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The Paradigmatic Crisis in Chinese Studies

Paradoxes in Social and Economic History

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The field of Chinese social and economic history is in the midst of a paradigmatic crisis. By that, I do not mean merely the questioning of the major analytical constructs that have informed past scholarship. Those, it seems to me, never commanded the complete allegiance of more than a minority of scholars, especially not in the diverse and critical world of Western scholarship on China. Rather, I am referring to the crisis of confidence in underlying, yet unspoken, assumptions that are shared by opposing constructs. Those have had a greater influence in our profession than the articulated constructs themselves, and have carried the true force of paradigmatic assumptions, in the original sense intended by Thomas Kuhn (1970 [1962]). It is the undermining of those assumptions by accumulated research that has brought the field to its present point of crisis, in which not just the old constructs but even the debates between them no longer seem relevant. There is a general sense that something different is needed, but there is as yet no clear articulation of what that something might be.

It is time for us to take stock of this crisis and to attempt to move toward new categories of understanding. The field need not retreat into purely empirical research, or second-order questions, or supposedly "hard" methodologies, as some have done, much less repeat tired ideological arguments, as a very few would like to do. Instead, we can see the present paradigmatic crisis as an exciting opportunity to rethink our old assumptions and address fundamental issues in new ways.

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This article begins with a broad-stroke review of past and present generations of Chinese and Western scholarship, to identify some of the main constructs that have guided scholarly research in the last four decades. Despite the obvious differences between the generations and between the two sides of the ocean, the major constructs employed have actually shared a number of basic assumptions. Those generally have gone unspoken, while most scholarly attention has been drawn to the areas of disagreement among the different constructs. Accumulated empirical research, however, has revealed the simultaneous existence of a host of phenomena that the existing assumptions take to be paradoxical. In so doing, it has challenged the very validity of those old assumptions. This article will take stock of a number of such empirical paradoxes, attempt to make explicit the unspoken assumptions they contradict, and suggest some new ways to think about the issues raised. No attempt will be made for a comprehensive review of the literature. Instead, the discussion of past scholarship will be restricted to the most illustrative titles, and my own predilections will be advocated unabashedly.

THE PARADIGMATIC CRISIS

CHINESE SCHOLARSHIP

Contemporary historical scholarship in China began in the 1950s with a picture of Chinese history during the imperial period as essentially unchanging. The reigning construct was "feudalism," seen as stagnant and traditional, juxtaposed against capitalism, seen as dynamic and modern. The overall scheme was the Stalinist "five modes of production formula," by which all historical development follows the successive stages of primitive, slave, feudal, capitalist, and socialist modes of production.

Under the construct of feudalism, scholars of China's imperial past studied feudal class relations, or the "extraction" of "surplus value" by the ruling landlord class from the peasant producers in the forms of land rent, tax, and usurious interest. Their effort resulted in massive compilations of source materials to document those exploitative rela-

tions (Zhang Youyi, 1957; Yan Zhongping et al., 1955). Some scholars also equated feudal economy with pre-commercial “natural economy,” conceptualized as peasant production for home consumption. They considered the most distinctive characteristic of such production in China to be the unity of farming and handicraft industry in the peasant household, capsuled in the expression “the men farm and the women weave” (*nangeng nüzhi*). It was thought to be a singularly tenacious form of production, resistant to the separating out of industry from farming into town workshops, and hence to capitalist development. To support their argument, they gathered evidence to demonstrate the preponderance of natural economy in the Ming and Qing, and its persistence into the 1930s.¹

Beginning already in the mid-1950s, these constructs came to be challenged by the scholarship on “incipient capitalism,” according to which Ming-Qing China, far from being stagnant, actually evinced dynamic changes heralding the coming of capitalism, similar to those in the West. One line of research sought to document and quantify systematically the spread of commerce in Ming-Qing China. The intention was to demonstrate the formation of an integrated national market, thought to be characteristic of a transition from feudalism to capitalism. Another concentrated on showing the loosening and decline of the “feudal relations of production,” especially of land rent, and the rise of “capitalist relations of production,” particularly of wage labor.²

The original proponents of the incipient capitalism argument paid little attention to demonstrating economic development; they assumed that once commercialization and capitalist relations of production could be demonstrated, there would be no question about capitalist economic development. But with the shift of official ideological emphasis from “relations of production” to the “forces of production” (i.e. technology, resource use, productivity, and the like) in the reformist 1980s, a new generation of scholars turned to address directly the question of economic development. The leading representative of this school has especially emphasized new cropping patterns and fertilizer use in the Yangzi delta (Li Bozhong, 1985a,b, 1984).

Although the incipient capitalism scholars have succeeded in undermining the old view of an unchanging “feudal” China, they have

not been able to gain widespread acceptance for their construct, either among the older feudalism scholars or among the younger generation trained in the 1980s. In Western European history, given the dynamic development of industrial capitalism in the nineteenth century, it makes good sense to speak in retrospect of incipient capitalism or a "transition to capitalism" in the previous three or four centuries. But, given China's non-capitalist nineteenth century, what sense does it make to speak of the earlier period as incipient capitalist? And, given the relative economic backwardness that made China an easy victim of imperialism, what sense does it make to equate Ming-Qing China with early modern England?

The incipient capitalism school has tried to argue its way out of this conceptual bind by maintaining that the intrusion of the West skewed China off her proper course of capitalist development. The Chinese economy's nineteenth-century backwardness would therefore be blamed on imperialism rather than any indigenous tendency toward stagnation. But that argument, while it serves nationalistic sentiments against imperialism, is not a compelling one. The economic influence of the West was limited until the end of the nineteenth century, and the Chinese economy showed little impulses of its own to develop full-grown capitalism from the supposed sprouts of the preceding centuries. The reality of China's economic backwardness in the nineteenth century only reminds us of the validity of some of the earlier scholarly findings under the feudal, natural economy scheme.

The theoretical impasse between the feudalism and incipient capitalism schools has bred pervasive skepticism toward both among younger Chinese scholars, so much so that few bother even to address these operating analytical constructs of their seniors. Most have sought to satisfy their desire for something new by adopting wholesale one or another fashionable approach from the West, thereby further enlarging the generation gap, in itself a direct reflection of the paradigmatic crisis in the world of Chinese scholarship.

WESTERN SCHOLARSHIP

Despite the greater diversity of Western scholarship, some of its major tendencies have been remarkably similar to those of Chinese

scholarship. Like the latter, American studies in the 1950s began with a view of traditional China as essentially unchanging. To be sure, instead of feudalism versus capitalism, the juxtaposition here, drawn from modernization theory, was between a “traditional” and a “modern” China. And the main emphasis was not on the class relations of feudal China, but on the hold of traditional institutions and ideology and, within social-economic history, on the pressure of population on a static economy.³ But the fundamental notion that China was stagnant, or changed only “within tradition,” until contact with the West was the same as in Chinese scholarship.

If the Qing was essentially unchanging, then impulses for qualitative change must have come from outside, hence the singular focus on “the impact of the West” and “China’s response” to it (Fairbank, Reischauer, and Craig, 1965; cf. Fairbank, 1958). Under that “Harvard school” sponsored “impact-response” rubric, important research was done to detail the West’s presence and the Chinese responses to it (e.g., Wright, 1957; Feuerwerker, 1958). But then the scheme was challenged in the late 1960s, at first politically, by those who saw the impact of the West as an apology for imperialism and the American involvement in Vietnam,⁴ and then empirically, by scholars who documented the occurrence of important changes during the “Ming-Qing transition.”

The latter tendency has given rise recently to the proposal for a new conceptualization of China in the centuries before the full onset of Western influence as “early modern,” evincing the same kinds of changes as those in Western Europe. Like “incipient capitalism” scholarship, the empirical point of departure for this argument is the very substantial commercialization that took place in the Ming-Qing economy. Its proponents are further urging that early-modern developments be found in the social-political spheres as well (Rowe, 1984, 1989; Naquin and Rawski, 1987).

As with the incipient capitalist scholarship, early-modern scholars have succeeded in undermining the old, unchanging, traditional-China scheme, and with it, its derivative, the impact-response model. Their empirical findings have contributed much more in that regard than the earlier political criticisms of John Fairbank and others by radical scholars. But, like the incipient-capitalist scholarship, the new con-

struct is having a difficult time gaining broad acceptance, and for similar reasons. If China in the 1600/1700-1840/1895 period was so much like the early-modern West, how then do we account for her very different path of change in the subsequent century? What do we do with imperialism and with the twentieth-century revolution? One possibility would be to argue that imperialism accelerated the earlier internally generated incipient modernization. But if that was the case, then how would one account for the coming of the Communist revolution—as merely an aberrant deviation from modernization? Another possibility would be to argue that it was imperialism that pushed China off her proper modernizing course into revolution. So far, early-modern proponents have yet to develop a persuasive view of imperialism and the revolution that is logically consistent with their argument.

And so the field finds itself in the present theoretical impasse: The old notions of a stagnant traditional China, and its derivative impact-response scheme, are no longer influential, and the new notion of an early-modern China is unable to establish itself as the new dominant construct. In the interim, the field is employing the seemingly neutral category of “late-imperial China” to characterize the Ming-Qing period, while overlooking the problems associated with the great emphasis on the imperial institution that the term implies.

TWO MODELS

The major analytical constructs of Chinese scholarship derive obviously from the classical model of Marx. The categories of feudalism and capitalism come from Marx’s analysis of Western Europe, especially England. The distinctive Chinese twist consists in the scheme of incipient capitalism. If Chinese society was merely feudal before the coming of imperialism, then the West would have to be credited with any modernizing changes that came afterward. But that was utterly unacceptable to any patriotic Chinese. So a formula was worked out in which China was well launched on a capitalist course of development before the coming of Western imperialism. The latter, however, drove China off that proper path into “semi-colonialism.” With incipient capitalism, one could have both the Stalinist five modes

of production formula (as well as the Leninist analysis of imperialism) and the condemnation of imperialism that nationalistic pride dictates.

The major constructs of Western scholarship, on the other hand, though less explicitly articulated and far from universally accepted, drew inspiration first from Malthus, and then from Adam Smith. Stagnant traditional China, it was thought, was burdened above all by Malthusian pressures on resources. But that image persisted only so long as the presumption that traditional China was essentially pre-commercial held sway. Once pervasive commercialization in the Ming and Qing was demonstrated, the Malthusian notions came under question from the ideas of Adam Smith.

Smith's vision was of market-driven capitalist development: Unfettered trade would promote specialization, competition, innovation, productive efficiency, and, with them, capital accumulation and development. Urban and rural advances would join in a single spiral of modern development, powered by the exchange of goods between town and country (Smith, 1976 [1775-1776]). It was a vision that was realized to a considerable extent in the English experience, which lent the Smithian notions strong empirical confirmation. It was also given strong theoretical support by the discipline of economics, which has employed an abstracted, pure Smithian model as the conceptual cornerstone for much of its theorizing.

If Ming-Qing China saw development of the sort envisioned by Smith, then labor, no less than any other productive factor, would be optimized in its use by the logic of the freely competitive market. And with optimal use, there can be no question of excessive population. Thus was the Malthusian perspective replaced by the Smithian vision implicit in the early modern model.

The foreground of debate between Chinese and Western scholarship was occupied at first by the question of whether it was feudal class-relations or population pressure that accounted for China's backwardness. The former held that capital formation in the Chinese economy was obstructed by the ruling landlord class who took the economic surplus from the direct producers and spent it on luxury consumption rather than productive investment; the latter argued that capital formation was obstructed by population pressure whittling away the peasants' surplus above consumption.⁵ Also at issue was the

question of whether it was social revolution or population control (and other reforms) that China needed to overcome her backwardness and modernize.

With the challenge to the traditional China model from the early modern China argument, and feudalism from incipient capitalism, however, the focus of debate shifted. The early modern construct found itself increasingly aligned with incipient capitalism against the old feudal natural economy and traditional China schools. Was the Ming-Qing economy already a highly integrated market economy witnessing early modern (or incipient capitalist) development, or was it still predominantly pre-commercial, essentially stagnant, and heavily burdened by population pressure?

With respect to the role of Western influence in China, Chinese scholars of both the feudal and incipient capitalist persuasions understandably emphasized the deleterious effects of imperialism. The feudalism scholars stressed how imperialism aggravated feudal relations of exploitation, while the incipient capitalism scholars spotlighted how imperialism obstructed a fuller development of Chinese capitalism.

The Western counter to those views came, at first, from the impact-response scheme. Some scholars argued, for example, that China's "failure to modernize" was the result not of the deleterious impact of the West, but of the tenacious hold of tradition (Wright, 1957; Feuerwerker, 1958). Then came, increasingly, arguments from the Smithian model. The expansions in international trade and foreign investment that came with Western influence were beneficial for the Chinese economy. If the Chinese economy nonetheless failed to modernize, it was not because of too much Western influence but because of too little, limited as that influence was to the coastal treaty ports (Dernberger, 1975; Murphey, 1977).

That line of argument led, finally, to the recent formulation that simply replaces the old "Western impact" with "the market." Now, unlike imperialism, with all its messy political realities and implications, markets can be shown to be good: When allowed to operate, they fostered Western-like development in China. Thus, the international market stimulated growth in Chinese industry and agriculture down into the 1930s. Its impact was not, as previous scholarship held,

confined to the coastal treaty ports, but actually extended into rural and inland China, generating extensive development (Rawski, 1989; Brandt, 1989, and Esherick, forthcoming; cf. Myers, 1970. Faure, 1989, more sensibly claims beneficial effects only for the export pockets). The misfortune of China, in this view, is that the market-stimulated development was interrupted by the historically aberrant phenomena of wars, famines, and the Communist revolution.

ONE PARADIGM

Despite the obvious differences between Chinese and Western scholarship, the two clearly share much in common. In both, a generation that saw Chinese history as essentially unchanging was challenged by one that emphasized dynamic changes from within Chinese tradition. In both, the image of a pre-commercial and essentially stagnant economy was challenged by one of a highly commercialized and vigorously developing economy. In both, stagnation was equated with pre-commercial economy, and modern development with commercialization. The Chinese feudalism scholars argued that feudalism was stagnant by equating it with pre-commercial natural economy. They, no less than the Chinese incipient capitalism scholars, assumed that commercialization must usher in capitalist development. Western traditional China scholars, similarly, assumed that the Ming-Qing economy was little commercialized. Ping-ti Ho's (1959) population study, for example, paid no attention to commercialization, and Dwight Perkins' (1969) study of Ming-Qing agriculture took a low level of commercialization as a constant. William Rowe's (1984, 1989) early modern challenge to these earlier works, on the other hand, proceeds from the evidence of vigorous commercialization.

The presumption that commercialization would give rise to modern development is one example of an assumption that cuts across both the feudal and incipient capitalist constructs, and the traditional China and early modern China constructs. It cuts across the last two generations of scholarship on both sides of the ocean, and across both Smithian and Marxist scholarship.

This kind of assumption generally goes unspoken. Scholarly attention is drawn instead mainly to the areas of disagreement between the

different constructs and models. And so we argue about the actual extent of Ming-Qing commercialization, and about the merits and demerits of imperialism and of class revolution. But we have paid little attention to the areas of agreement. Those are simply assumed to be too obviously true to require discussion.

It is this kind of assumption that I would call a paradigmatic assumption. The word paradigm, as it has come to be used in the academic world, usually means little more than an influential model of analysis. Such usage strips the concept of much of its analytical power, especially when applied to the social sciences, where there are so many competing constructs and models. I prefer to reserve the term paradigmatic assumptions for unspoken assumptions shared by different and opposed analytical constructs. Such assumptions have wielded a wider and subtler influence than the articulated constructs and models themselves, and have been significant for what they led us not to think, even more than what they led us to think.

By *paradigmatic crisis*, then, I am referring not just to a loss of confidence in one or another articulated construct or model, or one or another generation of scholarship, or one or the other side of Chinese and Western scholarship. It would be a mistake to interpret the current crisis in Chinese studies as signalling the demise of the older generation's research, or as occurring only in China and signaling the defeat of Marxist scholarship by Smithian scholarship. Where two bodies of ideas defined themselves so much in terms of the other, a crisis in either one should alert us to the need to reconsider both. A true paradigmatic crisis needs to be comprehended in terms of the interdependence and shared assumptions of both generations and both sides.

MULTIPLE PARADOXES

I believe it is, above all, the cumulative weight of demonstrated empirical paradoxes that has brought our field's paradigmatic assumptions to the verge of collapse. Paradoxes assert to be simultaneously true phenomena that our existing assumptions take to be contradictory. They therefore challenge those assumptions first with respect to the empirical validity of one or the other part of the paradox (e.g., with respect either to the fact of commercialization or of nondevelopment).

On a deeper level, they challenge those assumptions by questioning a presumed casual connection between two processes such as commercialization and some other phenomenon that is contradicted by non-development (i.e., modern or capitalist development). That is why the concurrence of vigorous and protracted commercialization with the persistence of subsistence-level farming in the Ming and Qing appears paradoxical from the perspective of both incipient capitalism and early modern China, and both natural economy and traditional China. It challenges the unspoken presumption shared by all of them that commercialization would, of necessity, bring modern development.

The contradictions between the demonstrated empirical paradoxes and the assumptions they challenge, however, have not usually been spelled out explicitly in the literature. Scholars do not normally discuss implicit assumptions, and some who would, no doubt, have thought the points too obvious for discussion. Thus left unspoken, the contradicted assumptions have continued to wield considerable influence, even when many feel uneasy about them. A major purpose of this article is to inventory a number of demonstrated empirical paradoxes and bring out the unspoken assumptions that they contradict.

COMMERCIALIZATION WITHOUT DEVELOPMENT

THE EMPIRICAL PARADOX

There can now be no doubt about the very substantial commercialization that took place in the Ming and Qing. In the space of the five centuries between about 1350 and 1850, almost all Chinese peasants took to wearing cotton cloth. That tells about the biggest part of the story of commercialization: the development of a cotton economy with large-scale intra- and inter-regional trade. Traffic in cotton goods, in turn, meant more extensive commercialization of grain, with trading between the cotton-surplus and grain-surplus regions and the cotton-surplus and grain-surplus peasant households. With that development came the rise of multitudes of commercial towns and cities, especially in the Yangzi delta, for the processing and trading of cotton and grain.

It would be simply wrong to continue to picture Ming-Qing China as pre-commercial (Wu Chengming, 1985).

Yet, we also know that subsistence-level peasant farming persisted throughout the five centuries of vigorous commercialization. There may be disagreement about whether production kept up with rural population increase (Perkins, 1969), or fell behind it (Ho, 1959; Elvin, 1973), but there can be no argument about the fact that the countryside was not undergoing anything like transformative development.

Along the same lines, there can be no doubt now about the spread of capitalist-like social relations of wage-labor. There were large numbers of rural farmworkers, both long-term and short-term. There was also the loosening of land-rent relations, with older forms of sharecropping giving way to fixed rents, and rents in kind to cash rents. Such changes offer additional confirmation of the increased commercialization of the rural economy (Li Wenzhi, Wei Jinyu, and Jing Junjian, 1983).

Yet, we also know that there was little large-scale capitalist production in agriculture. Most agricultural laborers were hired by peasant farms seeking to supplement their family labor. In all areas of China, especially the most highly commercialized ones, small-peasant farming continued to predominate. Moreover, the few large farms that employed hired labor did not achieve substantially different yields per mu from the small farms (Huang, 1985, 1990).

We have, in short, the paradoxical concurrence of vigorous commercialization and subsistence-level peasant farming. This throws into question both the Marxist and Smithian models' assumption of a necessary connection between commercialization and modern development. Those models were based mainly on the exceptional empirical experience of England. In most of the rest of the world, modern development only came with the conjuncture of other tendencies (e.g., active state leadership) with commercialization, and came much later than in England. The abstracted model of pure market-driven development, based on the English experience, has served a useful purpose in the construction of theory for neoclassical economics, but it should not be confused with historical reality in the rest of the world.

Linked to the idea of market-driven modern economic development is the assumption that it would, of necessity, come with both growth

in output and development in labor productivity. That was what was happening in Smith's and Marx's England; neither of them, therefore, drew any distinction between growth and development. Neither allowed for the possibility of (output) *growth without* (labor productivity) *development*.

However, past scholarship has shown that that was precisely what was happening in Ming-Qing China. Output growth resulted from expanded cultivated acreage, which might have gone up four times. It also resulted from higher yields per cultivated mu, through increased frequency of cropping per cultivated mu, and for some crops, also increased fertilizer and labor input per sown mu (Perkins, 1969). Yet, no one has been able to document increased productivity per workday, as opposed to per unit area, despite the persistent efforts of incipient capitalism scholars to demonstrate economic development. Only land productivity went up, largely from the increased application of labor. Returns per workday remained abysmally low, peasant living standards remained at bare subsistence levels, and the majority of the Chinese population remained tied to food production.

The distinction between growth and development is crucially important for comprehending China's rural social-economic history. The absence of labor productivity development, despite dramatic output growth, is what condemned the majority of the Chinese population to subsistence-level food production down into the 1980s (Perkins and Yusuf, 1984). By contrast, dramatic labor productivity development, in the United States for example, is what enables 4% of the population to supply food to the rest. Labor productivity development lies at the core of the meaning of modern development, and it did not happen in Ming-Qing China.

Another related assumption shared by Smith and Marx is that modern economic development would come in a single, coherent process involving both industrial and agricultural development and both urban and rural modernization. Once again, that was what was happening in their contemporary England. Neither one considered the possibility of urban industrialization without rural development.

But industrialization without rural development was precisely what happened in China from the late nineteenth century on. There can be no doubt now about the substantial industrial development that took

place in China then. The amount of capital invested in modern, machine-powered industry, mining, and transport grew at a rate of well over 10% per year beginning in the 1890s, a fact to which the modern cities like Shanghai, Tianjin, Wuxi, Qingdao, Hankou, and Guangzhou bore only partial witness. There was also the vigorous development of smaller towns, especially in the Yangzi delta. There was substantial growth even in handicraft workshop production in the towns.⁶

These developments took place in the context of greatly accelerated commercialization. The largest part of that story is told by the breaking apart of the old three-way combination of cotton cultivation, yarn spinning, and cloth weaving by the peasant household. Machine-spun yarn, first foreign and then also domestic, massively displaced the old handspun yarn. Peasant growers came to sell their cotton to be machine spun, and peasant weavers to purchase machine-spun yarn for hand-weaving. The result was vastly increased trading in the countryside (Wu Chengming, 1984; Xu Xinwu, 1990; Huang, 1990).

Yet, at the same time, we also know that the new capitalist sector of the economy never accounted for more than 10% of total output in China. There was also considerable disruption of the traditional handicrafts, most especially cotton yarn spinning, leading, for example, to the decline and even complete collapse of numerous towns in the Yangzi delta. Most important, peasant incomes remained at the barest margins of subsistence even through the relatively prosperous 1920s, and then took a turn for the worse with the depression. The majority of China's rural population remained tied to the land, engaged in bare-subsistence food production. The economic development that took place occurred mainly in the cities. The countryside remained underdeveloped.⁷

COUNTERFACTUAL ARGUMENTS

How do we deal with these demonstrated paradoxical realities? We can, of course, continue to insist on one or the other classical model to the disregard of the empirical paradoxes above. One resort of the past has been to try to argue away the contravening side of the paradox with counterfactual reasoning. Thus, Chinese incipient capitalist scholars maintained that *if* Western imperialism *had not* intruded into

China, the capitalist sprouts of the Ming and Qing *would have* led to transformative capitalist development for both town and countryside. In this way, the fact that transformative capitalist development did not occur does not matter. The validity of the theoretical scheme is maintained by asserting that it should have, despite contravening historical reality.

In the same way, neo-Smithian American scholars argue explicitly or implicitly that *if there had not* been war and revolution, the market-driven development of rural China in the first decades of the twentieth century *would have* led to transformative rural modernization (Myers, 1970; Rawski, 1989; Brandt, 1989). In that way, the historical fact that rural China did not modernize does not matter. Theory is maintained at the expense of history.

The same kind of argument has been used with respect to the effects of Western influence. Thus, the positive effects of that influence are explained away by Chinese scholars with the argument that, *if there had not* been imperialism, there *would have* been still more development.⁸ By the same token, the negative effects of Western influence are explained away by neo-Smithian Western scholars with the argument that, if there had been more Western influence, there would not have been such persistent rural poverty, or that, *if there had not* been Western influence, there *would have* been still more poverty (Hou, 1965; Elvin, 1973; Demberger, 1975).

Such assertions often come with two other kinds of reasoning. One maintains that feudalism or tradition must give way to market-driven capitalism or modernization. Even if it did not do so historically, it should have, or would have eventually. The other maintains that, given the presence of one element, commercialization, the rest of the compound, capitalism or modern development, must have been present. If it was not, it would have been eventually. Clearly, such arguments, in addition to being counterfactual, are teleological and reductionist. One insists on an inevitable, unilinear path of historical development. The other reduces complex phenomena to a single component part.

What we need to do instead is to start with the empirical paradoxes and seek theoretical constructs capable of explaining them, rather than insist on arguing away one or the other side. Scholarly inquiry should proceed from history to theory, rather than starting with theory and

forcing history to fit it. It is time to leave behind the conceptual strait-jacket imposed by the two classical models and their shared assumptions.

INVOLUTION AND INVOLUTIONARY COMMERCIALIZATION

Let me indulge briefly in a discussion of my own work, in order to illustrate the approach I wish to advocate here. Contradictory evidence had led me first, in my 1985 book, to settle on a syncretic approach that emphasized the partial validity of both generations of scholarship and both classical models. It was only in my 1990 book that I grasped clearly how empirical paradoxes challenged the unspoken assumptions shared by both generations and models. That led, in turn, to the questions: How might we account for paradoxical realities such as the concurrence of vigorous commercialization and subsistence-level farming? And growth without development? And urban industrialization and rural underdevelopment?

The approach led me, in the end, to re-think the very process of commercialization itself. We customarily assume that rural commercialization is powered by the profit-maximizing activities of enterprising farmers. That was the experience of Smith's and Marx's England. China, we assume, should have been no different—hence the search by scholars of both the Smithian and Marxist persuasions for rich peasants who made good. But, in Qing China, it turns out, that was only a small part of the story. The larger story was told by population pressures on the land. Shrinking farm sizes drove peasants to accept *involution*, or intensification of labor input per unit area at the cost of diminishing marginal returns per workday. In the Yangzi delta, this involution took principally the form of commercialized crop production, especially of cotton, and the sideline production that came with it. It permitted increased labor input and expanded total output value per unit area vis-à-vis simple grain production, but only at the expense of decreased returns per workday. It was a strategy of survival against population pressure, more than of capitalistic profit-maximizing, and it resulted in little capital accumulation. Such *involutionary commercialization*, powered primarily by population pressure, needs to be

distinguished from the transformative commercialization that ends in modern development.⁹

Involutionary commercialization could nonetheless mean higher household income, through fuller employment of the household's available productive labor. It could even mean higher income per laborer on a per-annum basis, through employment for a larger number of days per year. But it did not mean increased productivity or returns per workday, which generally comes with more efficient labor organization, technological advance, or more capital investment per laborer. Involution, in other words, explains the paradox of *growth without development*.

Unlike development, involution tends to be limited in the way of productive expansion, limited by the number of additional days any laborer could physically work in a year, whereas improved productivity per laborer through capitalization (i.e., increased capital inputs per unit labor) does not face the same constraint. Moreover, the more involuted production becomes, the more difficult it tends to be to take labor out and pursue the path of increasing productivity per laborer through capitalization. The displaced labor would have to find alternative employment.

It should be clear that, even without other transformative changes, involutionary commercialization could nonetheless become the basis for substantial market and town development, as occurred in Ming-Qing China. Involuted peasant production of cotton and silk provided the basis for the expanded trade in those commodities, and by extension, also in grain. That trade, and the processing of those commodities, became the backbone of the new towns that, in turn, provided the context for new cultural developments. Through it all, however, subsistence-level peasant production persisted.

The explanation for the empirical paradoxes with which we began needs to be found, in other words, in the very nature of the process of commercialization itself. It will not do to imagine that all commercialization must lead to capitalist development. There can be different forms and dynamics of commercialization, which result in different kinds of change. Instead of maintaining that China's experience must have been, or should have been, like England's, my concern was

instead to clarify just how its dynamic and logic were different, producing results that appear paradoxical from our England-derived assumptions.

My approach to the issues raised by imperialism is similar. Instead of assuming either that the world market must have been good for the Chinese economy, or that imperialism could only have had been bad, I tried to look at what actually happened and take account of the paradoxical concurrence of beneficial and deleterious effects. The coming of the West resulted in an interlinking of the capital-intensive foreign and urban sectors of the economy with the involuted rural sector. In the internationalized silk economy, for example, relatively capital-intensive mechanized silk-weaving was done by American and French factories, which came to depend on the relatively non-capital-intensive Chinese silk-reeling industry for their silk thread. The Chinese filatures, in turn, depended on cheap, involuted peasant household production for their supply of cocoons. The entire system was based on the low-return mulberry cultivation of the peasant men, and the even lower-return silkworm raising of peasant women. In the cotton industry, a similar logic applied. Foreign factories undertook most of the relatively capital-intensive cloth weaving, Chinese mills the relatively capital-cheap yarn spinning, and Chinese peasants the labor-intensive, low-return cotton cultivation. Thus was imperialism, Chinese industry, and peasant involution interlinked to form a single system.

FOR MICRO-SOCIAL RESEARCH

In terms of method, micro-social research seems especially helpful for overcoming existing assumptions. So long as research is restricted to macro-level or quantitative analyses, it is extremely difficult to resist the inclination to apply to China models and assumptions derived from one's own context. Dense evidence at the micro-social level or, better still, the ethnographer's sustained firsthand contact with the subject, however, allows one the possibility of developing a feel for the subject that is different from one's preconceived notions. With that comes the possibility for inverting the usual epistemological pattern of proceeding from intuitive assumptions to empirical study.

The opportunity is then opened up for perceiving and conceptualizing empirical realities that contradict our existing assumptions.

Local studies are another useful approach for similar reasons. Macro studies of a single variable or a limited set of variables seldom permit us to raise fundamental questions about presumed connections among different variables. Local studies, on the other hand, generally attempt to examine the “total history” of a given area, thus affording the opportunity of addressing in new ways the question of how different factors related to each other, rather than assuming that certain connections that obtained in one’s own context must also have occurred in the other. In attempting to rethink intuitive assumptions, I have found theoretical constructs generated from non-Western societies more instructive than the Western-derived models. Thus, my notion of involution has drawn much from the theories of A. V. Chayanov and Clifford Geertz, both based on micro-social studies of non-Western societies.

Finally, empirical paradoxes seem to me a particularly useful way to conceptualize problems for study. Existing constructs, both in their areas of disagreement and their shared assumptions, can help us to identify paradoxes. Once clearly identified, the simultaneous validity of facts presumed to be contradictory from the standpoint of existing models then opens up questions about presumed causal connections. For example, might not the nature of commercialization be different from what we had assumed? And, might not the cause of modern development be other than just commercialization? Such questions can, in turn, lead us to connections not otherwise apparent and to the generation of new theories that explain the paradox.

OTHER PARADOXES

What follows are broadly sketched observations on what seem to me to be several other empirical paradoxes that have been revealed by past scholarship. I will not attempt to provide a comprehensive survey of the literature that has contributed to demonstrating these paradoxes, but will refer only to works that seem particularly illustrative. Also, the discussion will concentrate mainly on the particular direction of

inquiry being advocated here. That means unavoidably slighting the many valuable contributions that others have made in searching for new approaches to break out of the confines of the old models.

SEGMENTED "NATURAL ECONOMY" AND INTEGRATED MARKETS

There have been major efforts on both sides of the ocean in recent years to bring the concerns and methods of microeconomics to bear on Chinese history. Earlier studies had been mainly macroeconomic; the new approaches have laudably turned the spotlight from gross national output to the neglected subjects of markets, prices, and enterprise/household choice (Wu Chengming, 1984, 1985; Chen Chunsheng, 1984; Wang Yeh-chien, 1989; Cheng, 1990).¹⁰

The new research has succeeded in demonstrating considerable market integration in the Ming-Qing economy. There is no question about the existence of a "national market" in such major commodities as rice, cotton, tea, and silk. Major inter-regional trade routes can be clearly identified, and the approximate quantities of trade estimated. Prices in different regions can be shown to have moved synchronously. In the Republican period, the earlier tendencies accelerated, and Chinese markets came to be linked further to foreign markets.

Yet, we also know that, throughout the Ming and Qing, almost all cotton yarn and cloth production was done not in town workshops, but by peasant households in conjunction with farming (Xu Xinwu, 1990, 1981). Moreover, the bulk of peasant production continued to go directly to household consumption. The most recent and systematic study estimates that peasant production for home consumption exceeded that for the market as late as 1920 (Wu Chengming, 1990: 18-19, *passim*). The rural economy, in other words, was still in substantial measure a natural economy.

Factor markets, moreover, operated under severe constraints, far from the ideal of the freely competitive market. Land transactions were restricted by both custom and law, requiring the first refusal of the neighbors and kin farming adjacent plots, and the indefinite right of redemption in the case of the very widely used practice of conditional sales (Yang Guozhen, 1988). Labor transactions, similarly, required personal connections and intermediaries to effect, thereby

greatly limiting the spatial reach of the labor market. Intra-village loans among kin and neighbors (either personal or through credit societies) were often based on the principles of reciprocity and good feeling, rather than of an impersonal credit market. And peasant borrowing from usurers was predicated on the logic of survival-borrowing in a subsistence economy, at interest rates of 2%-3% a month, much higher than any credit market based on profit-oriented enterprises could bear (Fei Xiaotong, 1939; Huang, 1990).

Now, we can, of course, fall once more into the old trap. Neo-Smithian scholars would insist that, given the element of synchronicity in the prices of some commodities, the rest of the compound must follow self evidently: that perfectly competitive, textbook-style factor markets operated in China's peasant economy no less than they do in advanced capitalist economies, and that peasant choice, no less than capitalist entrepreneurial choice, seeks to maximize profits in the market. For some, this reductionist reasoning would lead further to the teleological conclusion that transformative modernization of the countryside must result from such market development. The historical fact that it did not does not contradict the theory, according to the counterfactual argument, since it *would have* sooner or later *if* war and revolution *had not* interrupted the process.

The natural economy scholars, on the other hand, would insist that feudal economy can only be natural economy. Under normal historical progression, capitalism and completely integrated markets might have developed, but that possibility was precluded by the influence of imperialism, which joined with Chinese feudal forces to block the process. The situation *would have* been different, *if* only the West *had not* intruded. And so we would have a repeat of the old ideological arguments.

The combining of the perfect factor market model and the natural economy model into a "dual economy" (Hou, 1963; Murphey, 1977) does little to advance our understanding, for we know beyond question the close interconnections between the two, the most obvious example being the cotton textile economy, which affected almost every peasant. It would be simply wrong to picture two separate economies.

None of the three models is adequate for conceptualizing how markets did or did not work in China's recent centuries. On this

subject, as on so much else in China's social-economic history, we are faced with a conceptual impasse that is part and parcel of the current paradigmatic crisis. A useful first step for breaking out of this impasse would be to approach the question by inverting the past habit of going from theory to fact, and proceeding instead from the empirical evidence: Given the paradox of a segmented natural economy and an integrated market, how do we explain the simultaneous presence and long persistence of both? And, how do we explain the paradox of integrated markets without transformative modern development? My suggestion that there can be different dynamics for commercialization that produce different consequences might be one beginning. It is a line of thinking that can be extended also to the question of how the markets did or did not operate in accordance with our existing schemes. One particularly promising subject of inquiry might be the commercial firms that stood at the junction between the traditional and modern market systems: They should tell us a good deal about how the two systems operated and how they did and did not interpenetrate.

*THE EXPANSION OF THE PUBLIC REALM
WITHOUT THE DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIC POWER*

Another important area of new research by Qing historians is the demonstration of the spread, most especially in the Yangzi delta, of merchant organizations, common origin associations, gentry-organized schools and academies, literary and academic societies, philanthropic associations to provide for the elderly, widows, or orphans, charitable granaries to protect against famine, and the like. The mounting evidence on such non-state public associations is leading some to experiment with Habermas's (1989 [1962]) notion of the rise of a "public sphere" in early modern Europe to characterize these developments of the late Ming-early Qing.¹¹ The parallels seem obvious and striking.

The borrowing of Habermas's term and scheme, however, can carry unintended teleological and reductionist implications. In the context of Western European history, Habermas's study of the rise of the public sphere is tantamount to a study of the roots of democracy (and of its subsequent degeneration or "structural transformation"). He is talking not just about the difference between a public and a private realm, but rather about those two realms in the context of another juxtaposition:

the state versus civil society. For him, the two pairs of concepts interpenetrate. Indeed, it is his simultaneous use of them that gives his work its analytical power. From the standpoint of the roots of democracy, it was not merely the expansion of the public realm of life that was crucial, but rather its expansion in the context of the assertion of civic power against state power. It is in such a context that we need to understand Habermas's references to "the public sphere of *civil society*" (Habermas, 1989 [1962]).

Modern urban society has witnessed the steady expansion of the public realm of life, but not always with the assertion of civic power against the state. In fact, we might usefully think of the public realm as an area contested over by the modern state and civil society. In democratic societies, civil society asserts itself successfully over the public sphere. In non-democratic societies, however, the reverse was the case. One need only think of the complete domination by the postrevolutionary Chinese state of the public realm of life.

From such a point of view, what is poignant about Habermas's concepts as they might be applied to China is the dissociation, rather than association, between the expansion of the public realm of life and the assertion of civic power against the state. There was expansion of the public (as well as private) realm of life with town development and the breakdown of village communal patterns in an urban environment, to be sure. (We need only think of the differences in the daily lives of village and town residents: close social intercourse with family, kin, and fellow villagers but little beyond, as opposed to considerably more privacy from family and neighbor [or at least the potential for such], but more association with others outside the immediate neighborhood.) But, in China, the town did not stand outside of the power of the state in nearly the same way as in the late-medieval and early-modern West. And town development did not carry with it nearly the same implications of development of civic political power. In China, between 1600/1700 and 1840/1895, it seems to me, there was a fair amount of development of civil public associations, but little in the way of assertion of civic power against the state. Those two phenomena were interlinked in the West, but they were dissociated in China. The paradox of the expansion of the public realm without the assertion of civic power against the state, then, raises the

question: How were the dynamics driving the development of public associations in Ming-Qing China and in the early modern West similar and yet different?

LEGAL FORMALISM WITHOUT LIBERALISM

Another subject of current interest in the United States is the study of China's legal history. An older generation had been impressed by the lack of judicial autonomy and individual civil rights in China's legal system. Judicial authority was part of administrative authority, and law was predominantly penal in intent, for the purpose of maintaining state ideology and the approved social order. There was little or no development of civil law (Ch'ü, 1961; Van der Sprenkel, 1977 [1962]; Bodde and Morris, 1967). The emphasis, like the general scholarship on China of the time, was on the differences between late imperial China and the modern West.

Then came a generation of research that emphasized the formalist/rational aspects of China's legal tradition. The law, in fact, did not resort to arbitrary punishment and torture but operated by consistent rules of evidence. It worked quite well, even by present-day standards of justice. And it dealt with civil matters in systematic and rational ways (Buxbaum, 1971; Conner, 1979; Alford, 1984). This scholarship, of course, either anticipated or took place at the same time as the early modern China research, and paralleled the latter's tendency to redress the unbalanced emphasis of the preceding generation.

The different analytical constructs employed by the two generations correspond to Max Weber's dichotomy of instrumentalist or *khadi* law and formalist or rational law (Weber, 1954). In one, law is the instrument of the state and is subject to the whims of the ruler. In the other, it is based on abstract, formally codified principles, which in turn give rise to specialization, standardization, and judicial autonomy—characteristics that Weber equated with modern rationalism.

The differences between the two perspectives are clearly reflected in the work of comparative law theorist Roberto Unger (1976), and the long criticism of it by William Alford (1986). For Unger, China provided the foil par excellence of a legal tradition without the tendencies that gave rise to modern liberal law and its protections for

the civil rights of the individual. For Alford, on the other hand, Unger's views of Chinese law carry all the culture-bound errors of the earlier generation's work.

Both views seem to me valid in part. There can be no denying that imperial Chinese law was highly formalized and, as such, also systematic and relatively autonomous. It was "formalist" in those senses. Yet, there can also be no denying that imperial Chinese law remained subject to administrative interference, especially by the person of the emperor (see, for example, Kuhn, 1990), and that, until Republican times and the influence of the modern West, it gave rise to little in the way of liberal impulses toward the protection of individual rights. Formalism and liberalism may have become associated in the early modern and modern West. But they were not in Ming-Qing China.

Little can be gained if each side of the issue seeks only to assert that its view is the more accurate or important one. The debate would, in the end, become similar to the argument over whether late imperial China was traditional or early modern, feudal or incipient capitalist. Here again, the place to start would seem to be with the empirical paradox of formalism without liberalism.

We need to find out just what that meant in practice, especially with respect to civil justice.¹² There was no clear separation between criminal and civil law in the Qing, to be sure. That meant the absence of a clearly delineated and autonomous realm of civil justice, as exists in modern liberal law. Yet, the Qing code carried a considerable number of specific, formal provisions with respect to civil matters (like inheritance and succession, marriage and divorce, buying and selling land, and credit and debt). Massive numbers of case records of the Qing and Republican periods have now become available. The micro-social evidence contained in those records permits us to explore a number of questions in detail. From the point of view of the magistrate, for example, just how much of his attention was taken up by civil cases? To what extent did he act formalistically according to the letter of the law and to what extent arbitrarily according to personal judgment? And, from the point of view of the commonfolk, to what extent and for what purposes did they resort to litigation? Just how did the court system and community mediation interrelate in the settlement of civil disputes? Answers to such questions might give us a

firmer basis on which to analyze the differences and similarities of the Chinese and Western legal traditions.

STRUCTURE AND AGENCY IN THE CHINESE REVOLUTION

Past scholarship on the Chinese Revolution has been divided mainly over the question of the relationship between structure and agency in the revolution. The orthodox Chinese Marxist view is straightforward enough: Long-term structural changes brought increased tensions between classes, most especially landlords and tenants, and the Chinese Communist Party was the organizing agent of the exploited peasants. Structural change and human agency were united in a single movement of Communist-led class revolution (Mao, 1972 [1927], 1972 [1939]; Zhang Youyi, 1957; Li Wenzhi, 1957).

This view of the revolution is backed by the Chinese scholarship on long-term social-economic change. The feudalism school, as we have seen, emphasized the centrality of landlord-tenant conflict under feudal relations of production. Imperialism, in that view, aggravated those class contradictions, thereby setting the stage for the anti-feudal and anti-imperialist class revolution. The incipient capitalism school, though it stressed instead how imperialism obstructed the full development of the earlier sprouts of capitalism, reached the same conclusion about the structural background of the revolution: The continued predominance of the social relations of the feudal natural economy set the stage for the Communist-led anti-feudal and anti-imperialist revolution.

Conservative scholarship in the United States has argued the opposite: There was a disjunction between structural tendencies and human agency in the revolution. During the height of the cold war in the 1950s, the most ideological and conservative scholars even maintained that the revolution was strictly the work of a conspiratorial minority controlled and manipulated by Moscow (Michael and Taylor, 1956). Eventually, the conservative mainstream view came to emphasize party organization as *the* crucial force driving the revolution. Peasant class struggle is seen as merely a fiction of revolutionary propaganda; what really mattered was the effective organizing work of the highly manipulative Chinese Communist Party.

This view too is backed by scholarship on long-term social-economic change. The stagnant traditional China construct, as noted earlier, emphasizes the role of population pressure as the source of modern China's ills, while the neo-Smithian scheme spotlights the developmental effects of the market. From either point of view, the class revolution program of the Chinese Communist Party was an aberration running contrary to structural tendencies; population pressure would call for birth control and other reforms, and market-driven development for capitalism, not for revolution.

There is clearly a grain of truth in both of these sets of views. Few would deny that the Chinese Communist movement enjoyed much greater popular support than did the Guomindang, and that such support made a critical difference in the outcome of the civil war, most especially in its strategic phase on the North China plain. Yet, at the same time, there can be no denying the strongly conspiratorial mentality and workstyle of the Leninist Communist Party, its protestations of a "mass line" notwithstanding. Peasants in post-1949 China remain in many respects the objects of party manipulation, rather than the supposed masters of the revolution made in their name.

But the political context of the field at that time made it difficult to argue one or the other point without the rest of the ideological package. An effort to demonstrate the popular basis of the revolution would come with the entire class revolution argument (e.g., Selden, 1971), while an argument on the importance of party-organizing would carry with it the whole conservative scheme of things (e.g., Hofheinz, 1977). Even those who carefully avoided the ideological debate found themselves under attack by the most fervently committed. Thus was John Fairbank attacked by Ramon Myers and Thomas Metzger for propagating a "revolution paradigm" whose "ideological perspective, coinciding with Beijing's historiographical perspective, prevented many American intellectuals from thinking fairly and soberly about the two Chinese governments" (Myers and Metzger, 1980: 88).

Most scholars in the field have not found the arguments of either of these two highly ideological constructs persuasive. Many, staying clear of such arguments, have quietly set themselves the difficult task of generating the kinds of empirical evidence that would make possi-

ble a more sophisticated analysis (e.g., Chen, 1986). But, as yet, there has been no clearly articulated alternative that has gained wide acceptance.

To move the field forward from here, it seems to me, one necessary step is to break out of the confines of the old formulations of the relationship between long-term structural tendencies and the revolution. Structural change did not have to be pointing in the direction either of free market capitalism or of Communist revolution; there were other possibilities. I have suggested one with the concept of involutory commercialization. That means, in this context, the paradox of commercialization without intensified class conflict and without differentiation of the peasantry into capitalistic farmers and hired wage workers. Instead, commercialization enhanced the ability of small peasant farming and the natural village to reproduce themselves.

Another example of an alternative view of long-term structural change goes as follows: The big structural tendency that jumps out at us from the Jiangnan area in the century after the Taiping Rebellion was landlord weakening, caused by greater state interference, increased taxation, and non-expanding rents. Landlordism might not have been destroyed by active social revolution by tenant peasants, as the standard revolutionary model asserts. It might have ended simply through structural collapse, without much in the way of peasant revolutionary action, at least in the lower Yangzi region (Bernhardt, forthcoming).

Another step forward would be to conceive of the relationship between structure and agency as something other than completely consistent or completely opposed. We do not have to choose between just the conservative view of a party without popular support and the Communist view of a tide of class revolution. The important issue instead is: just how did structure and agency interrelate?

Viewing structure and agency as separate and interactive is a useful advance over the past presumptions of complete consistency or total disjunction. It enables us to see the linking of the two as a process, and not as a foregone conclusion. In Elizabeth Perry's (1980) study of the Communist movement in the Huaibei area, for example, long-term ecological instability and Communist organizing are shown to meet in a temporary alliance built on Communist willingness to draw on community self-defense organizations for support. In James Scott's

“moral economy” theory (Scott, 1976; Marks, 1984), party and peasant would find their meeting ground in the restoration of the “right to subsistence.” And in Joseph Esherick’s (1987) study of the Boxers, to give just one more example, popular culture becomes a way to study peasant predispositions in thought and action.

To work out fully a new view of the revolution and take the field out of the conceptual impasse of the past few decades, we will need qualitatively different evidence from what has been used so far. Chinese scholars of the revolution have concerned themselves mainly with organizational history, in part because of the limitations of the available sources. There has been no significant work on what happened when the revolutionary movement actually met rural society.¹³ But new kinds of documentation are becoming available in archives in China and in the memories of participants (whose ranks are, of course, thinning fast). Access to those can now be gained through archival and micro-social field research in China, an effort in which a number of American scholars are already actively engaged.

CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

The two-model divide has carried over into contemporary history. The class conflict analysis of the Chinese revolution has its corollary in the category “socialism” for postrevolutionary China. In that scheme of things, the Chinese Communist Party is the organized agent expressing the will of the laboring masses of Chinese society. State and society are one, and socialist revolution was the natural outcome of the long-term structural tendencies in Chinese society. The party-organization analysis of the revolution, on the other hand, has its postrevolutionary analogue in the category “totalitarianism.”¹⁴ In that construct, the party-state rules by totalitarian control of the people. State and society are opposed, and capitalism, not socialism, should have been the outcome of the structural tendencies in Chinese society.

With respect to agrarian change, the socialism model predicted that collective ownership of the means of production would overcome the weaknesses of small peasant production and power economic modernization, but without the inequities inherent in capitalist develop-

ment. The capitalism model, on the other hand, predicted that collective ownership would suffer from the absence of incentives that operate in an economy based on private ownership and free-market principles. Centralized planning, moreover, would bring excessive bureaucratic control, and the socialist economy would become mired in inefficiency.

Among Chinese policymakers themselves, there have been protracted debates on these same issues, capsuled at the time of the Cultural Revolution under the slogan "the struggle of the two roads." With each turn of direction in official rural policy, one or the other model has been called upon to rationalize the policy changes. Thus, equity and collective achievements were emphasized in the Great Leap and the Cultural Revolution, while markets and profit incentives were touted in the post-Great Leap adjustments and again in the post-Cultural Revolution reforms.

The debates have carried over to some extent into the Western academic world, with some scholars sympathizing more with the "Maoists" and others more with Liu Shaoqi and the 1980s reformers. The most committed proponents of one or the other model have gone on to criticize Chinese policies from the perspectives of the abstracted models, as, for example, excessive statism under Maoist policies (Lippit, 1987), or insufficient marketization under the 1980s reforms (Jefferson and Rawski, 1990).

With China's turn away from collective agriculture in the 1980s, ardent neo-Smithians have seen in the reforms confirmation of their cherished faith. For them, China's resort to market mechanisms signals the collapse of socialism and the triumph of capitalism. The reforms mean that the Chinese economy has finally been set back on its proper course of market-driven development, after decades of aberrant socialist revolution. If problems remain, it is only because the reforms have not gone far enough, having failed to implement complete privatization of ownership and total decontrol of prices (i.e., capitalism).

I believe the real lessons of China's recent past are that both models share faulty assumptions. As with prerevolutionary studies, what we have in contemporary studies is two models and one paradigm. While the foreground of debate has been occupied by the differences between

the two models, the greater influence has been wielded by their unspoken shared assumptions.

The paradigmatic assumptions I am referring to pertain, once again, to the areas of agreement between the two models, considered by both to be too obviously true to require discussion. Among those assumptions I would point again to their common notions that urban industrialization and rural development, and output growth and labor productivity advances, would form a single coherent process of modern development (whether capitalist or socialist).

Two other assumptions held by the two sides have been important in influencing our thinking about post-1949 China. Since the capitalism and socialism models derive from Western experiences, and their Russian counter, neither one gives serious consideration to the problem of excess population. Both assume that with modern economic development, whether socialist or capitalist, any such problem would be easily overcome. By extension, neither considers the problems attendant on highly involuted farming, in which yields per unit area have already been pushed so high as to limit the possibility for further large-scale advances. Both therefore assume virtually unlimited capacity for expansion of yields. And neither pays much attention to the sideline and industrial production so essential to peasant survival in an involuted rural economy. Both assume that rural production comprises mainly crop production.

Finally, although the ideologically influenced models of capitalism and socialism have commanded the adherence of only a minority of scholars, their shared tendency to assume that each represents the only alternative to the other has perhaps influenced a larger number. In that perspective, rural development must come either through capitalism or socialism, not some mixture of the two or some third or fourth or other alternative.

URBAN DEVELOPMENT AND RURAL INVOLUTION IN THE COLLECTIVE ERA

The paradoxical concurrence of urban industrialization with rural underdevelopment is even more evident in postrevolutionary China down through the 1970s than in prerevolutionary China before 1949. Past scholarship has demonstrated well the wide gulf separating

industrial development and agricultural change: While industrial output rose 11% per year between 1952 and 1979, or 19-fold in the period, agricultural output increased just 2.3% a year, barely ahead of population growth (Perkins and Yusuf, 1984: chap. 2). This paradox of industrial development and rural underdevelopment contradicts directly the predictions of both the capitalism and socialism models that rural and urban development would move in tandem.

Rural collectives, to be sure, enabled Chinese agriculture to undertake the kinds of infrastructural investments not possible by individual small-peasant farms. By themselves those improvements might have permitted gains in labor productivity. But population pressure and state policy compelled ever greater intensification of labor input per unit area, at the cost of diminished marginal returns. In the end, even though rural output expanded three-fold, labor input went up three- to four-fold — from the full mobilization of women for farm production, from increased number of days worked per year, and from a near doubling of the rural population. The result was lower returns per workday, or, in other words, the paradox of (output) *growth without* (labor productivity) *development* in farm production.

The collective farm, it turns out, shared with the prerevolutionary family farm certain basic organizational characteristics. Unlike a capitalist farm using hired labor, its labor supply was fixed, and could not be adjusted according to need. And, unlike a capitalist farm, it was a unit of both consumption and production, not just of production. As such, it could be driven by consumption needs to involute to a high degree, regardless of returns per unit labor. Involution in the post-1949 period, moreover, was dictated by state policy. From the state's point of view, added labor input in labor-abundant China was cheaper than added capital input. Furthermore, state taxation and procurement were pegged to total output, regardless of returns per workday to the collective members. The result was what I call *collectivist involution*, a continuation of the centuries-long involutory trend in rural China.

RURAL INDUSTRIES AND SIDELINES IN THE 1980s

The 1980s, by contrast, saw stunning rural development. The gross output value of rural (i.e., township and village, or the old commune

and brigade) production jumped about 2.5-fold in the decade between 1980 and 1989, many times the less than 15% cumulative increase in population (Zhongguo tongji nianjian, 1990: 333, 335; 56-57, 258, 263). With that dramatic advance have come the first signs in centuries of genuine modern development for China's rural population in the sense of expanded productivity and returns per workday, and substantial surpluses above bare subsistence in standard of living.

How do we account for the advance? The assumptions that population pressure matters little and that rural production is mainly crop production led some researchers to concentrate their attention primarily on crop output. The expectation was that market and profit incentives would power dramatic increases in the manner predicted by the capitalism model (e.g., Nee and Su, 1990). The fact that crop output actually advanced at an average of almost 7% per year between 1979 and 1984 (Zhongguo tongji nianjian, 1990: 335) only fueled those intuitive expectations. In fact, Chinese reform strategists themselves pointed to crop production as the cutting edge of rural development, and confidently forecast continued advances of comparable dimensions (e.g., Fazhan yanjiu suo, 1985). Even when crop yields leveled off in 1985, the most ardent Smithians continued for a time to cling to their vision by resorting to counterfactual arguments: *If* the Chinese leadership *had not* stopped with half-way measures (and had gone on to complete privatization and total decontrol of prices), there *would have been* further advances.

The fact that crop output leveled off after an initial spurt should not, on hindsight, be surprising. After all, in a high-density, involuted peasant economy such as China's, unit area yields had already been pushed to very high levels. Moreover, except for greater use of chemical fertilizer (made possible by the coming of age of China's petroleum industry) in the less advanced areas, easily supplied modern inputs had already long since been introduced in most areas. It was unreasonable to expect further dramatic advances of a scale comparable to what might be expected of an agrarian economy in which land was much less intensively used, like the United States or the Soviet Union.

With attention focused primarily on crop production, and the debates over the pros and cons of capitalist versus socialist production,

little notice was paid to the truly dynamic sectors of the rural economy: industries and sidelines (including handicrafts, animal raising, fisheries and nurseries, as in local statistical usage in China).¹⁵ Invigorated by marketized distribution of productive materials and state encouragement, rural townships and villages exploded with new initiatives. The growth was especially dramatic in industry, which experienced about a five-fold increase from 1980 to 1989, eclipsing the 0.3-fold gain attained in crop production. By the end of the decade, rural industries had come to account for more than half of all rural output, and sidelines another fifth.¹⁶

These, then, were the key areas, far more than crop production (by a ratio of about 9:1), that accounted for the dramatic 2.5-fold jump in rural gross output value. By 1988, more than 90 million rural workers were employed off-farm (*Zhongguo tongji nianjian*, 1990: 400; cf. 329), which, in turn, permitted the removal of overcrowded labor, or de-involution, in crop production in some areas of China for the first time in centuries. By reducing the number of workers sharing in a relatively fixed pie, de-involution brought increased income per workday in crop production. This, coupled with incomes from the new industries and sidelines, created the first stirrings of genuine development and relative prosperity in many areas of the Chinese countryside.

Finally, ideological insistence on one or the other model to the exclusion of other possibilities has obscured another dimension of change in the 1980s. By that perspective, rural development should come in accordance with either the predictions of the capitalism or the socialism model, not some seemingly paradoxical combination of the two. Yet it was precisely the rural collective enterprises — owned by townships and villages, yet operating in a marketized environment — that were among the most dynamic of all sectors of the rural economy. At the end of the decade, they still overshadowed private enterprises in total output value by a ratio of two to one (*Zhongguo nongye nianjian*, 1989: 345-346).

MARKETIZATION WITHOUT "CIVIL SOCIETY"

In the cities, the marketization of the Chinese economy in the 1980s was accompanied by the liberalization of Chinese political life and the

concomitant rise of civil associations. Those developments have led some scholars to employ the concept of “civil society” to characterize social-political changes under the reforms (e.g., Whyte, 1990). It is a concept that usefully asks questions about the nature of power relations between state and society, and represents an advance over the old totalitarianism model, which simply took for granted complete state dominance of society.

However, like the category public sphere used with respect to early and mid-Qing China, civil society too has the potential pitfall of leading us into forced equations between the Western and Chinese experience. In the early-modern history of Western Europe, and the more recent history of Eastern Europe, democratic developments—societal autonomy from state power and the civil rights of individual citizens, especially—accompanied the development of free markets. Civil society capsules that complex of connections: Early capitalist development along with the rise of civil associations autonomous from state power, and the beginnings of democracy. The use of the term without explicit attention to Chinese differences, therefore, carries the risk of suggesting implicitly that the same complex occurred in China.

Such a suggestion would, of course, be as inappropriate for 1980s China as for the Qing. It would exaggerate the democratic implications of the spread of market activities and civil associations in the 1980s, and by extension, the civic power base enjoyed by the demonstrators in Tian’anmen square in the spring of 1989. And it would repeat the past habit of some to project onto China a Western ideal by the reductionist and teleological reasoning that if one or two elements of a compound were present, then the entire compound must be or will soon be.

Once again, instead of starting from Western-derived assumptions, we would do better to begin with the empirical paradox of marketization and civil associations without democratic development. The marketization of 1980s China was of a very different sort from the historical experiences of capitalist economies, and the civil associations were similarly driven by very different dynamics from those in the West. If those differences can be identified, they should help us also to comprehend the possibly different social-political implications that marketization carries for China.

AN ALTERNATIVE TO CAPITALISM AND SOCIALISM?

Once again, we can, of course, continue to insist today on one or the other model of simple capitalism or socialism, using one or another of the old reductionist, teleological, or counter-factual arguments. Thus, the presence of markets is supposed to signal the imminent arrival of all other parts of the capitalism compound, like private ownership and democracy. If those other parts do not follow, they nevertheless should. From there, it is but a short step to the counter-factual conclusion: If only the Chinese leaders were not so reluctant to abandon socialism for capitalism, the desired developments would be sure to follow.

Reactionaries in China opposed to reform have employed similar logic to reach opposite conclusions. Given markets, the rest of the undesirable elements of capitalism must certainly follow: social inequality, capitalist exploitation, endemic crime, and so on. Therefore, the integrity of socialism must be reasserted against such incipient capitalism. As for the setbacks in the reforms, they demonstrate not that capitalistic reforms had not gone far enough but that they had gone too far: *If* only the planned and collective economy *had not* been compromised by the reforms, things *would have been* much better.

It is time to leave such arguments behind. Rural China before 1950 saw six centuries of private ownership and a market economy, but remained underdeveloped, with the vast majority of the population tied to subsistence-level food production. For rural China to return today to the pre-1950 economic organization would probably mean even greater problems than those faced earlier: The population is twice as large, and the easy advances from modern inputs like chemical fertilizers, electric pumping, and tractor plowing have already been made. It is difficult to see how the market could work its supposed transformative magic against such odds.

The collectivist approach of the 1950s through the 1970s should similarly be left behind. Under that approach, total crop output did increase dramatically, but productivity and returns per workday stagnated. The majority of the rural people remained at a bare subsistence standard of living. It makes as little sense today to persist in that approach as to return to the pre-1950 economy.

What then? The first task of scholarly research in this area, it seems to me, is to explain why the rural economy developed so vigorously in the 1980s when such development had eluded both the free-market-cum-private-property rural China of 1350-1950 and the planned, collectivist rural China of the 1950s to the 1970s. What was it about the paradoxical mixing of collective ownership by villages and townships with a marketized economy that helped to generate dynamic rural industrialization?

China's revolutionary history is distinctive for the very large role played by her villages and townships. Those were the loci of Communist organizing and revolutionary power. Through collectivization in the 1950s, villages and townships also became the basic units of ownership of land and other means of production. The permanence and stability of their constituent populations were next ensured by the extraordinary population registration policies enforced from the late 1950s on. Then, they served as the basic units of organization for massive efforts in water control, public health, and education, greatly elaborating in the process their administrative apparatus. All these changes gave these communities a role in rural change that is exceptional from the standpoint both of developing countries and socialist countries. Finally, in the 1980s, under the twin stimuli of increased autonomy and market incentives, they became the primary units for rural industrialization. Their crucial role in the resulting development raises the question: Has an empirical reality emerged in China that represents an alternative path to rural modernization that fits neither of the simple models of socialism or capitalism?

The current paradigmatic crisis in Chinese historical studies is part and parcel of a worldwide crisis in historical understanding that has come with the end of the cold war and the collapse of the rigid opposition between the capitalist and socialist ideologies. The conjuncture presents us with a special opportunity to break free of the conceptual constraints of the past and to join in the common search for new theoretical concepts. Our field has for too long borrowed analytical concepts entirely from Western-derived schemes, attempting in one way or another to force Chinese history into the classical models of Smith and Marx. Our aim now should be to establish the theoretical autonomy of Chinese studies, not with the exclusivism and

isolation of the old sinological studies, but in creative ways that would relate the Chinese experience to the rest of the world.

NOTES

1. Li Shu (1956). The best empirical research along these lines (Xu Xinwu 1981, 1990), begun in the 1950s, was not published until the 1980s.

2. The first tendency found its crowning achievement in Wu Chengming (1985), the second in Li Wenzhi et al. (1983).

3. The outstanding example of this line of work is Ho Ping-ti's study (1959), which seeks to demonstrate Malthusian pressures by providing educated guesses about the changing size of the Chinese population in the Ming and Qing. In the population explosion of the 1700-1850 period, the number of mouths to feed outran agricultural production and set the background for China's modern agrarian crisis.

4. See the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* (1968-), the journal that was founded precisely to challenge the established interpretation. See especially the article by James Peck (1969) and his exchange with John Fairbank (2.3 [April-July 1970]: 51-70). Cohen (1984) gives a discussion of both sides, and is especially strong for introspective criticisms of the impact-response and tradition-modernity models of Fairbank et al.

5. Compare Zhang Youyi (1957) and Lippit (1974), with Ho Ping-ti (1959) and Elvin (1973); the debate is summarized in Huang (1985: 14-18).

6. The best study to date of China's industrial development is Wu Chengming (1990). Cf. Liu and Yeh (1965), and Rawski (1989).

7. Rawski's (1989) and Brandt's (1989) attempts to revise the earlier, widely accepted estimates of Liu and Yeh (1965) and Perkins (1969) and to demonstrate substantial rural development in the decades before the 1930s are simply not convincing. I have considered Rawski's evidence in detail in my most recent book (1990: 137-143), and will not repeat the points here. Brandt's evidence is discussed in Esherick's review (forthcoming). For now, I see no reason to reject Liu-Yeh and Perkins' earlier estimates—namely, that output growth barely kept pace with population expansion.

Rawski's claims of possibly 0.5%-0.8% annual per capita output growth in rural China during the two decades between 1914/18 to 1931/36, or at best 15%-16% cumulative growth (Rawski, 1989: 281, 329), are in any case too meager to alter the larger picture of bare-subsistence peasant farming. Change of such a scale would be easily explained by involution: Enhanced annual output/income per worker would be achieved through larger number of days worked per year, but at the cost of diminished marginal productivity/returns per workday. The significant period from the standpoint of rural development is the 1980s (discussed below), which saw, in half the time, 15-16 times the growth that Rawski would like to find for the earlier period. That kind of change tells about the true difference between productivity development through capitalization (i.e., increased capital inputs per unit labor) and involutionary change through labor intensification.

8. This argument remains implicit even in Wu Chengming (1990).

9. Lest my involution thesis be confused with the old Malthusian argument, let me point out that my analysis owes much to Ester Boserup (1965), who turned Malthus on his head; where Malthus would have food production the independent variable that population pressed against, Boserup made population the independent variable that drove food production. As Boserup suggested, increased population pushed increased intensification of cropping, especially in the

form of heightened frequency of cropping, from the long-fallow system of one crop in 25 years to the short-fallow system of one in 5, then to annual cropping, and finally to multiple cropping. This was substantially the framework used in my work. I have added the notion that the process of labor intensification had finite limits. The Yangzi delta, for one, saw the process approach its limits already in the southern Song. What followed in the Ming and Qing was mainly involution, involving diminishing marginal returns to labor, rather than simple intensification, in which returns remain proportionate to labor input. I have also added the notion of commercialized crop-production-cum-household-handicrafts as a form of involution.

10. Note also earlier, pathbreaking efforts by Chuan Hansheng (e.g., Chuan and Kraus, 1975) and others.

11. Much of this work is still in progress. The direction is shown in Rowe (1989) and Brook (1990). The concept has, of course, also been employed with respect to the late Qing and Republic (Esherick and Rankin, 1990; cf. the good discussion of those efforts by Rowe, 1990), for which a better case can probably be made.

12. A conference on civil law in Chinese history, funded by the Luce Foundation, is being convened at UCLA this August.

13. At this crucial contact point between structure and agency, we have virtually no solid evidence. (The exceptions are ethnographic accounts such as Hinton, 1966, and Crook and Crook, 1959, which come the closest to providing a picture of the process of change when Party met village society.) For the Chinese scholars, ideological expectation substitutes for historical evidence: Since the Party represented the material interests of the poor peasants and agricultural workers, it goes without saying that the latter could only have given it active support, once given good leadership with a "correct line" of action. Documentation available to American scholars has been accordingly limited to stylized summary-reports by Party cadres more interested in showing the validity of the ideological expectation than what actually happened. This is largely true even of documentary collections published in China in recent years.

14. Shue (1988) discusses in detail the central role this model has played in scholarly analyses.

15. National statistics, however, separate out animal raising, nurseries, and fisheries from handicrafts, but include them all with crop production under agriculture (*nongye*).

16. *Zhongguo tongji nianjian* (1990: 333, 335). The "industry" figure here includes construction and transport. If the latter are excluded, then two-fifths instead of one-half.

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