

Middle-Class Confrontations: Post-Traditionalism and Fragmentation in China Ethnographies*

Myron L. Cohen
Department of Anthropology
Columbia University

If the major endeavor of Taiwan anthropology's study of the ethnic Han during the 1960s and 1970s focused on dimensions of culture and society harking back to the Qing dynasty, there remained in the background a powerful but unsatisfied curiosity regarding contemporary China. The opening up of China to fieldwork initiated a period of new concern with the present, in China research, to be sure, but also for anthropology in Taiwan. The middle-class transformation of society on both sides of the Taiwan Straits created the environment for a new phase of anthropological research. For China anthropology the middle class has become a defining element in the study both of those who are in it and those marginal to it. Middle-class characteristics now dominate this anthropology, ranging from the emergence of individualism and the triumph of the commodified and commodity-seeking self to the struggle for place in an insecure and rapidly changing class setting, to nationalism, and even to the impact of automobile ownership. Contrasts with Taiwan highlight and make explicit how China ethnologies share a framework of research and analysis, albeit one not defined by shared theoretical approaches, but nevertheless one that might be usefully and critically expanded to include comparable areas of concern in Taiwan.

Keywords: traditionalism, urbanization, modernization, population, ethnographies

* Li, Yih-yuan Memorial Lecture (李亦園院士紀念講座), Academia Sinica, Institute of Ethnology, November 29, 2021.

During his lifetime Professor Li Yih-yuan occupied a central position in China anthropology, for in his own work he bridged several important divides that then characterized the field. One was between the western, largely American and English anthropological scholarship on China and the Chinese-language scholarship which then was mainly based in Taiwan, another was between the study of Han and non-Han cultures within the framework of China or Taiwan, another was between the Han in China or Taiwan and Overseas Chinese communities, and yet another was between synchronic and diachronic ethnographies, with the latter now commonly referred to as historical anthropology. Finally, and fundamentally, he bridged the divide between China and Taiwan anthropology by advocating that the study of Taiwan has its own value for anthropological scholarship. Professor Li's broad range of interests defined an anthropology that contemporary research can readily fit into, but one which is surely lacking among many present-day researchers. Nevertheless, by turning to some issues in the ethnographies of present-day China, and their implications for Taiwan, I hope this talk will be in his spirit of advancing the anthropology of this part of the world.

I had known Professor Li Yih-yuan since my first arrival in Taiwan, in 1962. During my first year, in Taipei, I was a frequent visitor to the Institute of Ethnology, where I had many opportunities to meet Professor Li and discuss my fieldwork plans with him. Then I spent a year and a half in Meinong, with periodic returns to Taipei and to the Institute. After leaving Taiwan in 1964, I returned during the summers of 1966 and 1967, both visits associated with Professor Morton H. Fried's summer seminar on Chinese culture for American college teachers and graduate students. I mention this because each year one of the invited speakers was Professor Li. His 1966 talk concerned his fieldwork in a Taiwanese village in Zhanghua, and the one he gave in 1967 was on his research on Overseas Chinese, the Huaqiao. According to my notes taken in 1967, and I quote from them, Professor Li was then "teaching at Taida, had studied at the Department of Anthropology in the Peabody Museum, and was an Associate Research Fellow at the Academia Sinica." He was notable for being the first "local scholar to study Han communities."

Professor Li was fully engaged with, and constructively critical of, the English-language anthropological literature on China at that time, as well as with the mainly American English-speaking anthropologists who had been coming to Taiwan since the late 1950s to do fieldwork. Their focus, overwhelmingly although not exclusively, was on Han culture and society, and their presence in Taiwan was due both to the welcome they received as researchers, and to the fact that at that time access to the China mainland was denied.

Thus, Li Yih-yuan's legacy is hardly contained within the framework of Taiwan

anthropology, to which he made such a formidable contribution. For he also served as a mentor for many young anthropologists coming to Taiwan to do field work at both the graduate and postgraduate levels. I was among those who benefited from his support in many ways. He was director of the Institute of Ethnology by the time I, then a recent Ph.D. with an appointment as assistant professor at the Columbia University department of anthropology, applied for visiting scholar status with the Institute. This was shortly forthcoming, thanks to the positive and cooperative attitude Professor Li consistently displayed toward foreign scholars seeking to do research in Taiwan. This was for another stint of fieldwork in Meinong, which Burton Pasternak and I carried out in 1971-72. From that time on, my frequent visits to Taiwan, for conferences and further research, kept me in contact with Professor Li, until his passing.

Professor Li's engagement with the anthropology of the Han, be they in mainland China, Taiwan, or overseas, provided a ready intellectual link with the fieldwork interests of anthropologists coming from abroad, mainly from the United States, but some from western Europe. Their focus, and I was one of them, was largely on what I have called "traditionalism," namely an interest in the culture of the Han Chinese as this in Taiwan expressed continuities with late imperial China, especially during the Qing dynasty. Key figures in this traditionalist anthropology included my professor Morton H. Fried and Maurice Freedman. The latter loomed especially large in traditionalist anthropology, and Li Yih-yuan in his own publications addressed, often critically, some of Freedman's work.

But Li Yih-yuan's ethnographic gaze was broad-based, as befitted his status as a public intellectual writing on critical issues in contemporary Taiwan. For example, while foreign anthropologists might see in large-scale religious rituals manifestations of traditions rooted in China's imperial past, Professor Li saw them, certainly, as expressions of Han culture, but he placed them squarely in the context of the contemporary scene in Taiwan. His work brought into focus key associated issues including his classic critique of urban-based hostility or impatience with local religious ritual.

Professor Li was at ease in dealing with both tradition and social change, and so he must have been well prepared for the major transformation of China anthropology during his lifetime, with the opening of mainland China to fieldwork. If the major endeavor of Taiwan anthropology's study of the ethnic Han during the 1960s and 1970s focused on dimensions of culture and society harkening back to the Qing dynasty, there remained in the background a powerful but unsatisfied curiosity regarding contemporary China. The opening up of China to fieldwork initiated a period of new concern with the present in China research to be sure, but also for

anthropology in Taiwan. Contrasts with Taiwan highlight and make explicit how the China ethnologies share a framework of research and analysis, albeit one not defined by shared theoretical approaches, but nevertheless one that might be usefully and critically expanded to include areas of concern expressed in Taiwan.

In the movement of English-language anthropological studies of Han culture from a Taiwan-focused traditionalism to a China-focused modernism, the trend increasingly has been to give attention to what some of these works describe as the new middle class. The middle-class transformation of society on both sides of the Taiwan Straits has created the environment for a new phase of anthropological research. For China anthropology, the middle class has become a defining element in the study of those who are in it and those marginal to it. Middle-class characteristics now dominate as themes in this anthropology, and range from the emergence of individualism and the triumph of the commodified and commodity-seeking self to the struggle for place in an insecure and rapidly changing class setting, to nationalism and even to the impact of automobile ownership. However it is defined, its rapid emergence and expansion has attracted much scholarly and popular attention. Take, for example, the following comment from a recent report by the Center for Strategic & International Studies:

Based on [the Pew Research Center]'s income band classification, China's middle class has been among the fastest growing in the world, swelling from 39.1 million people (3.1 percent of the population) in 2000 to roughly 707 million (50.8 percent of the population) in 2018. This amounts to an increase of 667.9 million (or 47.8 percentage points).¹

The fascination with this increasingly large segment of China's population most interestingly parallels that of the old traditionalism's enchantment with the culture and society of late imperial China. Actually, the anthropological encounter with post-Maoist China began, as far as foreign anthropologists are concerned, early during the period of "reform and opening up," thus predating formation of the expanded middle class that was to become the object of much anthropological interest. During the twentieth century's last couple of decades, foreign anthropological research in China was largely concerned with the country's rural sector, including an early phase where studies of

1 Center for Strategic & International Studies, China Power Team. "How Well-off is China's Middle Class?" China Power. April 26, 2017. Updated September 30, 2021. Accessed November 22, 2021. <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-middle-class/>

non-Han communities and ethnic groups loomed large. It was during this early period following the initiation of the post-Mao reforms that some of the anthropological models and concepts that had characterized the traditionalist anthropology of Taiwan and Hong Kong were applied to China ethnographies. For example, my own 1985-86 research in Hebei applied with some success my understanding of family organization developed twenty years earlier in Taiwan, even though this earlier research was heavily traditionalistic and in many ways a critical response to arguments concerning the Chinese family as it was during the Qing dynasty.

In Taiwan, I related my research to the question of whether the joint family was characteristic of the imperial Chinese elite, the so-called “gentry,” or rather a developmental phase in a pattern of family organization embedded in Han Chinese culture. This question was totally within the framework of the traditionalist anthropology of that time, suggesting that the anthropology of Taiwan was really that of the Qing dynasty, even though the latter had already been gone for seventy years when I did my fieldwork. In Hebei, however, the focus of my fieldwork and its subsequent analysis was on changes in family arrangements under the impact of collectivization and other factors introduced since the onset of Communist rule. I still had a historical orientation, but my aim was to account for changes leading up to the present situation. In other words, my effort was not to contribute to the anthropology of the Qing, but rather to that of the PRC. In this context, it is ironic that some of the close parallels in family institutions between Taiwan and Hebei provided, on the one hand, a ready framework for my Hebei research, and, on the other, powerful evidence that social change under Communist rule had hardly been as dramatic or “revolutionary” as imagined by many China watchers during the Maoist period, when the country was largely closed to outside observation. Indeed, the revolutionary transformation of China is largely a process of the past thirty years or so, and it is the kind of revolution hardly anticipated during the Maoist years, resembling in many ways Taiwan’s transformation a generation earlier.

The fact is, in 1986 social change in the countryside had hardly gone as far as some had thought. Hebei village life then was remarkably similar in many ways to what I had seen in the Meinong village twenty-one years before, even counting the major differences. One similarity that sticks in my mind, and which can serve as an overall measure, is that in each village there was one family that owned a motorcycle, while the bicycle was the main instrument of personal transportation. In China, subsequent changes – all following decollectivization and the other post-Mao reforms – occurred in a context very different from China under Mao. The new era of “reform and opening up,” as it is commonly characterized, made large areas of social space relatively free of state control or even intervention, at least as compared to circumstances during the

Maoist era. This meant, first, that anthropologists, both from China and from abroad, could now carry out fieldwork in the PRC. More important, it meant that in rural and urban fieldwork settings there were large areas where participant observation might be more-or-less politically neutral, from the perspectives of both the anthropologist and the government. There were major exceptions, of course. Anthropologists doing fieldwork among so-called minority nationalities, even with official approval, were in situations ripe for political critique, and the extent to which this was realized depended upon choices made, such as with respect to publication. Again, the whole area of family planning was one where state intervention and control was vastly intensified, just as reform-style liberalization kicked off in other domains of social life. While anthropologists conducting fieldwork, especially in the countryside, could hardly avoid encountering family planning and its consequences, how they dealt with it, if at all, could have serious implications.

But with liberalization came China's rapid modern urbanization, by which I mean not only city dwelling, but also features such as residential arrangements concentrated in high-rise apartments with elevators and indoor plumbing, together with heavy reliance on automobiles as well as modernized public transit. It is important to differentiate the urban as the city, which has figured in Chinese society for centuries and certainly throughout the imperial era, from the modern urban. Urbanity, the expression of urban-centered lifestyles and values, was hardly confined to cities during imperial times, but was distributed, especially among the elite, across villages, towns, and cities alike, being precisely a reflection of the interconnections between rural and urban so characteristic of late imperial China before the treaty port era. Fast forward to recent times and we can also see evidence of a modern urbanity extending across China. Much of this resulted from urban expansion as such, with the World Bank's recording China's urbanization at 61% of its population as of 2020.

At the same time, modern urbanity's more limited extension into the countryside reflects the profound rural-urban contrast that emerged after the Opium War and the establishment of the treaty ports. That divide continued, with state reinforcement, throughout the Maoist era and is still in evidence today. Yet much of the contemporary ethnographic literature on rural China provides strong evidence of urbanity's penetration into the villages, even as these represent a shrinking portion of the population. One source is migratory labor, with villagers working in cities then returning home after having absorbed values of commodification, consumption, and style. The spread of urbanity is represented of course by car ownership, and even by such mundane conveniences as flush toilets, as described in interesting detail by Gonalo Santos in his study of a Guangdong village, published just a few weeks

before this writing.²

Perhaps it is the very rapidity of social and economic change in China in recent years that makes matters such as life in high-rises of greater interest. The high-rises and gated communities of China's new middle class have engaged the attention of, among others, Andrew Kipnis in Zouping, Shandong³, and Li Zhang, in Kunming, Yunnan.⁴ The same fascination with change may apply to other aspects of contemporary life, such as having a car, as suggested in the title of Jun Zhang's ethnography, *Driving toward Modernity*.⁵ Even contemporary studies of subjects of classical anthropological interest gain freshness through their focus on change. This is certainly borne out in Andrew Kipnis' new book on funerals,⁶ in which he places his subject squarely in the context of China's modern urbanization.

It is this urbanity, mainly within the urban setting, that is confronted in the recent anthropology of China. In his work on the urban penetration of the rural, Santos describes how community-based popular religion continues to thrive in the village, despite the growing impact of urban forces. In contrast, there are the apartment-dwelling residents in a fully urbanized setting such as Guangzhou where, as Jun Zhang⁷ tells us, the gated apartment complex consisting of several high rises does not comprise a community. Rather, she says, those living there are involved in their own particular networks of social ties, which have little to do with their immediate residential arrangements. Whatever their religious or secular orientations may be, they do not at all contribute to expressions of local residence-based solidarities.

Something of a contrast is represented by Robert Weller's findings in Suzhou⁸ where he reports that the leveling of villages with their temples has led to both the villagers' relocation to high-rise developments and, most interestingly, to the same relocation of their local gods. It remains to be seen, however, if the tight mix

2 Santos, Gonalo. *Chinese Village Life Today: Building Families in an Age of Transition*. University of Washington Press, 2021.

3 Kipnis, Andrew B. *From Village to City: Social Transformation in a Chinese County Seat*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016.

4 Zhang, Li. *In Search of Paradise: Middle-Class Living in a Chinese Metropolis*. Ithaca [N.Y.]: Cornell University Press, 2010.

5 Zhang, Jun. *Driving Toward Modernity: Cars and the Lives of the Middle Class in Contemporary China*. Ithaca [New York]: Cornell University Press, 2019.

6 Kipnis, Andrew B. *The Funeral of Mr. Wang: Life, Death, and Ghosts in Urbanizing China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021.

7 Zhang Jun. *Driving Toward Modernity*.

8 Weller, Robert P. "Censorship, foreclosure, and the three deaths of Fengzhen." *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2021, 11(2): 619-634.

between local and religious solidarities can long survive the adjustment to life in a multi-storied apartment house. Andrew Kipnis' study of the county-level city of Zouping, in Shandong Province, adds the element of the immediate heritage of Maoism. In Zouping, he says, at least two forces are working against the dissolution of residential solidarity under the impact of rapid urbanization. One is the so-called "village in the city," where urban expansion has enveloped pre-existing villages such that they are maintained as social entities through various combinations of residence and collective rights to village property. Another major force sustaining localized communities in Zouping's urban setting is a direct legacy of the Maoist era's urban *danwei* (單位) or work unit, whereby employment, residence, education, health care and much else are all bundled within one organizational framework. In Zouping, large conglomerates provide for some of their workers in what Kipnis calls a *danwei*-like setting. However, Kipnis also takes note of commercially available high-rise developments in Zouping, where there is the kind of anonymity and absence of residential solidarities noted by many as symptomatic of modern urbanism.

In China, as elsewhere, an apartment complex in a gated community of high-rises often will draw from residents an administrative committee to deal with local issues and financing. Here again, Jun Zhang points out how in the high-rise complex she is familiar with, such a group has little or no social expression beyond its immediate administrative tasks, and that conflicts over such matters can result in different factions jockeying for support from residents. However, such alignments are issue-related and will disappear once the issues are resolved or forgotten. All of this sounds almost absurdly familiar to a resident of Taipei or, for that matter, Manhattan. Yet, in the context of China ethnography, it reads as something fresh and of anthropological significance; this circumstance of itself deserves our attention.

Indeed, Li Zhang's ethnographic account of the new urbanization in Kunming, based on fieldwork that began shortly before Jun Zhang started hers, provides some of the basis for the subject's anthropological excitement. In her account, the emergence of residents' administrative committees is linked to conflicts between residents and the building managers, who usually are the original developers. Kipnis refers to Kunming as being notorious for such conflicts, but, again, from my perspective as an apartment-dwelling New Yorker, all of this is well known, unfortunately, and to be expected. While Li Zhang describes emerging urban patterns that anticipate those dealt with by Jun Zhang, she neatly identifies what is historically special about what she sees in Kunming. Her main point is that the new middle class, whatever else it may be, is defined as much by residential arrangements in the form of gated communities with high-rises, town houses, or even individual homes as it is by other attributes such as car ownership, a commodification and consumption orientation, and so forth. But what makes this new middle class special

is its history: It is the product of the Maoist era's closure and its replacement by the comparatively freewheeling economy that followed the initiation of reforms. Pre-Communist China had, for its time, a modern middle class, to be sure, concentrated perhaps in Guangzhou and Shanghai, but with sprouts in other urban centers. However, all of this gave way to the collectivized economy and the society of the unit or danwei during the decades of Maoist rule.

If the middle class is one urban product of post-Maoism, there are others. It is a credit to modern anthropology that one of its major concerns has been the marginalized, be these the poor, a minority defined in ethnic or racial terms, or one characterized by these in varying combinations. In much of the recent anthropology of China, these concerns have appeared most commonly in rural studies, be they of environmentally or medically challenged Han Chinese communities, or minorities pressured or disadvantaged in different ways. As far as the urban anthropology of China is concerned, the focus on marginality largely, but not exclusively, has involved rural-urban population movements. In some cases, the movement involves ethnic minorities, as analyzed, for example, in Liu Shao-hua's work among the Nuosu in Sichuan.⁹ Yet much of the urban anthropology of the marginalized has focused on Han Chinese migratory labor, as in the studies of, among others, Rachel Murphy in Jiangxi,¹⁰ and Li Zhang's work in Beijing,¹¹ with Andrew Kipnis giving some space to this subject in his Zouping ethnography.

In an interesting way, the effort to place rural-urban migratory labor in comparative perspective might reveal the importance of non-traditionalist anthropology carried out in Taiwan by only a minority of foreign scholars at the height of the traditionalism era. I have in mind, among other research, the important work done by Bernard and Rita Gallin¹² on social change in rural Taiwan and on village migrants working in urban factory settings. It is ironic that the significance of their research might be better appreciated today than during the twentieth-century decades, when a major focus of foreign scholars in Taiwan anthropology was Chinese late imperial culture. Absent from mid-twentieth century rural-urban migration in Taiwan was a factor that looms large in such migration across the Taiwan Straits: the ongoing

9 Liu, Shao-hua. *Passage to Manhood: Youth Migration, Heroin, and AIDS in Southwest China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011.

10 Murphy, Rachel. *How Migrant Labor is Changing Rural China*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.

11 Zhang, Li. *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks within China's Floating Population*. Stanford University Press, 2001.

12 Gallin, Bernard. Hsin Hsing, *Taiwan: A Chinese Village in Change*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966, 205.

Gallin, Bernard and Rita S. Gallin. "Socioeconomic Life in Rural Taiwan: Twenty Years of Development and Change." *Modern China*, 1982 Vol 8, no. 2: 205-246.

rural-urban divide formed and maintained by China's household registration system.

This is not to say that Taiwan lacked household registration. Indeed, Taiwan's is anthropologically famous, through the work of Chuang Ying-chang, Burton Pasternak, John Shepherd, Arthur P. Wolf, and many others. As in China, Taiwan's household registration was introduced as an instrument of surveillance and control, in the case of Taiwan by Japanese colonial authorities, who brought it over from their home country. Having had the opportunity to take close looks at both Japanese and post-Japanese Taiwan household registration forms and data during my fieldwork in 1964 and 1971, as well as similar material from villages in Hebei in 1985, and Sichuan in 1990, I can report that the Taiwan versions are far richer with respect to the data they contain for each individual and household. What the Taiwan records lack, however, is the Maoist twist: during the Maoist era, each person was assigned a class label and a designation as rural or urban. In post-Maoist times, the class labels are gone, but the rural and urban designations remain. The issue of people in China with rural household labels living and working in urban settings is a major concern in much of the rural-urban migration literature. The absence of such labels impinging on Taiwan's earlier rural-urban movements, together with other differences, sets up potentially useful comparisons and it also highlights the value that more non-traditionalist research on Taiwan might have had for a fuller comparative perspective on urbanization and social change in China today.

The extremely rapid emergence of the entire assemblage of post-Mao middle-class traits brings to mind what the sociologist Chang Kyung-Sup refers to as "compressed modernity." In work based in South Korea, whose middle class emerged from an historical context very different from that of China, he characterizes the developments we see in both countries as "compressed" because in his view they both display, and I quote,

a civilizational condition in which economic, political, social and/or cultural changes occur in an extremely condensed manner in respect to both time and space, and in which the dynamic coexistence of mutually disparate historical and social elements leads to the construction and reconstruction of a highly complex and fluid social system.¹³

13 Chang Kyung-Sup. 2010, "The second modern condition? Compressed modernity as internalized reflexive cosmopolitization," *British Journal of Sociology*. 61(3): 444-465. Cited in Laurence Roulleau-Berger, Young *Chinese Migrants: Compressed Individual and Global Condition*, translated by Matthew Glasgow. Leiden: Brill, 2021, 1.

At a purely descriptive level, Chang Kyung-Sup is proposing compressed modernity as a framework of comparison, one which could readily accommodate Taiwan as well as South Korea and China. The obvious questions are what they otherwise share and how they are different. But an even more important question is the extent to which China's recent ethnographic record sufficiently tallies with that of Taiwan, not to speak of other areas of the world, to allow for such comparisons and draw from them findings of even greater anthropological interest.

It is important to keep in mind that at about the time China opened up to anthropological fieldwork, Taiwan was already in the midst of the compressed modernity that would only later occur in China. As noted, that first phase of post-Mao fieldwork was largely rural, even as massive social and economic transformation was well underway in Taiwan. I remember stressing at the time how what was happening in Taiwan was far more revolutionary than anything going on in China. There was the massive expansion of Taiwan's middle class, the rapid spread of car ownership, modern housing, high-rise apartment complexes, the transformation of family life, and all of the other themes that loom so large in the current ethnographic literature on China. Yet none of this attracted much anthropological attention, which was then focused on rural China.

In contrast to the dominant anthropological discourse on Taiwan, sociologists, prominently represented by Chen Shao-hsing, focused precisely on Taiwan as an arena for the study of social change and modernization. Later, other sociologists such as Thomas Gold, Michael Hsiao, Robert Marsh and Ezra Vogel would indeed note and deal with what was called the "Taiwan Miracle," or the "Taiwan Economic Miracle," in reference to the island's rapid industrialization and economic growth during the final quarter of the twentieth century. And this was as it developed alongside Singapore, South Korea, and Hong Kong, with Taiwan now known as one of the "Four Asian Tigers."

But while sociologists and economists might focus on Taiwan's transformations, anthropological attention had moved to China. If China's early twenty-first century urbanization was mind-boggling, to use a term I've drawn from an ethnography of that very subject, why was Taiwan's transformation in almost all areas – urbanization, commodification, car ownership, education, metamorphosis into a dominantly middle-class society, and so much more, including the overwhelming mechanization of agriculture – any less so?

This question is important not just with respect to a critical analysis of anthropological research in Taiwan and China, but also with regard to the more fundamental issue of the nature of the ethnographic gaze. As I have stressed, foreign anthropologists in Taiwan during the era of traditionalism for the most part saw imperial China. In some cases, this was obvious and explicit, as in my work

noted above and in the late Arthur P. Wolf's classic article on "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors," with each of these categories tightly connected to his perception of social domains during late imperial times.¹⁴ In other cases, the association between Taiwan ethnography and China of the Qing dynasty was left vague, but the issues addressed, such as kinship relations or lineage organization, were framed in terms of earlier literature dealing with the Qing. Sources such as Justus Doolittle's 1865 book, *Social Life of the Chinese*,¹⁵ or Reginald Fleming Johnston's *Lion and Dragon in Northern China*,¹⁶ published in 1910, loomed large in that literature.

I do not mean to suggest that the anthropology of the traditionalist period was sloppy or erroneously oriented scholarship, for it did indeed contribute much to enhance the knowledge of late imperial Chinese culture. My point, rather, is that it had a particular focus, one that had obvious relevance to aspects of local Taiwan culture as encountered by the anthropologists. But this encounter was hardly fortuitous. Let us imagine a valley somewhere in northern Taiwan during the 1960s or early 1970s, where a large electronics plant and a small earth god (*tudigong*) shrine both were located. Should an anthropologist enter this valley, what would attract the greater part of that anthropologist's attention? I can assure you based on my personal experiences at that time, in terms both of my own interests and my familiarity with colleagues doing fieldwork then, it would certainly not have been the electronics plant. Of course, times have changed and, indeed, an ethnography of an electronics plant in Taiwan is the subject of an excellent anthropology dissertation in 2015.¹⁷

One might argue that simply due to its own massive transformation Taiwan now has much less to offer in the way of fieldwork opportunities for directly enhancing our appreciation of Chinese culture during the Qing dynasty, even if there were still an interest in that kind of fieldwork. Thus, anthropological interest in contemporary Taiwan means interest in Taiwan as such, and the value that focus might have for broader understandings. If traditionalism saw lineal connections between what was viewed ethnographically and late imperial culture, the post-traditional vision sees contemporary Taiwan in a regional or global setting, involving lateral connections, with comparisons highlighted by parallel or contrasting processes. However, if such comparisons wish to account for and analyze differences as well as similarities, a

14 Wolf, Arthur P. "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors." In Arthur P. Wolf, ed., *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, 131-183. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974.

15 Doolittle, Justus. *Social life of the Chinese*. New York, Harper & Brothers, 1865.

16 Johnston, Reginald Fleming. *Lion and Dragon in Northern China*. London: John Murray, 1910.

17 West, Matthew Ellis. "Intellectual Property and the Knowledge Economy's Global Division of Labor: Producing Taiwanese Green-Technology between the United States and China." PhD. Dissertation, Columbia University, 2015.

focus on origins may also be called for, perhaps involving an approach along the lines of the recombinant social change suggested by Kipnis in his study of Zouping. In other words, even if many of the elements leading to the emergence of a modern middle class are shared across borders, in China, Taiwan, East Asia, and beyond, the end product is not uniformity, precisely because the cultural configurations preceding such changes differ from case to case. What the notion of recombinant social change asserts is that some pre-existing social factors are powerful enough to have a continuing and differentiating influence even after powerful new forces for change come into play. As far as the connections between China and Taiwan are concerned, traditionalist anthropology looked to the past, but not for the purpose of accounting for changes up to the present.

In the analysis of present-day commonalities, a recombinant approach can yield different outcomes, depending on the historical depth of factors held to have a formative impact. The impact of the Maoist era on post-Maoist developments, such as the urban danwei system, might be expected to produce unique urban China residential arrangements in addition to those characteristic of other modern urban settings. Digging more deeply, however, may reveal features in the results of recombinant social change shared well beyond the present-day borders of China.

I suggest that one such potentially rewarding area of comparison relates to the collapse of fertility, which, as is well known, is occurring in many parts of the world. However, the global record points to something special about East Asia. For the moment, keeping the comparison limited to Taiwan and mainland China, major phases in the transformation leading to this crisis have included the simplification of the family structure, with the nuclear family increasingly functioning as the unit of household composition, supported by the growing desire of young people for greater privacy and independence. My own fieldwork in Taiwan, as well as in mainland China, suggests that the turn towards privacy and individualization began to take hold in Taiwan decades before appearing in rural China, even though it was in China that this transformation has received major anthropological attention, as in the work of Yan Yunxiang, among others.¹⁸ This transformation took place in the same ethnographic setting as other aspects of middle-class emergence in the anthropology of China. In Taiwan, as later in China, this trend was supported by the ongoing transformation of the economy from family-based labor-intensive agriculture to salaried employment away from farming. In addition, supporting this transition was the near-total mechanization of agriculture in Taiwan, which once again anticipated or even predicted later developments in China.

18 Yan, Yunxiang. *The Individualization of Chinese Society*. Oxford: Berg, 2009.

In Taiwan, with the emergence of the conjugal family as the basic unit of domestic life, there has been a drastic reduction in the fertility rate, a trend more recently followed in China. Over the past several years Taiwan’s fertility rate has consistently been lower than China’s, in spite of China’s state-enforced policy limiting births. Taiwan’s birth rate in recent years has been among the world’s lowest when compared with that of other regions. In 1970, the fertility rate in Taiwan was 3.9, ranking 138 out of 199; by 2013, it had plummeted to 1.1, ranking 210 out of 210. In 2018 Taiwan ranked 203 out of 209, with a rate of 1.2, according to the Population Reference Bureau; but the CIA ranks Taiwan at 222 out of 224, still with a fertility rate of 1.1. For 2021, as shown in the table below, the Population Reference Bureau estimate has Taiwan’s fertility rate as ranking 205 out of 209, while the CIA has Taiwan at the very bottom, 227 out of 227.¹⁹

Many reasons have been proposed for the drop in fertility, such as the high cost of education and lack of government-supported daycare. Such factors are indeed at work globally, not only in Taiwan. I suggest that in addition to these pressures there are circumstances peculiar to Taiwan and elsewhere in East Asia. Fertility collapse in Taiwan is quite similar to trends in Hong Kong, Macao, Singapore, and South Korea, all sharing in common a Confucian heritage stressing patriarchy and patrilineality. Moreover, in contrast to China, these polities also share an absence of government policy enforcing fertility reduction. China and Japan are among those with the lowest fertility rates globally, even though they rank slightly higher than the ones at the very bottom.

2021 EAST ASIA FERTILITY RATES IN GLOBAL RANKING²⁰

2021 List by the Population Reference Bureau			2021 List by the CIA World Factbook		
188	China	1.3	185	China	1.60
191	Japan	1.3	218	Japan	1.38
202	Singapore	1.1	223	Hong Kong	1.22
205	Taiwan	1.0	224	Macao	1.21
207	Hong Kong	0.9	225	Singapore	1.15
208	Macao	0.9	226	South Korea	1.09
209	South Korea	0.8	227	Taiwan	1.07
(world’s lowest rank)			(world’s lowest rank)		

19 These demographic data can be found on the Wikipedia website: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_sovereign_states_and_dependent_territories_by_fertility_rate [accessed 2021-11-23]
20 Ibid.

That China has expanded the allowable number of children to three, in effect eliminating all family limitations, seems a reaction to the fact that it has joined other East Asian areas in experiencing drastic fertility reduction. This was highlighted in a January 16, 2020, *New York Times* online report entitled “Births in China Fall to Lowest Level in Nearly Six Decades.” The first paragraph reads as follows:

The number of babies born in China last year [2019] fell to a nearly six-decade low, exacerbating a looming demographic crisis that is set to reshape the world’s most populous nation and threaten its economic vitality. About 14.6 million babies were born in China in 2019, according to the National Bureau of Statistics. That was a nearly 4 percent fall from the previous year, and the lowest official number of births in China since 1961, the last year of a widespread famine.²¹

The same article went on to note that the fertility rate in 2019 was 1.6, but the World Population Review gives China the slightly higher fertility rate of 1.69 for that year, or 156 out of 200; for Taiwan, that year’s rate was 1.15, or 199 out of 200. As China’s fertility trend moves towards Taiwan’s the Chinese government’s drive to reduce population growth has been replaced by one advocating more marriages and more children. As Ayo Wahlberg has aptly put it, the Chinese government has gone from “family planning to family making.”²²

What China now also shares with the other East Asian areas is a large middle class. Bringing in the recombinant perspective I mentioned earlier, we can look at declining fertility and the middle-class emergence in conjunction with pre-existing factors in an East Asian context. One major factor is the still-prevalent bias in China whereby, as Kipnis put it in reference to Zouping’s new middle class, “kinship relations are still imagined in a patrilineal fashion.”²³ More generally, the ethnographic literature confirms a continuing strong patrilineal bias in terms of property, marriage, and the desirability of male offspring. Yet this literature also records a dramatic rise in the status of women. In fact, these circumstances are common to all the East Asian regions with extremely low fertility rates.

It seems almost counter-intuitive that in societies where traditional Confucian values, including an emphasis on the importance of male offspring, have historically been dominant, fertility collapse should be most extreme. I suggest that it is precisely

21 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/16/business/china-birth-rate-2019.html>

22 Ayo Wahlberg, “Filial Adjustments: From Family Planning to Family Making in China.” *The China Review*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (May 2020): 235-245.

23 Kipnis, 2016, p114.

the endurance of such values, in face of the contradictory enhancement of women's status that is importantly behind the drastic birthrate decline. Fertility is decreasing globally, and improvements in the economic and educational status of women are understood to be major driving factors. Nevertheless, these kinds of pressures appear to be most extreme in East Asia.

Because women in East Asia are increasingly able to make choices of their own regarding higher education, occupation, and an independent lifestyle, the continuing male-centered family orientation represents a situation they would rather avoid, either by postponing marriage or remaining single. To give just one example, Zachary Howlett reports in his new book how delayed marriage and women's diligence in educational endeavors are both pushback against patriarchal norms.²⁴ Late marriage of course means fewer children for those who do finally join a spouse. The clash between emergent and historically present values turns the notion of recombinant change on its head, because rather than integrating the old dominance of patrilineality with women's status transformation, the present assemblage of cultural norms presents women and men in East Asia with contradictory options regarding marriage and reproduction.

What has been constant in anthropological circles regarding attention to the ethnic Han in Taiwan and China is an overwhelming interest in China. This has been a key continuity between traditionalism in the anthropology of Taiwan and post-traditionalism in the anthropology of the China mainland. Whether or how this will change due to recent political developments or to the impact of Covid-19 remains to be seen, but there may be room for anthropologists to take matters into their own hands, especially in consideration of contemporary trends in urbanization and the middle class. While it is obviously the case that an anthropologist can only do one ethnography at a time, the moment may have arrived to expand what I have called the ethnographic gaze and extend one's vision to the various regions of East Asia, certainly including Taiwan and mainland China.

24 Howlett, Zachary M., *Meritocracy and its Discontents: Anxiety and the National College Entrance Exam in China*. Cornell University Press, 2021. P. 132.

面對中產階級： 中國民族誌中的後傳統主義和議題分化

孔邁隆

哥倫比亞大學
人類學系

如果說1960和1970年代臺灣人類學漢人研究的焦點是放在清代的文化與社會，那便表示關於當代中國的研究仍有一大塊強烈的好奇心尚未被滿足。中國開放學者從事田野調查，開啟了一個關注當前現象的新研究時期，不僅在中國研究方面是如此，在臺灣的人類學方面也一樣。海峽兩岸社會的中產階級轉型，都為兩地人類學研究進入新階段創造了適當的環境。對人類學的中國研究而言，中產階級已經成為研究誰進入其中和誰成為邊緣人的決定性因素。中產階級特徵在今日的人類學中成為主導性議題，從個人主義的出現、商品化及追尋商品的自我滿足，到在不穩定和階級快速變化的環境中搏得一席之地，到民族主義，甚至到擁有汽車所帶來的影響等。中國與台灣的對照，突顯出關於中國的各派民族學共用一個相同的研究和分析框架。儘管這個框架並非由共同的理論方法所界定，但卻可能有助於批判性地擴展到包含臺灣在內的研究議題。

(劉紹華翻譯)

關鍵詞：傳統主義，都市化，現代化，人口，民族誌
