

UC Berkeley

Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review

Title

Where Anthropology Meets History—A Review of "Tracing China: A Forty-Year Ethnographic Journey," by Helen F. Siu

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7jb334pt>

Journal

Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review, 1(24)

Author

Ching, May Bo

Publication Date

2017-09-01

Peer reviewed

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

REVIEW ESSAY

Where Anthropology Meets History—A Review of *Tracing China: A Forty-Year Ethnographic Journey*, by Helen F. Siu¹

May Bo Ching, City University of Hong Kong
Translated by Gershom Tse

When an anthropologist comes face to face with history, she in fact faces a test of character: will she gravitate toward the “new history” (*nouvelle histoire*)? Or, will she revert to traditional history, which shares the façade but not the spirit of anthropology? If she chooses new history, then anthropology pursues a dialogue with the past, and the anthropologist is like Eva Perón in the 1996 film *Evita*: she comes on her own terms toward the calm, cool beholder—the historian. He has been illuminating her; in him, she sees a reflection of herself. She allows him to lead their dance, but she does not let him lure her away with charming legends and lore disguised as “historical truths.” Instead, the anthropologist sees through all the intricacies of myth making, and she holds her own. She twirls *her* way. But, little by little, she lets him in, and he becomes part of the choreography; together, they peel away layers of the past and reconstitute a present that makes sense.

For years, Helen Siu tangoed with history and trekked the fields of South China. *Tracing China: A Forty-Year Ethnographic Journey* (Hong Kong University Press, 2016)—a collection of Siu’s work published over the last twenty years—is not a grandiose showpiece splashed with a lot of paint and colors. Instead, she uses a 2B pencil to leave fine marks on wafer-thin parchment and smudges them ever so slightly, gradually letting the image emerge through the back of the page. If I have understood correctly, though plurality exists in the meanings of “trace,” Siu’s intention with the title *Tracing China* is less to track the history of China, and

more to scrupulously examine every footstep she comes across, no matter how indistinct—to “look for plum blossoms in the snow,” as the Chinese saying goes. This saying might have inspired the Chinese version of the title of the collection, one that preserves a sense of graceful subtlety.

As for the book’s subtitle, *A Forty-Year Ethnographic Journey*, in an era when the concepts and vocabulary of anthropology have been reconsidered and transfigured time and again, the adjective “ethnographic” has become complex: an “ethnography” is no longer a single, one-dimensional work of ethnology, nor is it an all-encompassing depiction of an entity or community within predetermined bounds. The ethnographer no longer assumes an omniscient perspective. Instead, she clearly understands that being in the field requires constant self-reflection and evaluation: to compile an ethnography means not only to scrutinize a subject but also to inspect the ethnographer herself, her ideas, and even her writings. Forty-plus years of fieldwork and more than twenty years of publishing have allowed Siu to step back and appraise her body of work, which spans a long career. The chronology of her work also requires that we, her readers, read with a pair of multifocal lenses in order to pick out subtle differences among her studies from various stages of her career.

Two Sets of Core Concepts

It bears repeating: an anthropologist choreographs her own dance; even when partnered with a historian, she follows steps that are intrinsic to anthropology. She targets the conceptual core of social science, considers and reconsiders it, and scrutinizes and applies it to form her analytical framework. Throughout *Tracing China*, especially in the introduction to part 3, Siu discusses and applies the core concepts that she has held onto over the years as her foundation. For clarity, we can divide these concepts into two main sets.

The first set of concepts has a fairly abstract and broad quality and includes such notions as *human agency*, *structuring*, and the seemingly unremarkable *process*. Since as early as 1989, when her monograph *Agents and Victims in South China: Accomplices in Rural Revolution* was published, Siu has explored and anatomized the concept of human agency. Based on her fieldwork in Xinhui, Guangdong, in the 1970s and 1980s, the book, with “agents and victims”

forming an integral part of its title, unequivocally points to the paradoxical nature of human agency—as people exercise what they subjectively see as their purpose (agency), a certain structuring process is activated. This structuring, in turn, affects and limits the behavioral and intellectual processes of the very pursuit of their agency. Emphasizing the importance of process helps release the tension between structuring and human agency and casts light on the dynamics between what is being structured and the process of structuring.

It is natural at this juncture to be reminded of Karl Marx's famous words in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852): "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." If this were as far as Siu's discussion went, then her work would achieve little more than perpetuating the narratives of the nineteenth-century masters of classical social science. Fortunately, her research looks beyond how social and historical circumstances dictate human agency; it emphasizes how human actors create the very structure they inhabit, unveiling through this structuring process the actions and fate of an agent and the trajectory of the *structural transformation* of a society. Using structuring, human agency, and process as a triangular theoretical framework, and drawing on her understanding of rural China from her field research as a basis, Siu deduces another set of important concepts that are deeply rooted in twentieth-century Chinese history—*state involution*, *cellularization*, and *complicity* among various agents in Chinese society.

Involution is a concept that anthropologist Clifford J. Geertz applied in the 1960s to his study of labor-intensive, wet-rice agriculture in Java, Indonesia (Geertz 1963). The concept refers to when a certain economic, societal, or cultural system has persisted for a while and has reached its definitive status, at which point it will not be able to reconfigure itself and advance or develop any further. This concept was also used in the 1980s by historian Prasenjit Duara, to analyze state making during the Republican era. In particular, Duara used it to demonstrate that when the Nationalist government faced insurmountable resistance in local societies, it had to rely on informal structures as local agents to manage regional counties. Over time, these structures became too ingrained, eventually becoming the norm of governing mechanisms in these local societies (Duara 1987).

Siu's research, especially her work on *datianer* (local bosses) in rural South China during the Republican era, echoes the discussion of how involution occurred in a number of modern state-making processes during the twentieth century, including economist Audrey Donnithorne's use of the phrase *cellular economy* to describe the self-reliant tendency of regions and state enterprises in China during the Cultural Revolution (Donnithorne 1972). However, Siu seems to take it a step further—drawing the “in” in *involution* further inward: she uses the idea of *cellularization*, which is rooted in biology, to bring *state involution* from a societal (external) level to a personal, experiential (internal) level. Here, much as an understanding of process can relax the tension between structuring and human agency mentioned above, using the perspective of *complicity* helps bring together the two concepts: state involution, which starts *externally*, and cellularization, which begins *internally*. In other words, if such an involution should happen through and through, it would be the result not only of stress from state mechanism but also of individual participation. Individuals would internalize what began as state narrative and allow themselves to become a part of the complicit process of state making; in the process, power would be exercised within and without, rigidly and elastically. Individuals exercise certain power, but are in turn controlled by it.

The cellularization of rural China is an important conclusion from *Agents and Victims*, but its gravity has largely been neglected. As Siu reiterates in the introduction to part 3 of *Tracing China*, in *Agents and Victims* she described how villages in South China developed vibrant commodities trading markets during the late imperial era, and how regional lineages took root and rituals and customs took shape, thus structuring translocal identities. Nevertheless, in the 1970s, when Siu stepped inside the boundary of these villages, what she saw was the aftermath of twenty years of socialist revolution in China—markets were restricted, kin-based structures obliterated, and popular rituals and traditions suppressed. More importantly, most organic connections and interactions between these villages and the outside were cut off. This was the time when villages in South China became inward-looking “rural” cells, reducing themselves to the most basic units. On the one hand, they were disconnected from the outside world; on the other hand, they could not be severed from the state and exist independently.

Considering this phenomenon in terms of *structuring*, we may think of the societal structure of 1970s Chinese villages as having become a cellular unit. This structure is part of a *revolution*. By definition, a revolution ultimately wants to shake up and overturn an old world and is the most comprehensive manifestation of *human agency*. However, *agents and victims* and *complicity* remind us that revolution can succeed only if both villagers and cadres participate and cooperate. Villagers are indeed victims of the process, but they are also agents. In fact, the most lasting damage occurs when both individual identities and fates are defined within the descriptions of class and revolution—as time passes, this language becomes rigid and irrevocable. As Michel Foucault (1977) emphasized, it is not only the external social structure that hardens in the process. Language and thought structure also rigidify.

This structuring process began before 1949. In fact, Siu's studies regarding Tianma township in Xinhui, Xiaolan town in Zhongshan, and Shawan town in Panyu clearly showed that the transformations brought to China by socialist revolution were starting to surface even in the 1940s. In the first half of the twentieth century, villages and towns were overrun by warlords. The Nationalist government's attempt to put forth various modernization targets through social and political undertakings immediately followed. During the Japanese occupation, numerous places were captured and cut off from the outside. Soon after, civil war broke out in China, lasting until 1949. Many villages in South China fell into the hands of *datianers* who ruled with the savage motto "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun," replacing the hierarchy of power that used to be expressed in genealogical language. The ensuing socialist revolution further extinguished any hopes of recovering what had been a complex, layered network of society and people (chap. 13, 69 and 119).

Among all of the conceptual tools Siu has applied, I find cellularization to be the most dynamic for appreciating the historical structuring that she has attempted to demonstrate with her field research over the past forty years. As a result of this particular form of historical structuring, the direction of the process changed and apparently became more rigid structurally, but what kind of structure was this? Researchers needed to suggest an answer, even if only temporary, to highlight the historical juncture that caused this structural transformation. Here, history gave Siu a different perspective from most social scientists: even though she and her colleagues had not

clearly formulated the concept and methodology of “historical anthropology” when she authored *Agents and Victims*, her understanding of pre-Republican rural South China was already quite different from the stagnant, closed-minded, and isolated scenario that many social scientists at the time tended to presume about traditional China. This is precisely why, in the postsocialist era, Siu recognized many so-called revivals of traditions—for instance, the chrysanthemum festival in Xiaolan of Zhongshan, Chaolian’s parade on Hongsheng’s birthday, and even the lavish weddings and funerals organized by villagers of the younger generation (chaps. 6–8)—as being much more than simple revivals. These events represented a restructuring of traditions driven by newfound wealth, a restructuring that might also redefine familial relationships between generations or be utilized to suit certain local political slogans. The recycled traditions were strategies for dealing with the past and present defined by and resulting from the socialist legacy.

Even though the villages of South China that were becoming structurally cellular maintained a certain connection with Hong Kong, Macau, and beyond and were not, therefore, completely cut off from the rest of the world, their own ability to organize themselves socially was not comparable with what they had experienced in the past. In the 1980s, there were social scientists who did not think that Communism had changed traditional China and maintained that traditional power remained tremendous. To this, Siu clearly responded: the Communist revolution had deeply changed rural China. The impact of the collectivization era was deeply ingrained in the lives and minds of the people. The postreform era, therefore, should be seen not as a “farewell to revolution” or a blank canvas. The phantom of the past is still seen everywhere in field sites. The power structure embedded in the Maoist era has been internalized by the people; they subconsciously regenerated the selfsame power structure that they had once run away from. Understanding this historical burden (or perhaps legacy) is a prerequisite for any post-Maoism study (chap. 4, 68–69).

Time and again in *Tracing China*, Siu points out the paradox in the relationship between party-state and society. To say that a party-state represents an external force that always works against the benefit of society is simplistic; likewise, it is difficult to treat local societies as repositories of culture and traditions and assume that when traditions are repressed, the repression will be only temporary and the traditions will eventually make a return. The fact is

that state and society are often tightly intertwined. Siu's research approach is not only applicable to a one-party, socialist country such as China. It also echoes what political scientists in the West advocated in the 1980s—to bring the state back into social and cultural analysis. Today, even in relatively democratic realms, the notion of a state—be it an organizational structure or individual agent—has deeply permeated society. As a result, the public versus private, state and society, formal and informal powers and authorities can no longer be looked at as dichotomies. Agents, being individual entities, may tend to be rational and calculative in both the political and economic arenas, but they are also tied to the baggage that they inherit from their own history and culture and have to make do with whatever hand fate has dealt them.

Siu's approach to the two sets of core concepts presented above was informed by post-1970 European historiographies, in particular those of British Marxists, L'École des Annales of France, and new developments in cultural history. Among them, historian Philip Abrams's classic discussion on historical sociology was a key influence: using *structuring* to replace the past separate treatments of *structure* and *process* (Abrams 1980). The tendency of various new historiographies to emphasize, on one hand, the need to give priority to *longue durée* and holistic approaches, and, on the other, the importance of lending empathy and meaning to individual actors and actions, helps us dynamically connect the vast bygone past, the evanescent present, and the imminent future. In other words, history is not just a background that “happens to be there” or something to embellish academic writings with, but a very real process that constantly feeds reality. In this process, man never ceases to make history and create narratives; the narratives shape and change history, and vice versa. Unfortunately, some historians insist on isolating these narratives and labeling them as objective or even the only historical “truth,” neglecting that “history” comprises diverse conceptuality and reality. To look at history as a structuring process is the very realization that gave Siu and company the impetus to fly the flag of “historical anthropology,” whether they researched the Ming and Qing or contemporary history, in South China or in the north.

Neither City, Nor Village, Nor Town: Deconstructing Labels and Boundaries

Siu's field studies saw a recurring phenomenon—people of the postsocialist era using labels or identities imposed on them to profit in resources in the new era. In a kind of gambling game, the identity of *peasant* became a valuable bargaining chip in some places; *towns*, on the other hand, became wedged between the urban and the rural. As early as in the 1980s, Siu began to focus on *market towns* (chap. 5), places in which others had already lost interest. In the postsocialist era, restricted by the administrative rank and collective economy of *towns*, *market town enterprises* had limited scopes and were sandwiched between rural communes, state enterprises, and the emerging cities. Town enterprises were not able to benefit, formally or informally, from tax exemptions the way rural enterprises did. Governments of townships received negligible benefits from the state. From the cadres' and enterprises' points of view, the notion of *township* had become ambiguous—neither a village nor a city; neither a collective nor a nationalized entity. Worst yet, it had come to connote having fallen behind the march toward modernization. The way out of the dilemma for them was either to have the same tax benefits as a village, or to be administratively promoted to *city*.

Nevertheless, Siu's case studies have shown that—as decisions were made at the provincial level, and were propagated from the cities down the rest of the administrative hierarchy—town enterprises were forced to merge with nearby rural collectives, and new town centers were forced into remote, poor, rural areas. Peasants seemed to profit from this, but only ephemerally at best. During the Cultural Revolution, they did not need to *xia xiang* (“be sent down to the village”) the way urban intellectuals did, and when the one-child policy restricted births in the urban areas, they were exempt from it and given a second quota. After the 1990s, when real estate experienced rapid growth, villages with collective land claims were able to bargain for the right to rent out or exchange their land. However, to go from “agricultural farming” to “real-estate farming” does not mean that peasants were guaranteed a change in social status—a certain village in Guangzhou's Zhujiang New City at the turn of the twenty-first century that Helen Siu has been studying in recent years serves as an example of this. For migrant workers in the cities, on the other hand, having a rural account (*hukou*) was forever

denied them social mobility, giving them the discriminatory and much ridiculed label of “peasant worker” (*nongmingong*).

Anyone familiar with contemporary China knows that governments and cadres lower in the hierarchy tend to think that climbing up the administrative system—i.e., to expanding power and resources—is the answer to most problems, so anything from turning villages into *jiedao* (subdistricts) or *qu* (district) into *city* is seen as a great fortune that has been bestowed on them. Siu contrasts this with people of the imperial past: they fortified their personal worth from a diverse cultural nexus of power and authority. During the Ming and Qing eras, numerous large towns were developed in South China. They became closely associated with cities but were also tied to villages, as if they were one body. People in these places knew how to utilize different utilitarian and symbolic means to link themselves with the state structure, be it imaginary or real. As a result, since the Ming and Qing, South China has been not only an economic unit, but also a purposeful cultural and historical structure, permeated with various political and social chance elements.

Before the twentieth century, places were happy to be called “villages,” but not in the general sense of backward, close-minded rural societies, as labeled by many Chinese intellectuals. Instead, they were an organic part of the Pearl River Delta economic region because of its translocal resources. They enjoyed certain autonomy both politically and economically, and offered many cultural references, and, for all these, they appeared to be quite content. Foshan in Nanhai, for example, was a major market town during the Ming and Qing, but was happy with the name “Zhongyi *xiang* [township]” (see Faure 1990); Panyu’s Shawan maintained a *xiang* status, even though it had the social and psychological structure of a town (Liu 1995). Also, Chaolian of Xinhui—one of the focuses of Siu’s studies—was described in the opening of a 1946 gazetteer as “a tiny island with just over six miles from east to west, and five from north to south” (Lu Zijun 1946). But the gazetteer wasted no time in changing its tone about Chaolian, and claimed that “rivers are the cradles of the world’s civilizations; deltas are the cradles of Guangdong culture,” expediting the associations between Chaolian (an island in the Pearl River Delta) and the “globe,” “culture,” and “civilization.” At the time of writing that gazetteer,

however, its author, Lu Zijun—known to have spent most of his life sojourning—was not even in Chaolian; he was at 3 Coronation Terrace in Hong Kong.

Up until the 1960s, the governments of many places in South China exploited administrative means to separate cities from towns and villages—herein lies the tragedy for villages. When a label has been imposed on and perpetuated among people—“I’m a ‘peasant’... I’m a ‘peasant’...”—this label will rather hypnotically become an ingrained “fact.” In the 1970s, when Siu stepped into rural South China to conduct fieldwork, she often met villagers who said, “We are but peasants. What is it [about us] that interests you?” (51). This sort of language circulating among the villagers was a wake-up call for Siu: she realized that the people in front of her were no “villagers” of the bygone era, but were “revolutionized peasants.”

The townships wedged in a peculiar space between villages and towns had neither the collective resources from the land nor the cultural confidence that villages-turned-towns had. Now, many cadres of townships, especially the younger ones who had little to do with the local society, look at everything from the state’s perspective (much like what political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott [1998] describes as “seeing like a state”) and define and manage local cultures with a “town-level” mentality, ignoring any organic relationships between cities and villages of the past, as well as all cross-region connections. In recent years, I have felt deeply the notion of cellularization having thoroughly permeated local cadres, as I collaborated with a town in Panyu to archive literature and artifacts related to Guangdong music. However, despite the “transregionality” in Cantonese music and the experiences of the people that these literary works and artifacts show, cadres are content with treating them merely as “local” cultural heritage. Likewise, many definitions in regional cultures in China have seemingly been decided and classified according to administrative hierarchies. This kind of narrow-minded thinking is precisely the consequence of cellularization becoming internalized.

Siu often says that she did not see revolution succeed in China, yet images of revolution continued to haunt like an apparition. Back when she thought she was walking into villages, she saw cellularized administrative units with a grounded peasantry. What would they look like now, after having been dragged through postreform urbanization? Ironically, when Siu walked into what she thought were cities, she also saw something different—as most cities lived through the

revolution, they became proletarianized at the core without knowing it. The village in Guangzhou's Zhujiang New City that Siu has studied in recent years serves as a vivid case in point of a village's identity being pulled in seemingly incongruent directions. Over numerous years, villagers there used their collective land rights to bargain with real estate developers. In exchange, they received multiple flats along with other profits, allowing them to stay on "their" land of which they can no longer claim collective ownership. However, the original ancestral halls in the village were rebuilt on a small patch of land near the newly developed housing complex. There, shrines pertaining to different last names were erected side by side, back to back. Temples also received similar treatment: they were moved in, single file, to a small corner of the complex. Interestingly, beside the temples stands an enormous statue of a warrior, his sword aimed directly at a modern bridge stretching across the river like the open jaws of a shark. Legend has it that the warrior could stave off bad luck.

Looking at this somewhat absurd scenario, we can understand why Siu gives the title "Grounding Displacement: Uncivil Urban Spaces in Post-Reform South China" (chap. 16) to the chapter on *chengzhongcun* (village in the city—or perhaps it should be "city among villages"?). The villagers who are now surrounded by the city live neither in a rural nor an urban space but in some peculiar dimension in between. Meanwhile, in the postsocialist era, they have kept their collective rights, becoming Maoist landlords in a post-Mao time. They are without a doubt compensated (using one sense of the word "displace," which is to "substitute") with the benefit of being settled (being "grounded"). At the same time, however, they have been "moved" into a changed habitat (using another sense of the word "displace") and are stuck there much like a vessel having run aground (another sense of being "grounded"). These villagers are in fact so deep in the mud that even they themselves lament, "We may be rich, but our children have no future" (xi). Along with migrant workers, they feel out of place living in Zhujiang New City, a Central Business District (CBD) that Guangzhou planned back in the 1990s. They are not citizens of Guangzhou, and it is difficult to see them as part of the "citizensphere." Any attempts to break out of their confines can only be "tilting at windmills."

This phenomenon of "mismatch" also features quite prominently in the discussions and images in the book series *Asia Inside Out*, edited by Siu with Peter Perdue and Eric Tagliacozzo.

The topic “Asia Inside Out” serves to remind us that if we are willing to dig a new tunnel into history, we can adjust, or even redefine, fixed spatial and temporal frameworks, and unravel Asia to its heart. In this way, many phenomena that seem to fit no descriptions may become understandable.

Narrative and Discourse: Living with a Language of Power

What is both paradoxical and tragic is that the kind of thinking above, which pinions cellularization to the local ground, has resulted from twentieth-century Chinese scholars’ bid to abandon earthbound China. Siu’s two literary anthologies—*Mao’s Harvest: Voices from China’s New Generation* (Siu and Stern 1983) and *Furrows: Peasants, Intellectuals, and the State: Stories and Histories from Modern China* (Siu 1990)—were published to illustrate this point. The prologue to *Furrows*, included in *Tracing China* as chapter 12, describes in detail how twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals—while pursuing modernization for the country, on the one hand, and saving themselves, on the other—left the countryside, created a notion of *peasantry*, and built a new China, but in the process facilitated a new self-righteousness. Intellectuals resembled the peasants that they portrayed—they were at once agents and victims. Within a common sociopolitical transition that they call “revolution,” they were complicit, intentionally or not, in creating a brave new world.

It is perhaps perplexing for readers of *Tracing China* that this prologue to *Furrows* has been placed in part 5 of the volume, entitled “History between the Lines,” along with “Where Were the Women? Rethinking Marriage Resistance and Regional Culture in South China” (chap. 11), an essay that seems remotely related. My understanding is that Siu tries to use a textual criticism approach to read between the lines of historical materials. In “Where Were the Women?” she sheds light on the traditions of *zishu* (“self-combing,” which symbolizes lifelong chastity) and *buluojia* (delayed transfer marriage) among women of South China, suggesting that they could be residual customs from indigenous people of the vast southwest, south, and southeast areas. During the Ming and Qing eras, these customs became stories recorded by scholars in gazetteers, which was their way of distinguishing themselves and their own “proper” culture from those that they deemed perverse. This kind of regional narrative was akin to the way

many genealogies claimed to have originated from nobility in the Central Plain, but came south to flee a land that had fallen into war and chaos. Both narratives were used to justify any claims to power or orthodoxy. Reading between the lines, Siu found a different voice in their narratives.

It is equally perplexing and paradoxical that unsubstantiated land claims contained in these narratives were being justified with alternative history. Indigenous people had to become “immigrants” from more “civilized” regions to be given a stamp of orthodoxy. Meanwhile, early settlers continued to reinforce their claim to Central Plain heritage to supplant both the indigenous people and any new immigrants. This does not mean, however, that those who are marginalized will accept the label of “belonging in the margins” and give up any hopes for social mobility. As anthropologist Barbara Ward (1985) reveals through the conceptual model in her study of the boat people in Hong Kong, those who were marginalized (Dan people) did not in fact identify themselves as a marginalized culture. Instead, they thought they fit right in to the norm of Chinese traditions. In “Where Were the Women?” Siu also mentions that, in some communities built on the sands (*shatian*) that were given the label “Dan,” the practice of *buluoja* was adopted in the 1930s and 1940s by those who hoped to associate themselves with the “orthodox” people through the practice, even though by then it was already considered backward and parochial by intellectuals.

“Local,” “Dan” (or “local” and “Hakka” in some scenarios), and other labels were the by-products of a game of monopoly in which different lineages grappled for position and settlement rights. The publication of “Where Were the Women?” in 1990 laid the foundation for the paper “Lineage, Market, Pirate, and Dan: Ethnicity in the Pearl River Delta of South China” (chap. 9), which Siu published with Chinese historian Liu Zhiwei in 2006. “Lineage, Market, Pirate, and Dan” points out that marginalized people were not entirely without hope of upward social mobility, provided that there was enough time for the process to take place. If they eventually succeeded, obtaining settlement rights, they would use all manner of language and narratives to their advantage to create rigid ethnic classifications and labels, devising the identities of “us” and “others.” In the field, Siu and Liu often heard the Dan people being branded “*shuiliuchai, wu citang*” (“floating twigs, with no ancestral halls”) (135, 136), a divisive label that continues to be heard even to this day. In September 2016, a friend from Panyu drove me in his car to visit a

local recreation center in Wanqingsha township in Nansha district to the south of Guangzhou. On our way there, I watched the passing scenery while using the GPS on my phone to track our location in real time and traced the changes in topology of Manqingsha since the Ming and Qing. As we drove into a narrow lane, I saw rows of small houses neatly arranged on the flat land—obviously the Dan people’s doings. The Dan people used to live in straw huts by the edge of the water, but in the 1950s they were allowed to “come ashore.” As I saw all of this, I timidly asked my friend, “Are the inhabitants here ‘boat people’?” Nonchalantly, he answered, “Yes, floating twigs, with no ancestral halls.”

As I heard this phrase (*shuiliuchai, wu citang*), Siu and Liu’s essay “Lineage, Market, Pirate, and Dan” (2006) flashed across my mind. The essay was a collaboration between an anthropologist and a historian: together they discuss the household registration system of the Ming and Qing era, the rise and fall of regional power during tumultuous times, and business and trade opportunities brought forth by sea and land transports. They also discovered stories hidden between the lines in genealogies, and observed the organizations and power structures in rituals and celebrations that honored gods and goddesses. All of these layers equipped them with the expertise and experience necessary to decipher the deeper meanings beneath the seemingly harmless phrase “floating twigs, with no ancestral halls.” In this *structuring* process, a narrative of lineage privilege and social exclusion—“us” versus “them”—emerges. This narrative and the labels it contains are highly internalized. At the same time, they also determine how people recognize history, reality, and their own identities. Such is the narrative power uncovered by Siu’s critical reading of both literary and historical texts.

Hong Kong, Hong Kong!

Coincidentally, while Hong Kong’s economy advanced rapidly, the classification labels “Hong Konger” and “new immigrant” were loaded with both factual and emotional meanings. In “Positioning ‘Hong Kongers’ and ‘New Immigrants’” (chap. 15), Siu urges policy makers to disperse the gloom brought on by these two fundamentally diametric identities, and to identify and distinguish the origins and backgrounds of those who reside in Hong Kong at different times.

This is the way to make more reasonable governmental policies and discourage the use of divisive, even discriminatory, language.

Though she claims to enjoy her “marginalized,” fuzzy identity, I believe that, among all of her field sites, the one that Siu cares about the most is still Hong Kong. Her research shows how those who live in Hong Kong and in the rest of South China *should* most strongly exhibit transnational and transregional characteristics; yet, though the Hong Kong experience gradually gives rise to a Hong Kong identity, it has never been an easily discernible one. Is it “colonial,” “Westernized,” or “local,” or does it metamorphose among adjectives? It is precisely this “South China experience” that has made Siu realize her research subjects are moving targets; she must trace their footsteps wherever they go. In every ethnography that Siu has written, there has had to be more than one field site, and more often than not her field sites cross national and geographical boundaries. In each locale, people’s narratives reflect visions, emotions, and strategic positioning that are modified according to the ever-changing infrastructure in the region (300). Over forty years, none of Siu’s field sites—be it Chaolian island, Huancheng commune, Shawan and Xiaolan towns, Guangzhou, or Hong Kong—has been an isolated point; instead, they are all hubs that exist at the crossroads of networks. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Hong Kong was able to thoroughly unleash the power of flexibility associated with its role as a hub, because of its ambiguous political environment. In Siu’s words, Hong Kong was a cultural kaleidoscope with a global landscape. Many historical factors inadvertently turned Hong Kong into a Chinese society distinct from the cities in mainland China. It was not long ago that women were assumed to be marginalized in Chinese society, but in Hong Kong they have been catapulted by certain structural factors into political prominence.

Nevertheless, while the “Hong Konger” identity gathers momentum in the face of new immigrants pouring into Hong Kong, many people also seem to go through a psychological involution. Among many who experienced Hong Kong’s handover to the Chinese state—a historic turning point—*localism*, a concept that is still fuzzy, has begun to take shape and surface in various narratives. It is as if history is playing a prank on us: as it turns out, the concept of cellularization that was applied to villages in South China is equally applicable to the metropolis that is Hong Kong forty years later, and this is troubling. From the end of the twentieth to the

beginning of the twenty-first century, a number of phenomena in Hong Kong have inevitably suggested that the city is cellularizing—even if this trend has not spread to every corner of society, it has permeated the population ideologically. “Hong Kong” and “Hong Kongers” have come to consider themselves self-sufficient entities and, to some extent, have isolated themselves from the outside.

Siu’s study of rural South China has reminded us time and again that the cellularization of a place is not merely the result of immense external political control, but can happen because in every act of revolt, individual actors unwittingly adopt the language and ideology of those they revolt against, unknowingly victimizing themselves in the process. In the final chapter of *Tracing China*, Siu describes the downward mobility that Hong Kong’s middle class tends to experience as becoming “provincialized,” even though she couples it with encouraging examples and tempers her tone, attempting to make downward mobility sound more positive, as a way for the middle class of Hong Kong to get out of its predicament. Recently, her vision has expanded toward Asia and the rest of the world: it is from such a perspective that Siu titles part 7 of the volume “Historical Global and the Asian Postmodern,” to evoke broader thinking. To me, however, as much as this attempt points toward a way out of a quandary, it also reveals worrying questions: Has the aura of being metropolitan become a thing of the past? Will Asian postmodern societies become complacent in the name of upholding “localism”?

As described in chapters 10 and 13, after some warring times and much shuffling in South China in the 1940s, merchants of Xinhui who had been flexing their muscles and maintaining a certain influence both outside and within their hometown began to face marginalization from the local society. The metropolitan aura that they used to exude either had to be quarantined from the provincial ways of the locals, or it would be drowned by rurality, becoming forever subdued. However, power shifts that are controlled externally are not the most frightening; it is auto-cellularization that we should fear the most. If the people of Hong Kong, especially the middle class, allow their ethos to continue to become cellular, then even if they appear glamorous, cosmopolitan, and metropolitan on the outside, when they look deep into the mirror, they may see something as bizarre as the man mentioned in the book (245, figure 12.1) who wears numerous Mao badges on his decrepit clothes—he may feel wretched, but when he

searches everywhere for a figure to bemoan his plight, he fails to see that that figure has been with him all along, worn as a badge of honor. This phenomenon has been shrewdly described by Beidao in his poem “Untitled” (244):

To myself
 I am ever a stranger.
 I fear darkness,
 but I let my body get in the way of light.
 The shadow I make
 is my lover.
 The heart inside is my foe.

Sometimes literature may offer just the right eloquent expression to say what an anthropologist or historian cannot fully articulate.

Weberianism or Marxism?

Whether walking among the fields, speaking with the locals, or reading literature, Siu shares the same ultimate goal with like-minded colleagues: to listen to and read people’s vernacular languages, understand the meanings of their actions as well as how they themselves define and interpret those actions, and analyze how their narratives were constructed over time. Time and again, Siu emphasizes that, as agents, humans not only carry the burden of history but also exhibit determination and ambition. Under institutional restrictions that may not be obvious, people continue to create cultural resources, but at the same time they never cease to fortify the very framework that ties them down. Siu treats both her research subjects and the categories and labels that they use as “social and discursive products to be deciphered.” This is what critical literature refers to as an “exercise in deconstruction” (xii).

Conducting fieldwork in China in the 1970s was not an easy experience. Siu was classified by people she met in the field as a student, Hong Kong–Macau compatriot, professor, and party agent, as well as a friend and sympathizer. Yet, over the years, her interactions with her research subjects turned from shallow acquaintances to deep friendships, which inform and inspire her search for the meanings of human actions. By writing ethnography in an interactive style, which was not mainstream at the time, she notes her own transformation from Marxist to Weberian. Thus, she writes in the prologue of *Agents and Victims* that, “in a sense, I went to

South China with Marxist hopes, but I left with Max Weber's worst fears" (xiii). But, to me, if this is Siu's way of expressing what she felt in 1989, then this current ethnography reflects that she is at once Weberian, as she seeks meanings behind actions and narratives, and Marxist, as she never departs from her humanistic concern for the people she encounters. At the same time, her largely outside-in approach is akin to the structuralist thinking of Émile Durkheim, Michel Foucault, and Claude Levi-Strauss. Because of this, there is no single framework laid down by an academic or stemming from an ideology that can express Siu's theoretical premise in simple terms. As an anthropologist who observes social phenomena and the transformations of theories in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Siu also attempts to find inspiration in history and literature, to shake some of the rigidity or even dissociation that twentieth-century social science tended to have because of overclassification and labeling, and endeavors "to develop an institutional framework and platform with a clear interdisciplinary intellectual agenda to capture phenomena 'in motion'" (xi). According to Siu, what changes constantly are not just the people and society, but also the very notion of "China." China has implications beyond geographical and political units. It is also a wealth of experiences collected from people's lives and ideas. China is more than spatial. It is also temporal. It is a process (viii–xiv) in the eye of history, the calm, cool beholder.

Epilogue: A Postmodern Absurdity

A final note regarding the photo on the cover of *Tracing China*: those who have read *Agents and Victims* will recognize that the two books share the same cover image. In other words, the photo was taken more than thirty years ago. When I look at the image I cannot help but wonder: what has since happened to those palm trees? And where has the woman's path led her? In the 1989 volume, the photo was black and white to echo Siu's observation that "everything was red, but life was colorless" (xi). This time, the photo appears with enhanced colors. However, is this twenty-first-century photo more realistic than last century's version? The streaks of sunlight in the current photo have been treated digitally to show extra luster—and perhaps an over-the-top finish—so much so that the glare blurs the details in the rest of the image, making it all look a bit absurd. But perhaps this aptly conjures an image of today's China: it is a

hodgepodge of things reasonable and unreasonable, entwined, superimposed, fragmented, making for an uncertain future. Mad it certainly appears, but not entirely without method.

May Bo Ching is professor of Chinese and History at City University of Hong Kong and a research fellow at the Centre for Historical Anthropology at Sun Yat-sen University, China.

Note

- 1 This review essay was originally published in Chinese in the December 2016 issue of *Ershi Yi Shiji* 二十一世紀 (Twenty-First Century) (158:128–140). That journal, produced by the Chinese University of Hong Kong, plays an important role in conveying politically sensitive messages to readers in Greater China. The review is included in the “Readings from Asia” section of *Cross-Currents* because it captures a Chinese reading of a comprehensive overview of the work of an American-based scholar. The text is from Asia, and so is the political context in which it was first published and received. By including the essay in this open-access, English-language forum, we aim to increase its exposure beyond its original, Chinese-speaking audience. The fact that the Chinese review was published in a journal in Hong Kong rather than in mainland China is significant. The journal has a “Greater China” audience and uses traditional Chinese characters. A simplified-character version of the review (created by mainland readers) has been widely circulated in China. Ching’s review discusses research topics that might have been problematic if published in China at this time. This highlights the significant positioning of Hong Kong as a space for meaningful academic conversations. How long this space can be maintained is uncertain in view of how aggressive the Chinese government has been in censoring thought in the past few years. The role that Hong Kong will be able—or unable—to play in China politics in the “post-post–Cold War” era is worth noting. Both Helen Siu and May Bo Ching are native Hong Kongers, products of the South China (Lingnan) culture that is linked historically to both Asia and Europe. Both scholars studied overseas, in the United States and United Kingdom, respectively. Siu is one of the leaders of a major South China research group with which Ching is associated, and we can also understand this review in part as a way of expanding the influence of that group’s approach to history and anthropology.

References

- Abrams, Philip. 1980. “History, Sociology, Historical Sociology.” *Past and Present* 87:3–16.
- Donnithorne, Audrey. 1972. “China’s Cellular Economy: Some Economic Trends since the Cultural Revolution.” *The China Quarterly* 52:605–619.
- Duara, Prasenjit. 1987. “State Involution: A Study of Local Finances in North China, 1911–1935.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29 (1): 132–161.

- Faure, David. 1990. "What Made Foshan a Town? The Evolution of Rural-Urban Identities in Ming-Qing China." *Late Imperial China* 11 (2): 1–31.
- Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: Penguin.
- Geertz, Clifford J. 1963. *Agricultural Involution: The Processes of Ecological Change in Indonesia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Liu, Zhiwei. 1995. "Lineage on the Sand: The Case of Shawan." In *Down to Earth: The Territorial Bond in South China*, edited by David Faure and Helen F. Siu, 21–43. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Lu Zijun. 1946. "Zixu" [Preface]. *Chaolian xiangzhi* [A gazetteer of Chaolian township], 3–4. Hong Kong: Linruiying yinwuju.
- Marx, Karl. 1852. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. English translation from Marx/Engels Internet Archive. Available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/index.htm>, accessed on June 21, 2017.
- Scott, James C. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Siu, Helen F. 1989. *Agents and Victims in South China: Accomplices in Rural Revolution*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- , ed. 1990. *Furrows: Peasants, Intellectuals, and the State: Stories and Histories from Modern China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Siu, Helen F., and Zhiwei Liu. 2006. "Lineage, Market, Pirate, and Dan: Ethnicity in the Pearl River Delta of South China." In *Empire at the Margins: Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern China*, edited by Pamela Kyle Crossley, Helen F. Siu, and Donald S. Sutton, 285–310. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Siu, Helen F., and Zelda Stern, eds. 1983. *Mao's Harvest: Voices from China's New Generation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ward, Barbara. 1985. *Through Other Eyes: Essays in Understanding "Conscious Models," Mostly in Hong Kong*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.