The Otherness of Self

*A Genealogy
of the Self in
Contemporary China*

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Deng Xiaoping's socialist ideology: no matter whether it is a white or a black cat, as long as it catches mice, it is a good cat. Today's socialist practice: no matter whether it is a white or a black mouse, as long as it is capable of avoiding being caught, it is a good mouse.

AN ENTREPRENEUR IN BEIHAI

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Preface and Acknowledgments

As an ethnography of a history of the present, this book compiles a genealogy of the self in contemporary China. A history of the present, as Michel Foucault has shown, is an act of deconstruction and construction, projecting old elements of theory and story onto a new intellectual horizon of the present, just as how a genealogy may be rewritten as a new segmentation takes place in the southeastern Chinese lineage organization, where a focal point of worship can be established when a (usually wealthy) descendant sets up a new ancestral temple. In the sense that I intend this phrase to convey, a genealogy of the self traces the effects of dislocation within "a structure of conjuncture" of self-representation in the context of contemporary China.[1] The representation of self—understood in a broad sense as the search for an answer to the question *What is good (life)?*—constitutes and yet is constituted by an ethical space in which our condition of possibility of being as such dwells.

I argue that a moral earthquake is taking place in today's China. Although we do not yet know how many buildings of existing goods or evils will collapse and what will be the shape of a new moral outlook in the near future, it is quite certain that the moral landscape of Chinese society will not be the same in another couple of decades. This is an attempt to capture the change of such an outlook while it is still changing, an adventure into the shifting ground of what good (life) is in the history of the People's Republic, a glimpse into the question of what they want to be. Specifically, I argue that a different conception of time in the practice of everyday life seems to be emerging. Although tentative, this book sets to sketch the emergence of a new character, standing on an ethical ground both familiar and strange, from the historical horizon of contemporary China.

This horizon is the home of a number of inventories of historical forces. The notion of force is crucial here, for it is through these forces,

hierarchized and dispersed, that organizational and institutional power gain their life in everyday practice. A force is always related to another force, which is in turn related to yet another one, and so on. The relations between these forces are never equal; instead, each force is always subjected to another, or perhaps each is always in either a superior or an inferior relation to another force. Within the interior space of a force, a combination of social or cultural elements exists. These elements shape a particular force of which they are its constituent units. Whereas the combination of these forces makes up a particular social system at a given historical moment. The structure of the self is a historically situated (re)combination of the elements derived from all the possible forces at a given moment; a genealogy of the self is a system of several structural wholes. To capture this (re)combination of elements and forces in China at the present time is the ethnographic task of this book.

What underlies this book is a general theoretical orientation toward an anthropological understanding of the modern Chinese experience, and at the center of such an orientation lies my effort in trying to capture a particular mode of existence in and as *becoming*. From such a theoretical orientation, although the subject of my writing is different, this book can be seen as a continuation of my previous work, an ethnographic critique of everyday life in northern rural Shaanxi entitled *In One's Own Shadow* (2000). I believe that the modern Chinese experience has remained a riddle for the social scientist, and it is time to take up seriously the task of solving the riddle, to examine it not simply as "other modernities" but as an essential step toward a hermeneutics of the ontology of ourselves. Such an inquiry cannot be carried out unless a deep historical sensitivity is restored. This is therefore essentially a historical inquiry about "the structure of feelings," to borrow a term from Raymond Williams (1977, 128). This is not a study of political economy, a most popular mode of inquiry for the studies of postreform Chinese society; I am not dealing with material conditions of change. Instead, this book deals with the configuration of a discursive space affecting the way in which the stories about oneself and others are able to be told.

An empirical puzzle is that one often finds that Chinese society seems to possess a magic power that turns itself on and off quite unexpectedly, switching gears back and forth and revolving its wheels first in one direction and then in another. This possibility of switching gears—in both the domains of governance and of everyday life—was particularly true of the years of economic reforms in the 1980–90s. An ethnog-

rapher may find it surprising that a promising young scholar of physics has turned himself into a businessman within a year, working in a management position at a Kentucky Fried Chicken. What is striking is not that people have changed their jobs or professions; rather, they have changed characters as persons. This discontinuity in the personhood of a person is what I call the otherness of self: this book is an ethnographic account of the otherness of self in contemporary China.

Ethnographic materials for this book were collected from a very successful high-tech company, and this is an anthropology of the logic of business practice in Beihai, a southern Chinese coastal city. A city consists of an open space, quite different from a rural community—a long privileged site of field research in the tradition of anthropological studies of Chinese society.[2] A great deal of urban life in South China has been penetrated by transnational capital and capitalism, and the Chinese urban sphere is increasingly becoming an integral part of the global political economy. The subject of my writing can be located in space but is never local because it is a study of the conditions of possibility of social existence that cannot be experienced in one community. Methodologically speaking, this book is an ethnographic understanding rather than an ethnographic observation conventionally understood.

What underlies the urban question in and of China is a more general theoretical concern about the nature of anthropological knowledge.[3] Some prejudice and disciplinary habitus, such as that in favor of the exotic, may have been revealed to be an intellectual illusion, but the fundamental problem concerning the nature of anthropological knowledge is far from solved. This question was first brought to my attention when I was doing research in Japan in 1998: What is the significance of ethnographic experience in the anthropology of modern life? While traveling in Japan, a society where traditional forms of social ties, such as communal connections, are no longer central to the organization of cultural life, I began to wonder what a field approach would look like if the object of analysis was urban space. This book, if not always explicit, provides a critique of the classic mode of anthropological enterprise by shifting the focus of ethnographic description from the actual experience of a people to an account of the stories that they tell about themselves and others. Part of the reason for this shift in focus is because many aspects of business practices were not directly observable. For example, no businessman—insofar as China is concerned—would bring an ethnographer to the dining table where a deal would be sealed with the

mayor, because personal favors might be offered that should not be witnessed by a third party. This example represents an extreme case, and a large number of business conducts in (South) China are not supposed to be seen in public. In such cases, ethnography can only mean hearing the stories told by those involved. If the term *experience* remains useful, I wish to give it a connotation as something embedded in commentary or memory or imaginary—already an interpretation of what happened or what would happen. Largely based on this kind of ethnographic materials, this book seeks not to describe what people actually do but what they want to be. Through the stories told, I hope to understand a history of the future. My understanding is that looking at the stories people told the ethnographer may enable an understanding of how they conceive of themselves and society at large. This shift in focus is linked to a larger theoretical concern that takes narrative as an essential feature of human experience. Following such a theoretical orientation in general, this book proposes to rebuild the grounding of anthropological analysis by a serious consideration of the significance of narrative in the constitution of reality and experience. In particular, to pose the question of narrative is not simply to state that social or cultural differences lie in the different ways of telling stories about oneself and others but also to raise the question about the relationships between narrative and experience to assert a theoretical stance that places a crucial significance on the narrative character of human existence: what we are and what we want to be are determined in the stories that we are able to tell about ourselves/Ourselves.

Truth is partial, and so is ethnography. If some readers, especially those not familiar with the history of twentieth-century China, wonder about the extent to which such an account of business life may represent the overall picture of (South) China, a response would be to invoke Ludwig Wittgenstein's idea of "family resemblance": this work is only an individuation of an overall process of change, a snapshot of the stream of a historical transition, a person in a segmented lineage of multiple generations. One can still tell that in some respects this person resembles his uncle descending from his father's line, although his mother's brother may see in this person's appearance another outline of features. Ethnography is like this person, sitting in front of a reader whose reading is not entirely constrained by what is written, though the ethnography as the instance of a family resemblance provides a best example for the anthropological imagination.

It is common for anthropologists to say that the object of their

analysis is social (or cultural) system; however, the definition of the social itself is not always clear. Few would disagree with Clifford Geertz when he said that "human thought is consummately social: social in its origin, social in its functions, social in its forms, social in its applications" (1973, 360), but even fewer could explain what the social is supposed to mean in the contemporary world because in most cases the term is simply used as in opposition to the behaviorist or other reductionist approaches in social sciences, where individuals—particularly their physiology and psychology—are considered the genesis of everything else. Geertz continued, "At base, thinking is a public activity—its natural habitat is the houseyard, the marketplace, and the town square. The implications of this act for the anthropological analysis of culture, my concern here, are enormous, subtle, and insufficiently appreciated" (1973, 360). In such a statement, one may see a hint of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, in particular his celebrated critique of the idea of a private language.[4] If this is the case, the domain of the social here is defined as that of meaning.[5] Given the fact that it is increasingly difficult to locate the social in the house-yard, the marketplace, and the town center insofar as the case of urban development in (South) China is concerned, how can we define what is social and what is meaningful?[6] With reference to the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, David Carr, and others, I argue that the social must be defined as a relationship that allows a particular articulation of oneself to Ourselves in a historically specific cultural context. It is a meaningful relationship, but, more important, it is narrative in essence. I argue that what characterizes today's China is the difficulty in articulating the relationship of oneself to Ourselves in any coherent way.[7] The book addresses how such a difficulty emerged from the historical horizon of contemporary China.

The book is organized into two parts: the first tells a story of the success of a high-tech company in Beihai, Guangxi, South China, a region where economic development is rather slow. I chose this particular city as my field site to move away from Guangdong (including Hainan), Fujian, and Shanghai, where most attention has been given whenever the question of South China's development is raised.[8] It is important, in my view, to shift attention to a less studied, less developed region to balance our understanding of the effects of capitalist global penetration. By writing about the success of this high-tech company, the Beihai Star Group, I hope to capture the spirit of Chinese capitalism and to reveal the complex investment structure that involves social and

political capital rather than technology and knowledge. The larger context of my writing is that since the mid-1990s, the government has claimed that the future of China lies in the development of high-tech industries, and all the provinces have set up special zones and policies for such industrial development. Chapter 1 introduces the city and the feeling of being there, from an outside insider's point of view, and provides an account of the economic and political background against which the Beihai story of urban (high-tech) development is told. Chapters 2 through 4 describe the main characters involved in the telling of the Beihai story, sketch the typical modes of plots that situate the characters in the story, and provide an analysis of the narrative structure according to which those stories about business and society are able to be told. It is an ethnography of the characters and schemes of plotting in the Beihai story of urban (high-tech) development. The second part of the book, although continuing to provide ethnographic details, will bring theoretical concerns implicitly addressed in the first part to the focus of attention. Chapter 5 defines and describes the structure of the self as a theoretical domain of analysis. The concept of self is carefully examined by reading a number of anthropological and philosophical texts and using them to lay a theoretical foundation for the book's ethnographic description. Chapter 6 analyzes everyday conception of time as a central element in the constitution of the self and argues that three historical moments of the modern Chinese experience may be understood as three different configurations of temporality in everyday life. Chapter 7 deals with the problem of subjectivity, clearing a theoretical space for further ethnographic investigation concerning the question of subject and subject position. In conclusion, I turn to the problem of memory and argue that a new character seems to be emerging, embodied in the practice of business life in (South) China; this character has lost his memory and could no longer utter any *We*. State agencies have encouraged and nurtured an increasing gap between the ideologies of the state and the social life of business practice. I am writing for these difficulties in speaking about Ourselves, for the discrepancies between the official world and the world of business life, and for the future already lived.

First, my gratitude goes to those who have helped me in the field. None of these people with whom I worked should be called informants because they were not simply telling me about their lives: they were

telling me dreams or desires acted out in language. For this reason, I see a clear difference between informants in the conventional sense of anthropological understanding and peoples whose character can only be revealed in the stories told by themselves and others. In a sense, I am grateful not only for their revelation of their dreams and desires but also for the possibility of knowing them in such a way. It was certainly a transformative experience for me as a fieldworker, though not always confined to a geographic place.

For academic help and assistance, I am most grateful to Frederic Wakeman, who as a senior colleague in the China field at Berkeley has strongly influenced my thinking and scholarship. Since I joined the faulty in 1995, the Department of Anthropology at Berkeley has been intellectually stimulating, and I am grateful to my colleagues for their inspiration and for challenging and encouraging me in ways that I often do not fully appreciate until later. There is a long list of people, colleagues and friends, whose names must be registered here as a trace of my intellectual growth in the past few years. Some read chapters of this work and provided useful comments, some stimulated me in thinking about anthropology and China studies in general, some helped create for me a productive environment, and some are friends who have provided emotional support while I was working on this project. They include: Gerry Berreman, Stanley Brandes, Timothy Brook, Meg Conkey, Robert Culp, Prasenjit Duara, Alan Dundes, Dru Gladney, Tom Gold, Nelson Graburn, William Hanks, Steve Hershler, William R. Jankowiak, David Johnson, Rosemary Joyce, Patrick Kirch, Ryosei Kokubun, Hong-Yung Lee, Hy Van Luong, Laura Nader, Lili Nie, Aihwa Ong, Christian de Pee, William Schaffer, Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Gavin Smith, James Watson, Diana Wong, Chen Yang, Wenhsin Yeh, Shen Yuan, and Li Zhang.

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Notes on the Text

Table for conversion of Chinese units of measurement

Length
1 *li* = 0.5 kilometer
1 *chi* = 0.333 meter

Area
1 *mu* = 0.077 hectare
1 *li* = 0.01 *mu* = 0.1 *fen*

Weight
1 *dan* = 50 kilograms
1 *jin* = 0.5 kilogram

Official Exchange Rates

1980   1 U.S. dollar = 1.5 yuan

1985   1 U.S. dollar = 2.7 yuan
1986   1 U.S. dollar = 3.5 yuan

1990   1 U.S. dollar = 4.8 yuan

1992   1 U.S. dollar = 5.5 yuan
1993   1 U.S. dollar = 5.8 yuan
1994   1 U.S. dollar = 8.6 yuan

1996   1 U.S. dollar = 8.4 yuan
1997   1 U.S. dollar = 8.3 yuan
1998   1 U.S. dollar = 8.3 yuan
1999   1 U.S. dollar = 8.2 yuan

Romanization

Unless otherwise specified, names and words are written in Mandarin, romanized according to the pinyin system.

The network of cities