twentieth-century scholarship, was profoundly shaped by a discursive formation entwined with political ideology (Said, 1978). Those criticisms struck deep chords with all of us, especially the social historians who had long been critical of imperialism.

In addition, the new cultural studies criticized powerfully the implicit materialism of our Marxist-influenced social history. To be sure, some of us social historians had been influenced by the nonmaterialist orientations of an E. P. Thompson or James Scott. But there can be no denying that, in our "revolt" against the modernization

theorists, with their use of "culture" as a construct to explain China's "failure to modernize," many of us became at bottom materialists in emphasis. Our cultural studies colleagues called in reaction for a reemphasis on nonmaterial subjects.[15] In so doing, they found a ready audience in our sinological intellectual historians, who had for so long felt sidelined by social history.

Furthermore, in calling on "critical theory" to reject virtually all of Western social science theories as culture-bound constructions, our cultural studies colleagues have struck other chords with the sinological historians. Their criticisms have given the sinologists the theoretical justifications for what they had long believed and practiced. And their belief that indigenous cultures should be studied on their own rather than on Western terms holds ready appeal for sinologists who have long insisted on China's uniqueness.

At the same time, however, our radical cultural studies colleagues have provoked some strong reactions from us conventional historians. While culturalist theories are surely correct to emphasize that facts come with constructed representations, I believe they are wrong to jump from there to the conclusion that facts are no more than representations. While I could not agree more with the point that we need to be sensitive to and critical of different "spins" that are put on facts, it does not seem to me to follow that there can therefore be no facts that are not reducible to representations. But that is the conclusion that is drawn by Said, on the theoretical inspiration of Michel Foucault:

> The real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything or whether any and all representations, because they are representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer. If the latter is the correct one (as I believe it is), then we must be prepared to accept the fact that a representation is *eo ipso* implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the "truth," which is itself a representation. What this must lead to methodologically is to view representations (or mispresentations—the distinction is at best a matter of degree) as inhabiting a common field of play defined for them, not by some inherent common subject matter alone, but by some common history, tradition, universe of discourse. [Said, 1978: 272-73]

By such a logic, it really no longer matters whether evidence is carefully gathered and texts accurately read, for none has any objective existence outside the discourse in which it is represented. In the end, factual evidence comes to be no different from fabricated evidence, each differing merely by its degree of misrepresentation, each reflecting merely the historian's cultural orientations, and each finally just part of a system of discourse.

Social science theory, by extension, is rejected almost in toto. Since almost all social science theory is Western in origin, and since almost all Western theory is of necessity culture bound and tied to a larger discursive formation intertwined with imperialism, any engagement with it other than "critical" rejection is suspect. There can therefore be no serious discussion of modernization, of development, or of democracy in connection with our subjects. Any such discussion would be complicitous with the project of imperialist domination. In the end, Said had no use at all for nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western scholarship, all of which he rejected as part of the "Orientalist" discourse.

Said's (1978) book, to be sure, makes effective and telling points, especially in the first part, which discusses the crude generalizations made at the height of imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But the discussions in the second and third parts are much less convincing. The connections drawn become more and more tenuous. The fact is that as Western scholarship matured in the twentieth century, it became more rigorous, more empirically grounded, more multifaceted, and no longer so easily stereotyped. To be sure, one can still find evidence of the influence of imperialist and Western- or modern-centric ideologies and theories, as Said did. But one can also find abundant evidence of the opposite: of rigorous scholarship, alternative conceptualizations, and even profound emotional and intellectual identification with the subject. In our China field, the great majority of sinologists were sinophiles who were sometimes more enamored of their subject than their own culture and who were in any case not reducible to mere denigrators of their subject in the manner Said made "Orientalists" out to be.

What needs to be pointed out here is the other side of Said's (1978) one-sided argument. The better Western "Orientalists" and "area specialists" were (and are) individuals who gave tremendous commitment and energy to the study of their subjects. Those efforts, including protracted language study, enabled many to become deeply steeped in their subject's culture. While such immersion may not free one completely from self-centered ethnocentrism about one's own culture, it most surely provides greater possibility for doing so than otherwise. Said's own bicultural origins enabled him to see things from a Palestinian point of view and gave him the critical perspective on Western scholarship he needed. What his *Orientalism* did not do was to consider how that same biculturality, which Said shares with so many "Orientalists," can become the basis for transcending the kind of monocultural perspective he so strongly criticized. The other side of "Orientalism" is the biculturality that gives us the wherewithal to see both sides and to offer alternative perspectives and concepts.

While Said's (1978) *Orientalism* provided no more than reflexive criticism of Western scholarship, Clifford Geertz's books on "interpretive anthropology" and "local knowledge" went on to urge a specific alternative. For Geertz, proper anthropological research is one that dispenses with all social science constructs and supposed objective facts. It aims instead at "translating" for us indigenous conceptual structures by "thick description" that seeks to characterize such structures (as opposed to "thin description" that tries merely to recount "facts"). The difference between "thick" and "thin" is a matter of an "interpretive" or "semiotic" approach versus a positivistic one—not a difference between dense and sparse factual narration, as the words might suggest on the surface. By extension, the only worthwhile knowledge is "local knowledge" that translates and interprets such conceptual structures for outsider readers. Like "thick," the "local" here refers not to how we social and local historians might understand the term but rather to the semiotic study of indigenous discourses (Geertz, 1973a, 1973b [1972], 1978).

For Geertz, as for Said, there can be no facts independent of representations. Indeed, Geertz maintains that the insistence on separating fact and (interpretive) law should be seen as something like a quirk of modern Western law. Islamic, Indic, and Malaysian cultures, according to him, come with no such insistence. Instead, they take for

granted the inseparability of facts and representations. To Geertz, "facts" properly understood are in the end just advocatory representations, like the "evidence" paraded by lawyers on the two sides of our adversarial legal system. That being the case, the discourse and the conceptual structures that organize and give meaning to "facts" become the only worthy subjects of study (Geertz, 1978).

While Geertz makes a powerful point with his courtroom analogy, it does not seem to me to follow that all facts are therefore no more than representations. To be sure, lawyers in the courtroom are generally no more than "hired guns," much more interested in winning than in the truth. And we scholars most certainly are not entirely above such impulses. But we need to remember that the courtroom comes not just with two adversarial representations but also a judge and a jury charged with the ideal of searching out the truth. That truth-ideal, no matter how imperfectly realized, seems to me absolutely essential to the functioning of a justice system. To give it up is to give up on any possibility for justice.

In the same way, to give up the ideal of searching for the truth on the basis of empirical evidence is to give up on any possibility of genuine scholarship. It matters in historical research whether our evidence was carefully and accurately gathered, or carelessly and erroneously so, or simply fabricated. It matters whether we have gone into the archives and the records and done our work with discipline and integrity. It matters in anthropological research whether we have put in the time to learn the language and done our fieldwork carefully rather than breezing through like a tourist. Carefully gathered archival and field evidence, partly constructed as they must be, remain our best access to the reality of our subject. To dismiss them is to dismiss our subject itself and to end with either mere reflexive criticism as a substitute for history, as Said's (1978) *Orientalism* did, or mere study of "local" discourse and representation, as Geertz's "interpretive anthropology" and "local knowledge" urge.

While Geertz is surely right to point out that materialist reductionism makes us lose sight of symbolic and deeper meanings, his alternative agenda merely replaces that with an idealist reductionism that would lead us to a complete disregard for empirical evidence as the arbiter in disputes over representations. If we do that, our courtrooms would quickly be reduced to just sites for battles between hired

guns and nothing more, and our scholarship to advocatory representations and nothing more. We might then just as well dispense with all rules of evidence in the courtroom, all conventions of evidentiary verification in scholarship, and all pretenses at searching for truths. Why then should anyone bother at all with law or with scholarship? We might as well have just the politics of representation or simply, to borrow the reigning slogan of the Cultural Revolution, "politics in command."

My other difficulty with cultural studies is its extreme cultural relativism.[16] Geertz's "local knowledge," despite the surface meanings of the words, is a very particular kind of knowledge: a semiotic interpretation of indigenous conceptual structures. I have learned from my own research, however, that indigenous constructions, no less than foreign ones, may well run counter to what was actually practiced. Official Qing China might have maintained that it did not care about civil matters in law, but archival evidence demonstrates that its courts routinely handled such cases in accordance with the code. Qing representations, in other words, can be as misleading as modernist ones. To be sure, Qing legal practices carried their share of false representations, but practice cannot thereby be reduced to mere constructed representation. We can separate out the two. Indigenous constructs must be subjected to the test of empirical evidence no less than Western "master narratives." The disjunctions and interdependency between representation and practice can reveal to us the key features of a legal system (Huang, 1996).

Moreover, we must not deny China its modernity, as extreme cultural relativism tends to do. Ours is an increasingly integrated world, tied by the commonalities of industrialization, modern communications, and international trade (some would say "world capitalism"), even while different nations/cultures are divided by their varied traditions. We must not insist that modernity is but a Western construct of no relevance to China. China itself has sought most urgently to become modern, in the sense of improved infant survival rates, improved life expectancy, improved productivity per laborer, freedom from constant survival pressures, and so on.

For us modern historians, Geertz's "local knowledge" cannot begin to encompass what we need to do. Premodern indigenous conceptualizations make up at best the first part of our problematic. We need

to ask further about how official and popular constructions might have differed and how both related to practice (e.g., official and popular representations of Qing law vs. the practice of Qing law). We must then turn to how earlier constructions reacted to and changed with contact with the West (e.g., the drafting of modern codes that were at once patterned on Western models and yet modified to adapt to Chinese customs) and how practice changed and did not change. We must concern ourselves with how China has searched for a distinctively Chinese modernity (as embodied, for example, in the ideals set forth in the Republican and Communist legal codes). That search itself is now part and parcel of the local knowledge that we must seek to understand. Geertz's narrowly postmodernist local knowledge simply cannot encompass the multiple issues we must confront.

THE "NEW CULTURAL HISTORY"

Some of our sinological intellectual historians and radical cultural studies colleagues have allied to try to lay claim to a "new cultural history." The alliance between the two is rather surprising, for our cultural studies colleagues usually think of themselves as radicals, whereas to many of us social historians, the sinological historians have long seemed to be conservatives at best and reactionaries at worst. It is an alliance based, first of all, on shared enemies: of Western-centric theory and of materialist-oriented social history. It is also an alliance based on shared emphasis on what needs to be studied: indigenous traditions on their own terms. Both believe in the uniqueness of their subject, at least in the sense that it cannot be reduced to Western-based theory. It does not matter that, for one, that sense of uniqueness is based on sinological ethnocentrism while, for the other, it is based on postmodernist cultural relativism. And, for now at least, it does not seem to matter that one concerns itself almost entirely with the elite, while the other's sympathies are primarily with the voiceless. The differences are covered over by the two sides' joint attempt to claim the "new cultural history."

I would like to separate out here what I consider to be the valuable aspects of cultural history from the less desirable tendencies of radical culturalism, including sinological ethnocentrism. The new cultural history is properly critical of the implicit materialism of the

old social history. It draws creatively on important tools of discourse and textual analysis. And the best of the new cultural history considers not only the elites but also the popular and not only nonmaterial aspects of culture but also the material dimensions. It does not reject empirical research but rather emphasizes the importance of archival work. And, for theory, it draws on the insights of critical theory without the excesses of extreme anti-empiricism and extreme cultural relativism. It does not claim that discourse is the only reality and hence the only subject worthy of study, as Said and Geertz came to insist. In fact, if we take Lynn Hunt as one representative spokesperson for the new cultural history, the target of her criticisms has recently turned from the materialism of social history to the extreme anti-empiricism of radical cultural studies (Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, 1994: esp. chap. 6; cf. Hunt, 1989).

I believe I myself have been quite profoundly influenced by the new cultural history. In fact, some of my social and economic historian friends may well see my recent work on law as resembling more the "new cultural history" than the older social-economic history. It gives representations as much attention as practice. My focus on the disjunctions between the two is predicated on the assumption of the relative autonomy of both. That goes against crude materialism, as does my suggestion that the Chinese justice system should be seen above all as a paradoxical combination of moralistic representations with practical actions. Neither dimension alone is adequate to capture the Qing justice system. Ideology and discourse are as important for our understanding as practice and material culture.

Legal history has held special appeal for me precisely because it compels us to deal not only with actions but also with representations, and not only with practical realities but also with ideals. Legal documents arguably articulate more than most other kinds of sources the logics of both customary practice and official ideology and of the relationships between them. They lend themselves particularly well to a search for implicit principles and abiding logics. In the end, my difficulties lie not with the new cultural history but rather with some of its specific tendencies carried over from radical culturalism. Legal records have shown me the importance of representation, but they have also reminded me of the crucial difference between genuine evidence

and fraudulent evidence and between truth and fabrication—differences that radical culturalism has tried to dismiss.

PARADOXES AND NEW CONCEPTS

My own approach in recent years has centered on the notion of paradoxes.[17] Empirical evidence shows that Chinese reality runs counter to the expectations of most Western theories. For example, Marx assumed a necessary connection between given sets of production relations and given levels of development in the productive forces. But my empirical research taught me that managerial farming in North China was paradoxically capitalist from the perspective of production relations but precapitalist from that of productive forces. Both Marx and Adam Smith, at least in their ideologized guises, assumed a necessary association between commercialization and economic development. But my empirical research showed me that the Yangzi delta countryside saw paradoxically vigorous commercialization and growth (of total output) but no development (of labor productivity per workday). Weber, finally, assumed an association between the rule of law and formalist rationality. But my empirical research showed me that the Chinese justice system saw the rule of law without formalist rationalization.

Pointing out paradoxes such as these, I believe, has the advantage of engagement with the theoretical literature without the pitfall of either mechanical imitation or uncritical use to the disregard of empirical evidence. I have tried to conduct a dialogue with the theories of Marx and Weber without being trapped into either/or choices between binary polarities (of "the West" and "the other"). I have also sought to engage those theories on empirical as well as conceptual levels. China can be shown empirically to be paradoxically similar to and yet different from the West as constructed in those theories. Chinese reality can help bring out problems in the implicit assumptions of those theories.

If Chinese reality is indeed paradoxical from the point of view of Western theories, then we must try to develop new concepts that accord better with Chinese reality. I myself have found it helpful to

use existing theory as a stimulus for forging my own concepts based on the empirical evidence. That was what I tried to do in my idea of "involutionary commercialization," for example. The empirical evidence shows us that family farms in the Yangzi delta became quite highly commercialized in the Ming and Qing but that their returns per workday stagnated or decreased. Here is where Chayanov's (1986 [1925]) analysis of the special characteristics of the family farm becomes relevant, even though he does not have much to say about the relationship between the family farm organization and commercialization. The family farm is a unit not only of production but also of consumption and will act according to the dictates of survival. Its labor, moreover, is given, not hired, as in a capitalist enterprise. Faced with the pressure of insufficient land, it will intensify family labor input in farming and/or handicrafts even when marginal returns to labor shrink below the marginal costs of hired labor (at which point a capitalist farm using hired labor would cease to add labor, for that would mean negative returns). Commercialized crop and handicraft production in the Yangzi delta, I saw, were precisely such a response, leading thereby to "involutionary commercialization." The typical pattern in the Yangzi delta family farm was to absorb the lower return work with family labor of low opportunity cost (i.e., the labor of the women, children, and elderly). That was what I termed "the familization of production," which undergirded the "commercialization without development" (Huang, 1990).

The same applies to my idea of the "practical moralism" of Qing magistrates. The empirical evidence shows us that while they (and official discourse in the Qing in general) represented themselves as highly moralistic rulers-judges who governed by example and settled disputes by didactic mediation, they in fact acted more like practical bureaucrats who applied codified law strictly and followed routinized procedures. The Qing legal system, it seems to me, was a combination of Weber's ideal-types: of substantivist rule of absolute authority linked to patrimonialism with the routinized rule of law linked to bureaucratic government. The tensions and interdependencies between the two paradoxical dimensions made up the very structure of the system (Huang, 1996: chap. 9).

My usage above of the word "paradox" refers mainly to the coupling of one empirical phenomenon with another that runs counter to

conventional theoretical expectations (and therefore appears contradictory or paradoxical), such as "capitalist production relations without capitalist development," "commercialization without development," "growth without development," and "rule of law without formalist rationalization."

In my most recent work (Huang, 1996), I have used "paradox" also to refer to the pairing of phenomena that run counter to both materialist and idealist expectations: what I call "disjunctions" between representation and practice. Materialist theory would insist on the determinative role of practice over representation, and idealist theory the opposite. Both usually assume the basic congruency between representation and practice. By pointing to the disjunctions (or "disjunctures," which to me means specific points of disjunction) between the two, my intention is to emphasize the relative autonomy of both.

One purpose is to seek a middle ground between the current bifurcation in academic fashion between materialist orientations of rational choice theory in the social sciences and idealist orientations of postmodernism in the humanities. Disjunctions between Qing representations of law and actual Qing practice point out the inadequacies of exclusive attention to either dimension. They underscore instead the interdependency of both in making up a legal system governed by paradoxical "practical moralism" and "substantive rationality."[18]

These and other concepts I have suggested are very tentative and piecemeal formulations. I am very far indeed from having developed any coherent picture of the organizing patterns and logics of historical change in late imperial and modern China. At this point, I am not at all sure where future empirical research and concept building might lead me.

For what it is worth, however, I hope I have made clear my own preferred approach on the question of the uses of theory. Historical inquiry requires a continual back-and-forth process between the empirical and the conceptual. In that process, theory is useful as an aid in forging one's own connections between evidence and idea. It might serve as stimulus, foil, or guide for us; it should never be relied on as a source for ready-made answers.

A NAGGING QUESTION

A nagging question remains. Most theories come with a futuristic vision, such as Adam Smith's of spiraling capitalist development, Marx's of a classless society, and Weber's of rational rule and society. Theories, it may even be argued, are subordinate to and rationalizations of their futuristic visions. They are, in any case, inseparable from the visions they hold. Alternative theories for China will require alternative visions.

Part of our problem in searching for theoretical autonomy for China, in other words, is also a problem of searching for alternative visions. If China did indeed have a past that was distinct in its pattern and its dynamic from the West's, how might that translate into present and future reality? If commercialization without development did no more than give way in the end to simple capitalist market development, and the rule of law without formalist rationality to mere wholesale transplanting of modern Western law, then we might just as well have simply employed standard Western theoretical categories, of capitalism and "rationalization," or incipient capitalism and even "incipient democracy." Why bother with the empirical demonstration and theoretical conceptualization of a different pattern if things were to end no differently from the West?

An alternative vision would not be such a problem if China itself had given us clear indications of what that might be. But the fact is China today is still engaged painfully in the search for a distinctively Chinese modernity. The ruling ideologies of modern China have so far failed to provide the answer. The dynasty fell before its reforms took full effect. The Guomindang lost to the Chinese Communists. And Mao Zedong's vision for a socialist China with a distinctive new culture failed with the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. His successors have been reduced to pragmatism, unwilling or unable to come forth with far-reaching visions. Today, a century and a half after China's first forced contact with the West, the big question remains: what does it mean to be modern and still Chinese? What might the substance of Chinese civilization in a modern world be?

Most of us historians shun such a question, but I think it can usefully be approached in a history-based way. We might look for a coherent picture of the dynamics and patterns of change in Chinese history, one

that is at once empirical and theoretical and without the pitfalls outlined above. We can then ask, Which of those historical patterns might be of relevance for alternative visions for China? We might also turn to Chinese thinkers themselves for guidance. There is no shortage of alternative visions in twentieth-century China. Even the ruling parties proffered some far-sighted formulations that were never acted on. Which among those visions accord well with demonstrable historical patterns? We might aim to answer the following question: what, from a historically grounded perspective, might a China that would be at once paradoxical from a Western perspective, yet modern, and at once modern, yet proudly Chinese, look like? Such a question may appear outdated to a Western postmodernist, but it has been and remains centrally important to China.

NOTES

1. *Mantetsu*, of course, is short for the Japanese Minami Manshū Tetsudō Kabushiki Kaisha (or South Manchurian Railway Company), under whose auspices were carried out the many rural investigations and surveys that resulted in possibly the richest documentation of a peasant society available. For a detailed discussion, see chapter 3 of Huang (1985).

2. See my article on this point (Huang, 1995).

3. *Shixue lilun yanjiu* (Historiography Quarterly) first published my article on the paradigmatic crisis in Chinese studies (Huang, 1991), excluding the part on 1949, which the editors deemed too politically sensitive (1993, no. 1: 42-60), and followed it with discussions of that article and my North China and Yangzi delta books in five subsequent issues. The discussions began with some brief comments on my work from four scholars (1993, no. 2: 93-102), then a longer comment-article (1993, no. 3: 151-55), then reports on the discussions of two conferences on my work—one sponsored by the journal *Zhongguo jingjishi yanjiu* ("Huang Zongzhi Zhongguo jingjishi yanjiu zhi pingyi" [Discussions of Philip Huang's research on Chinese economic history]) (1993, no. 4: 95-105) and the second jointly by the three journals: *Shixue lilun*, *Zhongguo shi yanjiu*, and *Zhongguo jingjishi yanjiu* ("Huang Zongzhi xueshu yanjiu zuotanhui" [Conference on Philip Huang's scholarly research]) (1994, no. 1: 124-34). The series concluded with a final symposium of six articles-comments under the title "Huang Zongzhi xueshu yanjiu taolun" (Discussions of Philip Huang's scholarly research) (1994, no. 2: 86-110). The journal *Zhongguo jingjishi yanjiu* also carried reports on the proceedings of the two conferences (1993, no. 4: 140-42; 1994, no. 1: 157-60).

4. Published in the form of summary-minutes of an ostensibly scholarly discussion of my books, in *Jindai Zhongguo shi yanjiu tongxun*, 20 (Nov. 1995). The Chinese versions of my books were published first on the mainland by Zhonghua shuju (Huang Zongzhi, 1986, 1992b) and then republished in a "complex character edition" by Oxford University Press in Hong Kong (Huang Zongzhi, 1994b, 1994c). My paradigmatic crisis article was first published in Chinese in its entirety by the Shanghai shehui kexue yuan chubanshe (Huang Zongzhi, 1992a) and then republished by Hong Kong Oxford University Press (Huang Zongzhi, 1994a).

5. This calls to mind, of course, Edward Said's now-classic book *Orientalism* (Said, 1978). My analysis here has a different emphasis (more below).

6. I refer, of course, to the works of John Fairbank (e.g., Fairbank and Reischauer, 1960: esp. 290-94; Fairbank, Reischauer, and Craig, 1965), Mary Wright (1957), and Albert Feuerwerker (1958).

7. See the symposium " 'Public Sphere'/'Civil Society' in China?" in *Modern China* (Huang, 1993).

8. This point is discussed in some detail in my article on the "paradigmatic crisis" in Chinese studies (Huang, 1991b).

9. These were two major points in my North China and Yangzi delta books (Huang, 1985, 1990).

10. This point is elaborated in detail in my new book on civil justice in Qing China (Huang, 1996: esp. chap. 9).

11. Readers familiar with Said's (1978) work on Orientalism will notice that I am emphasizing a side of Orientalism that he ignored: many sinologists (like Islamicists) loved and identified with their subject perhaps even more than they denigrated it.

12. Dubbed "the Manchu" by some of his students, Aisingoro Yü-chün (who also went by his Han surname Liu), was one of Kang Youwei's last students.

13. Later published as *Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and Modern Chinese Liberalism* (Huang, 1972).

14. I have in mind here a narrow sinological intellectual history and do not mean to include the great sinologues of our field, who were often scholars of Olympian vision.

15. The best example of this kind of criticism in our field is probably Barlow (1993). The article does make the valuable point that the previous generation of critics of imperialism had dealt with imperialism primarily as a social-economic phenomenon and not as a cultural phenomenon.

16. For Geertz's criticism of and defense against those who have attacked his brand of relativism, see his "Anti Anti-Relativism" (Geertz, 1989) and "The Uses of Diversity" (Geertz, 1986). For a critical comment, see Rorty (1986). My discussion here is more concerned with practical issues of Chinese studies than the philosophical issues of that exchange.

17. Explicitly stated and elaborated first in my "The Paradigmatic Crisis in Chinese Studies: Paradoxes in Social and Economic History" (Huang, 1991b).

18. Weber himself hinted at the formulation of "substantive rationality." See the discussion in Huang (1996: chap. 9).

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