

Rethinking Contemporary China

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I am delighted to have the opportunity to deliver this lecture. At the same time, I have some doubts that George Ernest Morrison would approve of my standing here this evening. Dr. Morrison was, of course a product of his time: the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Times have changed, not just in attitudes to women but also in attitudes towards China.

Morrison was an Australian, but he was also a citizen of the British Empire; he saw no conflict between the two. Morrison's China was the China of British imperial interests and the preservation of those interests. It was through these spectacles that he viewed China.

Like Morrison, all foreign observers have interpreted China through the filter of their own era, as well as their personal background and experiences. Indeed, a virtual academic industry has developed, not on China itself but on 'interpretations', 'perceptions' and 'images'. If we are sometimes confused about China, we should not worry too much, according to Jonathan Spence who has written as much as any historian about Westerners and China. 'The history of our confusion', Spence consoles us, 'goes back more than four hundred years'.¹

This evening I would like to add a little more to this confusion. Unlike Jonathan Spence, I shall not be dealing with a period of four hundred years, but just over forty years: the period since the communist revolution. And I shall not discuss the very general—and often very polemical—topic of 'perceptions' or 'images' of China, which are often couched in some form of positive-negative dichotomy. Rather I shall examine the narrower, though not always separate, issue of scholarly approaches and interpretations, and the changing trends in these. My basic focus will be on the social sciences, particularly on the nexus between state and society.²

What has recently been under way, I would suggest, has been a scholarly rethinking of contemporary China. This has involved a shift from an essentially 'elite politics' approach to China, which resulted in fairly narrow one-dimensional interpretations, towards a broader approach which is giving us a more multidimensional perspective. The outcome of this rethinking is that the study of contemporary China, after being in a state of relative backwardness, has begun—but only just begun—to catch up with scholarship on other countries.

Viewed from the early nineties, much of our analysis of post-revolutionary China, particularly during the Mao era and of the Mao era, now appears extremely limited. The field was dominated very largely by political analysts. Not just that; the focus was on 'elite politics' and more particularly on Communist Party policy. The study of policy became extremely pervasive, extending to the economy, agriculture and industry, health, education, culture, national minorities and so on.

¹ Jonathan Spence, 'Western Perceptions of China from the Late Sixteenth Century to the Present', in Paul S. Ropp, ed., *Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, p.1.

² Research which is specifically on the Chinese economy or the arts (including literature) is outside the scope of this lecture.

A major reason for this focus was the limited range of information available to researchers. Scholarly access to China was negligible and materials were largely restricted to the Communist press and official documents which, as sociologist Andrew Walder expressed it in 1982, had ‘always yielded information’ on policy-making and policy-implementation.³ In contrast, sociologists and other social scientists faced what they described as the ‘long-bemoaned data problem’.⁴

But the dominance of political analysis was also linked to the basic paradigms being used. Post-revolutionary China was seen above all as a ‘political entity’ with a system that represented a complete break with the past. Furthermore, it was generally assumed that there was a close link between the political system, its policies, the implementation of those policies, and social reality.

The paradigms that were adopted—and also the shifts that occurred within them—were as much a product of Western intellectual trends as of the Chinese situation itself. In the early years of the People’s Republic, especially the 1950s, the totalitarian paradigm was dominant. This largely paralleled Soviet studies and reflected prevailing Western Cold War ideology, particularly in the United States, on the evils of communism. In essence, China was defined as a totalitarian state on the Stalinist model. As Richard Walker stated in his book *China Under Communism*, published in 1955:

The whole of Chinese society together with its long cultural traditions and great legacy of art and learning is being systematically transformed into a modern totalitarian state in which human values are subordinated to a mechanistic philosophy ...⁵

In the second half of the sixties, the use of the totalitarian paradigm began giving way in the face of developments both within Western scholarly discourse and within China itself. Out of these came two dominant streams of analysis.

The first focussed on China’s ‘socialist model’. In the West it was the era of social alternatives: questioning the consumer society, competition and individualism. It was also the era of Vietnam and a strong reaction against the Cold War totalitarian syndrome, particularly in the United States, with American academics establishing the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars. China itself was in the throes of the Cultural Revolution. Ostensibly, at least, it appeared to be creating a selfless, egalitarian society, devoid of the social tensions and problems that plagued the West. It was within this intellectual context that ‘revolutionary romanticism’ became an influential framework for analysing contemporary China. Scholars focussed on Maoist ideology, the revolutionary process, and the nation’s apparent social transformation.

The era of ‘revolutionary romanticism’ came to an end—and for some Western scholars an embarrassing end—when the realities of the Cultural Revolution era began to be revealed after Mao’s death. But the change corresponded as much to a shift in the Western intellectual climate: away from the search for social alternatives and back to notions of competition, the market, and individual values.

³ Andrew Walder, ‘Chinese Communist Society: The State of the Field’, *Issues and Studies*, 18:10, 1982, p.12.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Richard Walker, *China Under Communism: The first Five Years*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1955, p.ix.

The second stream of Western analysis, which at times absorbed elements of the first, was to be more resilient. The stress was on elite policy-making, fitting in with one aspect of the behaviourist revolution that was under way in Western political analysis. With the Cultural Revolution, it had also become obvious that there were complex dynamics at work even at elite levels of Chinese politics.

The resulting Western research became quite sophisticated, with a number of competing models or theories being advanced about what constituted the dynamics of Chinese politics. Was policy orientation all important—the framework that still dominates China political analysis, nowadays in terms of ‘Maoists’ or ‘hardliners’ versus ‘reformists’ or ‘moderates’? Or were China’s political dynamics based on factions and power struggles, on generational differences, or on interest groups competing for power and influence? Whatever the model, the focus was still basically on ‘elite politics’, although there was some expansion from the idea of the monolithic ‘centre’ to centre-provincial relations and even local politics.

Both of these approaches—the emphasis on social transformation and the emphasis on policy-making and its implementation—seemed to have severe shortcomings when one was actually confronted with China during the Mao era. When I first went to China in 1975, for example, it soon became apparent that there was often a wide gap between the ideologies and policies being expounded—the elements that Western analysts focussed on—and the practical situation.

One obvious example was that of ideology and policy towards women. These were based on the socialist notion of male-female equality, guaranteed in the Chinese constitution and widely publicised in the media. The few books and articles that had been published on the subject in the West stressed the substantial changes that had occurred in gender relations since the communist revolution.

I was not immune to this. My first article on the subject, which I wrote just before I went to China, was called ‘Women in China: Mao vs Confucius’.⁶ It assessed the extent to which the new government’s guarantees of male-female equality in both the public and domestic spheres had, in fact, been achieved. I utilised the available source materials in a fairly critical manner—so I thought.

But after being in China for a short time—including living cheek-by-jowel with Chinese female students and teachers, and working in a factory and on a rural commune—it was obvious that I had seriously overestimated the extent of change and seriously underestimated the continuities from the past. These included general assumptions of female mental, as well as physical, inferiority; widespread female illiteracy, much greater than that of males; and women’s continued responsibility for the domestic sphere, despite their participation in the work force and the Women’s Federation’s lofty resolutions that ‘men should participate in housework’.⁷

This issue was just one of many examples of the gulf that existed between declared policy and accompanying media rhetoric—virtually the only source materials to which most scholars had access—and people’s everyday lives. Other issues included everything from education and employment to national minorities.

⁶ Beverley Hooper, ‘Women in China: Mao vs Confucius’, in Ann Cuthoys, Susan Eade and Peter Spearritt, ed., *Women at Work*, Canberra: Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, 1975, pp.132-45.

⁷ See Beverley Hooper, *Inside Peking: A Personal Report*,

There seemed to be two basic elements missing from most academic analysis of contemporary China. The first was any sense of the dynamic of history: the extent of change versus continuity from the past. The second was the social dynamic, or at least the interaction between state and society.

It is these two elements, I would suggest, that have begun to be introduced into our analysis of post-revolutionary China. To improvise on Theda Skocpol's terminology—her desire to 'bring the state back in'⁸—what we are seeing in contemporary China studies is a tentative effort to 'bring history back in' and to 'bring society back in'. This is leading to a rethinking of contemporary China: a shift away from a narrow 'elite politics' approach towards a multidimensional perspective which puts contemporary China into both a broader historical framework and a more complex social framework.

Let me deal first with the question of history. For the historian of twentieth century China, the success of the communist revolution in 1949 has often been a source of frustration. I personally became aware of this in the mid-seventies when I was considering a PhD topic on the transitional period of the late forties and early fifties. Several political scientists and historians told me that anything up to 1949 was 'history'; October 1949 and beyond was 'politics', or at least 'contemporary China'.⁹

1949, I discovered, had become a firm demarcation line between 'old' and 'new' China. This, in turn, had created what American scholar Paul Cohen has described as an 'academic Great Wall of China' between historians and political scientists. To use Cohen's words: 'They ask different questions, rely on different sources, read different books, and often attend different conferences'.¹⁰

This division was, of course, largely connected with the basic paradigms that had been adopted for analysing post-revolutionary China; these assumed the imposition, or the unfolding, of a new political, social and economic system. But the history of China since 1949 has not simply been the replacement of one system by another, but a dynamic process of continuing interaction and tension between 'new' and 'old'.

1949 was not always the insurmountable barrier that it became. Early on a number of historians continued their research into the contemporary era, seeing thematic continuities as well as changes. A striking example of this was the writing of C.P. Fitzgerald, foundation professor of Far Eastern History at the Australian National University and the author of several books on both pre and post-revolutionary China.

And initially, at least, there was quite a lively debate about the basic nature of 'communist China'. How far could it be placed along the historical spectrum, particularly that of Chinese nationalism? How far was the past simply being brushed aside by a new all-pervasive system? These were the basic questions that occupied the

⁸ Theda Skocpol, 'Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research', in Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Theda Skocpol, *Bringing the State Back In*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp.3-43.

⁹ I was fortunate that Professor Wang Gungwu, then Head of the Department of Far Eastern History at the Australian National University, did not share this view. See Wang Gungwu, *Power, Rights and Duties in the Chinese History*, Fortieth Morrison Lecture, 19 September 1979, (Reprinted in *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no.3, 1980, pp.2-26.

¹⁰ Paul A. Cohen, 'The Post-Mao Reforms in Historical Perspective', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 47:3, 1988, pp.519-41.

attention not just of scholars, but also of Western diplomats and journalists in China, both before and after the communists came to power.

One has to be careful—and painstaking—when examining and analysing, for example, the diplomatic archives. On the whole, the British were more prone than the Americans to seeing China's new rulers essentially as strong Chinese nationalists. But one diplomat in the Far Eastern Section at the Foreign Office strongly disagreed. In late 1949 he noted on a memorandum: 'There is no doubt that they are Soviet-style communists. Their ideology is that of Marxism-Leninism'.¹¹ His name was Guy Burgess—of Soviet spy 'Burgess and Maclean fame'. From hindsight, this provides an odd twist to the British debate.

But despite the occasionally declared need for a broad historical framework, the analysis of post-revolutionary China was soon dominated by the new system-oriented paradigms. Historians, on the whole, retreated from the post-1949 period, while political analysts paid little attention to China's history before 1949 (apart from examining the growth and activities of the Chinese Communist Party). Hence the academic Great Wall.

Only a few tried to breach the wall. Lucien Pye, one of the most productive writers on contemporary China, developed his concept of Chinese political culture. Pye identified a number of basic themes which characterised Chinese political behaviour, whatever the system. A few historians like Maurice Meisner, Jonathan Spence, and also to some extent the late John King Fairbank, moved fairly freely backwards and forwards across the barrier. But for most of us—both in Australia and other Western countries—the barrier was very real.

Recently, though, there have been some efforts to 'bring history back in' to the study of contemporary China. First there is the notion of the past forty-odd years—or at least the Maoist era—as 'contemporary Chinese history'.¹² It's now well over twenty years since Geoffrey Barraclough made his widely publicised case for the field of 'contemporary history'.¹³ He was hardly the first, but what he stressed was the need, not just simply to show how the past influences the present, but to identify new trends and forces while they are taking shape.

Some historians have continued to be more than a little suspicious of the concept of contemporary history, labelling writing on the recent past as 'journalism' or 'current affairs'. For Chinese history, the 'recent past' can be a very flexible concept. One Oxbridge historian, for example, has been known to use the term 'journalism' to describe anything written on China after 1644. Of course China's history did not come to an end in 1644. Nor did it come to an end in 1949, any more than Russia's did in 1917.

In recent years, it has become even more necessary to 'break through' the 1949 barrier and adopt a longer view, assessing the basic historical issue of change versus continuity. This need, already apparent in the light of economic and social change in post-Mao China, increased after the events of May-June 1989. The intensity and

¹¹ Foreign Office 371/

¹² See, for example, Michael R. Godley, 'Issues in Contemporary Chinese History', *ASAA Review*, 13:2, 1989, pp.37-46.

¹³ Geoffrey Barraclough, *An Introduction to Contemporary Chinese History*, Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1967. The book had been first published in 1964 by C.A. Watts.

momentum of the student protest movement had to be explained not simply in the context of recent political demonstrations—for example 1978 and 1986—but harking back to the May Fourth Incident in 1919. Indeed, May Fourth had been a powerful symbol for the Chinese student movement, whatever the nature of the ruling regime, for some seventy years.

But it was the violent suppression of the protests that sent China specialists scurrying to find explanations. A few of those who'd clung to the 'totalitarian' paradigm, which had also enjoyed some revival since the early eighties, saw 3-4 June as confirmation that they had been right all along about the nature of communism. Others looked further back in Chinese history for explanations of the use of ruthless force: as far back as the First Emperor of China. The notion of authoritarianism as a basic feature of China's political culture began to be voiced by scholars both inside and outside China.

Even before the trauma of Tiananmen, though, some Western historians had started to examine this issue as part of the broader question of continuity from the past into the 1980s. One notable example was Paul Cohen, who linked the post-Mao reforms to China's late nineteenth and early twentieth century history, under the label of 'authoritarian reform'. Cohen argued that the kind of state that a 'succession of Chinese political leaders had sought to build had been notably authoritarian in character'. Within this scenario, Deng Xiaoping appears basically as an authoritarian reformer, embodying characteristics that extend back through Chiang Kai-shek, Yuan Shikai, the Empress Dowager, and the Self-strengtheners of the late nineteenth century. According to Cohen, such reformers have been reluctant to compromise 'the overall structure of authoritarian rule'; hence they have 'ruthlessly stamped out' any serious challenge. These comments were published just a year *before* Tiananmen.¹⁴

The paradigm underpinning the historical perspective of authoritarian reform—from the Self-strengtheners through to the present day—has been described as China's 'ongoing quest for wealth and power'. This is hardly a new concept, but it fits in well with my own research on China's Open Door policy. The Open Door, perhaps as much as any other recent developments, needs to be put firmly into an historical context.

China's reopening to the outside world has been subject to a high level of overreaction and misinterpretation. Initially there was a great deal of enthusiasm, even euphoria, about the Open Door, particularly on the part of Americans: what has been described as a kind of 'Marco Polo-itis'. Enthusiasm gave way to disenchantment when the initial expectations were not fulfilled. Instead businesspeople, journalists and even scholars had a catalogue of frustrations: continual bureaucratic wranglings, interminable negotiations, renegeing on contracts, and overcharging for services,

It is, of course, easy to be smug and say that this was all fairly predictable. Some of the problems *have* been due to what are sometimes called 'cultural differences': the differences that we are all urged to 'understand' in order to take advantage of the economic opportunities available in China and other parts of Asia. In the China case, these include 'work practices' such as providing beds for workers to have their

¹⁴ Paul Cohen, 'The Post_Mao Reforms in Historical Perspective', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 47:3, 1988, pp.519-41.

lunchtime nap. This threw the American partners in the infamous Beijing Jeep Company joint enterprise into a state of virtual hysteria.

But the issue goes beyond 'cultural differences'. What Westerners have also come up against is the history of assertive Chinese nationalism. When they came to power in 1949, the Chinese Communists were merely the latest ruling group intent on ridding China of the humiliation of imperialism; they were the first powerful enough to do so. There has continued to be a strong consciousness of the imperialist past in China and a vehement, sometimes abrasive, determination never again to allow the country to be dictated to by foreigners.

On the surface the Open Door policy might look like a reversal of assertive Chinese nationalism. It is not. The post-Mao government has tolerated a substantial foreign presence in China as part of its latest 'quest for wealth and power': a quest it considers can be successful only with the assistance of foreign capital and technology. This, of course, harks back to the Self-strengtheners who, in their bid to modernise China—at that time to save it from disintegration—looked to the West and Japan for modern technology and expertise. But not for the underlying philosophy. The slogan then was 'Chinese learning as the essence; Western learning for application'. A century later, it has essentially been 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics as the essence; Western learning for application'.

As China's leadership has been finding out, it is proving as impossible in the 1990s as it did a century ago to keep the 'Chinese' and 'Western' elements apart. Hence the somewhat ambivalent attitude towards foreigners in China. There are occasional warnings even from Deng Xiaoping that 'foreigners should remember they no longer enjoy special privileges in our country'.¹⁵ Rather more worrying to foreign residents and visitors have been the media campaigns against 'spiritual pollution' and 'bourgeois liberalisation': basically euphemisms for undesirable Western influences. These campaigns have taken place when some of the so-called 'hardline' or 'conservative' political leaders have gained the upper hand and blamed China's mounting social and political problems on the Open Door policy.

Consciousness of the historical framework of the Open Door might not ease the frustrations of Westerners in China; indeed some scholars become as frustrated as any businessman or woman. But it might give them more forewarning of what to expect, and perhaps make them less prone to swings of enthusiasm and disenchantment.

I have dealt at some length with the need to incorporate an historical dimension into the study of 'communist China'. Let me move on now to the second—and sometimes associated—area of recent rethinking in contemporary China studies: 'bringing society back in'.

This methodological shift has not been unique to China; indeed, it has been an important issue in Soviet studies over the past fifteen years or so. It is worth looking briefly at this issue, not least because Soviet studies provided part of the basic methodology for contemporary China studies. (Soviet specialists had, though, long forsaken any idealistic or romantic sentiments about the nation they were studying.)

¹⁵ These have been expressed since the early Eighties. See, for example, *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily), 5 June 1982.

Soviet studies has seen a fairly strong challenge to the ‘elite politics’ paradigm, even to its dominant use for the Stalin era. In 1977 Stephen Cohen complained that the Soviet Union’s social and political development after 1917 was generally explained ‘almost exclusively by the nature of the party regime ... Authentic interaction between party-state and society is ignored’.¹⁶ In 1986 he reiterated that Sovietology ‘desperately needs social history, as well as contemporary sociological research, if the field is to expand its sketchy empirical knowledge or enrich its often one-dimensional interpretations’.¹⁷

This statement was made in the context of a dispute that erupted when leading ‘revisionist’ historian, Sheila Fitzpatrick, challenged what she described as the Kremlinologists’ overwhelming concern with ‘elite politics’. Fitzpatrick argued that, even in the Stalin era, central state control was not as complete as had usually been argued. She called for greater attention to the analysis of society: not just state-society relations but the dynamics operating within society itself.¹⁸

Fitzpatrick’s challenge resulted in a very lively confrontation in the pages of *The Russian Review* during 1986-87 as leading scholars defended their approaches and interpretations, while picking holes in their opponents’ arguments. But even those scholars who basically supported Fitzpatrick argued that, at least for the foreseeable future, research would have to be within the framework of state-society relations, not the ‘pure’ social history that Fitzpatrick seemed to be calling for. This was not so much because of the implied nature of Soviet society as because of the continuing paucity of primary sources.

The major source materials for much of the new research had, in fact, come from the already well-known Smolensk Archive. The local government records of the city of Smolensk had been captured during World War II by the Germans, and subsequently removed by the Americans. They contained a wealth of information on everything from workers’ grievances to education and crime.

Chinese studies does not—at least not yet—have anything equivalent to the Smolensk archive.¹⁹ Over the past ten to fifteen years, though, there has been a dramatic increase in access to information about China. First, we are able to make greater use of the materials we already have in our libraries. This is the result of an upsurge in the number of Western researchers able to read original source materials which has come with the general expansion of Chinese studies and the connected opportunity to do advanced language study in China.

Second, we have benefited from China’s social liberalisation. This has led both to the revival of scholarly research in China and to the burgeoning of publications, both on current issues and on earlier periods. To cite one example; at the peak (or trough) of the Cultural Revolution in the late sixties the number of magazines and journals published in the People’s Republic fell to twenty. In 1990 the number was close on

¹⁶ Stephen F. Cohen, ‘Bolshevism and Stalinism’, in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation*, New York: Norton, 1977, p.7.

¹⁷ Stephen F. Cohen ‘Stalin’s Terror as Social History’, *The Russian Review*, 45, 1986, p.375.

¹⁸ Sheila Fitzpatrick, ‘New Perspectives on Stalinism’, *The Russian Review*, 45, 1986, pp.357-73.

¹⁹ The closest—though far more limited—are the Lianjiang documents, a set of official Communist Party records captured by a Chinese Nationalist commando raid in 1964. The documents contain detailed information on Linjiang country for a six-month period in 1962-63.

6,000, ranging from academic journals through to popular magazines on almost every conceivable subject.

Third, we have been able to take advantage of China's reopening to the outside world. We now have a level of access to Chinese libraries, researchers and people that was unimaginable fifteen years ago. Where we were once restricted to formal interviews with officials, we can now have almost 'normal' contacts with academics and, in some cases, undertake collaborative projects with researchers in universities, or in the various institutes of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

Having said this, one should not exaggerate the level of access to information or the ease of obtaining it, particularly in China. There has been no more than a crack in the lack of access to official archives for the post-1949 period. Scholars attempting to do field research in China have their own problems. Things have improved somewhat since the early eighties when anthropologist Margery Wolf rather idiosyncratically devoted a whole chapter of her book on Chinese women to 'Speaking bitterness: doing research in the People's Republic of China'.²⁰ Wolf was not allowed into people's homes, which had been no problem in Taiwan, but had to conduct formal interviews with officials in attendance. After a few days she realised that her interviewees were anticipating her questions. If she changed the questions, they continued to present their well-rehearsed 'correct' responses to the ones on the original list.

Although the situation has improved, particularly for some ethnic Chinese researchers who have been able to resume contacts with their family villages, foreign researchers are still much more constrained than they are in Taiwan, Hong Kong and many other parts of Asia. Indeed, some of the most important Western studies of contemporary China are those based, either completely or largely, on research done in Hong Kong in the late seventies and early eighties: works on village dynamics, education, Cultural Revolution youth and industrial organisation.²¹ Their basic methodology—the use of refugee informants—initially aroused considerable controversy; one critic likened quizzing refugees about China to asking Martin Luther to evaluate the Catholic church.²² From what we now know, however, these works often presented more realistic—and sometimes more insightful—analyses than many of the other writings of the time.

Nowadays, though, one really has to do at least part of one's research in China, not just to experience new developments but also to retain one's academic credibility. Even my students become suspicious if I haven't been to China within the last year.

²⁰ Margery Wolf, *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985.

²¹ See, for example, Anita Chan, Richard Madsen, and Jonathan Unger, *Chen Village*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984; Richard Madsen, *Morality and Power in a Chinese Village*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984; Jonathan Unger, *Education Under Mao: Class and Competition in Canton Schools, 1960-1980*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985; Andrew G. Walder, *Communist Neo-Traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

²² Francis L.K. Hsu and Godwin C. Chu, 'Changes in Chinese Culture: What Do We Really Know', in Godwin C. Chu and Francis L.K. Hsu, *Moving a Mountain: Cultural Change in China*, Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1979, p.396.

What, then, have been the results of the increased, if variable, access to contemporary China? The eighties and early nineties have certainly seen an upsurge of research on Chinese society, though mostly on the post-Mao period. There has not really been a strong direct challenge to 'elite' political analysis of the post-revolutionary era similar to what occurred in Soviet studies.

One China scholar who has specifically raised the issue, in a rather similar manner to that of Fitzpatrick and her so-called 'revisionist cohort' of social historians, is Vivienne Shue in her 1988 book *The Reach of the State*. For Shue it is a matter of taking her fellow political scientists to task for their 'elite politics' approach to post-revolutionary China. Shue focuses on the continued dominance of policy-oriented analysis and the oft-held assumption that policy equates with social reality. 'The intra-elite struggles are important', Shue states, 'but they are only fragments in a larger mosaic of state-society interactions, in which the state frequently seeks control and social forces often demur'. Focussing on rural China, Shue argues that 'state penetration and control of rural society under Mao was more uneven and less complete than is often imagined by scholars'.²³

Shue's argument has created substantial interest, though it has not sparked the intense debate that occurred in Soviet studies: at least not yet. Shue's major critic to date, Jonathan Unger, claims that Shue's 'core conjectures about what occurred on-the-ground in China happen, alas, to be dead wrong'.²⁴ These are strong words in academic scholarship! According to Unger, the available evidence suggests that 'the Chinese state all too effectively controlled village life from the 1960s to the 1970s', and that 'the reach of the Party/state in the countryside was considerably more penetrating and comprehensive' than it had been in the Soviet Union.²⁵

This is the starkest public disagreement so far on the state-society relationship, which is central to our understanding of contemporary China. An important recent research theme has been the interaction between state and society at the micro level, whether in the village or in urban enterprises like factories and hospitals.²⁶

The continuing debate centres around the role of local officials and enterprise cadres. How far have these people essentially conveyed and imposed 'policies from above', as implied even in the 'neo-traditionalist' and 'clientelist' interpretations of Andrew Walder and Jean Oi respectively?²⁷ How far, particularly in the countryside, have local officials protected and insulated their communities from the state, as exemplified in Shue's concept of a 'cellularised' society?

²³ Vivienne Shue, *The Reach of the State: Sketches of the Chinese Body Politic*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988.

²⁴ Jonathan Unger, 'State and Peasant in Post-Revolution China', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 17:1, 1989, p.116.

²⁵ *ibid.*, pp.117, 131.

²⁶ Jean C. Oi, *State and Peasant in Contemporary China: The Political Economy of Village Government*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989; Helen Siu, *Agents and Victims in South China: Accomplices in Rural Revolution*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989. Andrew G. Walder, *Communist Neo-Traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, Gail Henderson and Myron S. Cohen, *The Chinese Hospital: A Socialist Work Unit*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984.

²⁷ For a recent scholarly exchange on the issue, see 'An Exchange of Views about Basic Chinese Social Organization' (articles by Brantly Womack, 'Transfigured Community: Neo-Traditionalism and Work Unit Socialism in China', and Andrew G. Walder, 'A Reply to Womack', in *The China Quarterly*, 126, July 1991, 313-34.

Once again, developments in the post-Mao era have given the state-society issue added significance. We obviously need to know more about the situation before 1976 in order to analyse the extent of recent change. To anyone who lived in China in the mid-seventies, one of the most striking features of the past fifteen years has been the reduced 'reach of the state'—and with it the drastic decline of social control. This has persisted, even increased, despite official efforts to reassert political control in the wake of Tiananmen.

Many of the basic mechanisms underpinning state control either no longer exist or have decreased in importance. The return to virtual family farming in the countryside and the development of a diversified economy, including private enterprise, have given people a substantial degree of economic and social independence from the state. The Open Door has, of course, brought with it a wide range of culture and ideas that do not conform to official ideology. At the same time, the state itself no longer attempts to oversee every aspect of people's lives, from their social activities to clothing and even hairstyles.

This is the context within which China's post-Mao society must be analysed. As Fitzpatrick said for the Soviet Union, there is also a need to disaggregate society either beyond, or in different ways from, the official social categories of peasants, workers and intellectuals.

Take the generational variable, in particular the youth generation. The events of mid-1989 focussed international media attention not just on university students but on the hopes and aspirations of China's youth, a generation that had grown up largely in the post-Mao reform era. I had been surprised, even back in the early eighties, by the limited amount of research that was being done on this social group, at a time when Chinese officials and the media were already acknowledging the existence of a 'youth problem'.²⁸

The youth generation has been in the front line of the impact of economic and social reform, and also of the decline of social control. Young people have high material and personal aspirations—higher than those of their parents and grandparents—created by the consumer society and the Open Door. There is large-scale migration of rural youth to urban areas in search of the 'good life', a movement once prevented by the state monopoly of jobs and access to everything from food to clothing. Youth is particularly susceptible to 'going abroad fever': the vision of the riches of the Western world.²⁹

All too often, youth's aspirations come up against the everyday reality of limited opportunities, including widespread youth unemployment which most officials no longer bother to describe euphemistically as 'waiting for employment'. The outcome, of course, has ranged from youth's alienation from China's power-holders to active protest against the leadership's slowness in improving material opportunities and allowing more personal freedoms. The six weeks of continuing student protest in mid-1989—in the very heart of the nation—demonstrated in graphic form the decline of state control, as well as the fragmentation of elite politics. The official resort to sheer violence only confirmed that the state had lost its ability to penetrate society.

²⁸ For details, see Beverley Hooper, *Youth in China*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985.

²⁹ See Beverley Hooper, 'Chinese Youth: The Nineties Generation', *Current History*, September 1991, pp.264-69.

Both history and society, then, are gradually being incorporated into our analysis of contemporary China. There are also tentative moves to extend China analysis across and beyond these disciplines into the new social sciences and the new humanities. This was the topic of a symposium held just last week by the Australian Academy of the Humanities. The theme was the 'redrawing of the boundaries between traditional disciplines and the establishment of new disciplines', including cultural studies and gender studies. So far as contemporary China is concerned, the use of the new approaches is still very much in its infancy and one has to acknowledge that most research is hardly at the 'cutting edge' of the new disciplines. But there has been a start.

One of the features that the new approaches tend to have in common—and one that is very relevant to China studies—is a focus not just on society but on the lives and culture of 'ordinary people'. Researchers analyse popular culture rather than high culture, history from 'the bottom up' instead of the 'view from above': whether one prefers the approach of the *Annales* school of social history, people's history, the Indianists' subaltern history, or the anthropologist-historians' ethnohistory.

Some of these new methodologies first made their presence felt in Chinese studies in research on the Ming-Qing period. Influenced in particular by the *Annales* school, scholars began to examine topics such as popular culture, folk religion, life-cycle rituals, marriage and the family, and gender.³⁰ Some scholars have even begun 'crossing the great 1949 divide', as Philip Huang expressed it in the preface to his recent book on the peasant family and rural development in the Yangzi delta, from 1350 through to 1988.³¹ At the same time, researchers on the contemporary period are beginning to attend conferences and contribute to edited works which sweep across the conventional divisions of pre-modern, modern and contemporary China.³²

The social and cultural developments of the post-Mao era, in particular, have brought contemporary China into the broader historical orbit and provoked more questions about change and continuity in post-revolutionary China. There has been an apparent resurgence of family rituals, particularly those surrounding marriage and death. While these have tended to be interpreted as simple 'revivals' of pre-revolutionary practices, ethnographer Helen Siu recently posed the question of whether they are not so much revivals as 'cultural fragments' being recycled in the context of a new set of power relations. As she points out, the rituals are actively promoted by local Party officials; they are not being revived in spite of them.³³

This argument might well apply to popular rituals. But what of the so-called 'social evils' that were substantially eradicated soon after the communist revolution and have now resurfaced: prostitution, drug trafficking and addiction, sectarian sects and secret societies. Should we perhaps start looking at some aspects of the Mao era as a phase

³⁰ See Evelyn S. Rawski, 'Research Themes in Ming-Qing Socioeconomic History: The State of the Field', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 50:1, 1991, pp.84-112.

³¹ Philip C.C. Huang, *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Yangzi Delta, 1350-1988*, Stanford: University Press, 1990, p.vii.

³² See, for example, James L. Watson and Evelyn S. Rawski, eds, *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988; Rubie S. Watson and Patricia B. Ebrey, eds, *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

³³ Helen Siu, *Agents and Victims in South China: Accomplices in Rural Revolution*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.

of ‘discontinuity’ in Chinese history, with continuity skipping over the years 1949 to 1976?

I would now like to focus on one particular feature of the new approaches to contemporary China: the topic of gender. Over the past fifteen years there has probably been more research done on gender issues in China than on any other social issue. Indeed gender has in many ways been in the forefront of the general rethinking that has been occurring in contemporary China studies.

The pioneering research of the seventies—for example, that of Delia Davin and Elisabeth Croll—fitted fairly neatly into the framework of policy-oriented analysis. As such, it stressed the changes in women’s lives as a result of the state’s ideological commitment to female emancipation.³⁴ These studies were of interest not just to China analysts but also to Western feminists who were constantly debating the question of whether socialism was a sufficient, or at least a necessary, condition for the achievement of gender equality.

By the early eighties, the focus had shifted to a greater emphasis on the interaction between state and society. Researchers also used an essentially historical approach, analysing continuity as well as change. Compared with earlier studies, the new wave of books revealed a relative lack of change in gender relations.³⁵

The issue was to explain *why*, despite the state’s official commitment, gender equality had not been achieved. The most important explanation—and this brought to light the fundamental gap that has sometimes existed between ideology and practice—has been that the state did not attempt to change the basic family system that underpinned gender inequality: that is, the treatment of women as objects of exchange between kinship groups of males. This includes the custom of a woman moving into her husband’s village or family on marriage, thereby losing her value to her own family and always being an outsider in her husband’s family. Indeed, Judith Stacey and Kay Ann Johnson have argued that the state actually strengthened the family system in the interests of socio-economic stability, thereby reinforcing the structural foundations of women’s subordination.

More recent studies have focussed on the impact of the post-Mao reforms on gender relations. Even though overall living standards have improved for both sexes, the gender divide appears to have widened. Greater enterprise autonomy has led to increased discrimination against women, particularly in employment. Most strikingly, the advent of the consumer society has led to women’s exploitation for commercial purposes, with a degree of gender-stereotyping no longer always acceptable in the West. Magazine and television advertisements feature glamorous young women with washing machines and vacuum cleaners, described as ‘the housewife’s best friend’. In rural areas, the household has again become the focus of economic life, further

³⁴ Delia Davin, *Woman—Women and the Party in Revolutionary China*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978; Elisabeth J. Croll, *Feminism and Socialism in China*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.

³⁵ Three major books were published in 1983: Judith Stacey, *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983; Kay Ann Johnson, *Women, the Family and Peasant Revolution in China*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983; Phyllis Andors, *The Unfinished Liberation of Chinese Women, 1949-1980*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983. In the same vein, see Margery Wolf, *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985.

reinforcing male authority. The sexual division of labour is also increasing, as men move into rural industry and women remain in agriculture.

The general decline of social control has made women particularly vulnerable, not just to the rising incidence of violent crime and rape but also to the so-called 'people-pedlars', the cross-country networks which buy and sell women. Somewhat paradoxically, however, women have also been adversely affected by one of the state's few recent efforts to increase its control over society: notably through prescribing the one-child family. Females have borne the brunt of the impact, from the revival of female infanticide and the dumping of baby girls to physical and mental abuse against women for producing a female baby. Limiting couples to one child has highlighted—in very dramatic fashion—the persistence of son preference which, once again, is linked to the basic family system.

One of the problems with research and writing on gender in China, as in other countries, is that it tends to be 'ghettoised' and kept apart from mainstream research: what feminist researchers sometimes call 'malestream' research. Most university courses on China now have the obligatory lecture on women. Conferences have the obligatory 'gender' session, often attended virtually only by women.

Chinese studies in Australia has yet to see the sort of challenge that has taken place over the past few years in Southeast Asian studies. At 'mainstream' politics conferences, some of the newer scholars became increasingly frustrated at the complete absence of a gender variable in academic discussions of everything from the impact of industrialisation to the rise of the middle class. The outcome, which extended to Asian Studies as a whole and included the China field, was an *ASAA Review* symposium 'Why Gender Matters in Asian Politics' and a forthcoming book *Gender in Asian Politics*.³⁶ The basic aim has been to provide a counterbalance to the continuing exclusion of the gender variable from the most commonly used university textbooks which still, by and large, use the old approaches.

But there has been a more basic challenge by gender studies than wanting to be integrated into 'mainstream' politics, history or sociology. It is not sufficient, as Maila Stivens has expressed it, simply to 'add-women-to-the-existing-paradigms-and-stir'.³⁷ Rather, feminist researchers have challenged the mainstream: the basic epistemologies.

This includes a challenge to the state-society dichotomy. Indeed, a major target of feminist research has been the common division of society into public and private spheres which has tended to marginalise and trivialise many aspects of women's lives. What has conventionally been studied in history or politics has been the 'public sphere': the world of public politics and work which has normally been dominated by men. But political relationships exist throughout society; hence the feminist argument that 'the personal is political' and also the links with the new and not-so-new social histories. Some of the recent studies of women in China deal with these varying levels

³⁶ See Susan Abeyasekere, ed., 'Why Gender Matters in Asian Politics', *ASAA Review*, 13:1, July 1989, pp.1-29. *Gender in Asian Politics* will be published in the *ASAA*'s new 'Women in Asia' series in 1992.

³⁷ Maila Stivens, 'Some Thoughts on Gender and Emerging Social Forces', paper presented to the *Emerging Social Forces in Asia* Conference, Asia Research Centre, Murdoch University, Perth, 5-8 September 1991.

of gender relations: in the workplace, whether urban or rural, in marriage and divorce, and in the re-creation of 'femininity' and its effects.

Gender, therefore, together with the new scholarly emphasis on people's everyday lives, is beginning to have some impact on the contemporary China field. These new approaches, however, are still far from being an integral part of a reconstituted 'mainstream'. What Evelyn Rawski has said for research on the Ming-Qing period holds just as true for contemporary China: both state and society 'need to be disaggregated and subjected to searching analysis'.³⁸

In the general rethinking that has been under way about contemporary China, no single dominant paradigm has emerged to replace such earlier simple paradigms as totalitarianism and 'revolutionary romanticism'. Contemporary China is not so simple. Rather it is a product of the interaction and tensions between the country's traditional, modern and recent histories, and between the various groups—official and unofficial—within society. As scholarly approaches to post-revolutionary China become more multidimensional, we can look forward to a range of new debates in contemporary China studies.

³⁸ Evelyn S. Rawski, 'Research Themes in Ming-Qing Socioeconomic History: The State of the Field', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 1, 1991, p.100.