

Chapter 1 – Kin and non-kin cooperation in China

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The fact that people in China and elsewhere cooperate, in various senses, with their close kin – for example, that Chinese parents make sacrifices for their children with an eye on the future, or that Chinese siblings do things together for mutual benefit across the lifecycle – is not very surprising. From an evolutionary point of view, it could be said to make good sense. What is more surprising, one could say, is the fact that people in China and elsewhere cooperate so much with *non-kin*, and even with total strangers. To be clear, both of these facts – i.e. the fact of cooperation with kin *and* the fact of cooperation with non-kin – are scientifically important and have been investigated and heavily theorized, most famously in Hamilton’s Rule and subsequent contributions to kin selection theory (Hamilton 1964a, 1964b; Birch & Okasha 2013). There has also been a great deal of back and forth among scholars about what ‘cooperation’ actually consists in and how it might have evolved in humans and other species (West et al. 2006; Amici 2015). But it has primarily been the second – if you like, more surprising – fact of cooperation with non-kin that has generated a huge amount of theoretical and empirical work across a wide range of disciplines in recent decades.

To give an example: experimental economists, inspired by game theoretic approaches, have studied how people behave when asked to divide money with others under a given set of rules (for a critical overview of this field, see Guala 2005). One broad finding is that on average people are surprisingly ‘cooperative’, in the sense that they will give money to others even when the rules of a particular game allow them to be as selfish as they like. Notably, however, virtually all such research examines cooperation between *non-kin* – in fact, it is primarily about cooperation between total strangers who do not even meet in person for the sake of the experimental tasks. To give another, very different, example: developmental psychologists, by means of an ingenious set of studies, have shown that human infants and children are readily disposed to cooperate with others (for a general introduction to such studies, see Tomasello 2009). More specifically, they have better skills and dispositions for cooperation than do our close primate relatives. But, again, the bulk of such

research examines cooperation between *non-kin*. For instance, psychologists have studied whether infants/children are disposed to ‘cooperatively’ share information with strangers by pointing things out to them in a helpful way (it seems that they are). Meanwhile, studies that focus on cooperation between infants/children who are actually related to one another, e.g., between siblings or cousins, remain rare.¹

Why kinship has not been more central to recent work on human cooperation by experimental economists, developmental psychologists and others – notwithstanding its centrality to evolutionary theories of cooperation – is a complex question of intellectual history that is beyond the scope of this chapter. From the point of view of a social anthropologist, however, this seems an odd state of affairs for at least five reasons:

- (1) In the real world, a high proportion of human cooperation takes place between kin;
- (2) In the real world, the distinction between kin and non-kin is often very porous;
- (3) In the real world, the distinction between kin and non-kin *cooperation* is also often porous, something that has significant consequences for many (arguably all) forms of ‘non-kin’ cooperation;
- (4) In the real world, family life impinges heavily on the development of knowledge, skills and dispositions for cooperation, e.g. as when children learn to cooperate via interactions with their siblings and then extend what they learn out to non-kin interactions;
- (5) In the real world, cooperation with kin entails many, if not most, of the challenges found in non-kin cooperation, which suggests the two things should be studied together.

Before going any further, let me pause briefly to illustrate these five points ethnographically. My first period of long-term fieldwork was conducted in the Taiwanese fishing community of Angang in the

¹ This is not to say that studies of cooperation between kin do not exist (e.g. see Spokes & Spelke 2016), only that they are rare compared to studies of cooperation between non-kin.

mid-to-late 1980s (Stafford 1995, 2000a). The people I met there were quick to identify Angang as a relatively 'traditional' place. Certainly, local religious life proceeded along broadly traditional lines, and was notably intense. Much of this centred around a large number of spirit mediums who communicated with gods on behalf of their local clients virtually every day of the week at domestic altars, communal temples and even on the village streets. This was also a place where kinship concerns were highly salient and absorbed a great deal of time and mental energy. Angang was not a classic single surname community of the kind to be found elsewhere in rural Taiwan and China, and there were no obvious signs of patrilineal organization such as lineage halls and ancestral temples. Still, there were identifiable surname clusters in the villages and there had also been a significant (although declining) rate of local marriages over the years. As a result, the majority of people lived surrounded by many agnatic and affinal relatives. They sometimes told me that 'everybody [here] is one family' (*dou yijia ren*), although this was not strictly true (as I will discuss below).

Against this background, a number of general observations can be made about cooperation in Angang, ones that are consistent with the points already outlined above. As would be expected, there was a great deal of cooperation *within* households, including between spouses or between parents and their children. But there was also a great deal of cooperation *between* households that shared a kin connection of some kind. For example, adult siblings who lived in the same neighbourhood, or in adjacent villages, sometimes engaged in cooperative activities such as tending vegetable plots together or co-funding religious rituals to be held at their respective domestic altars. There was even some degree of coordination at the higher level of surname groups/clusters. I was told, for instance, that when it came to local elections people tended to vote along surname lines.

So one can say not only that kinship is pervasive in Angang but also that kin-based *cooperation* is pervasive (as per my **point 1**, above; see also the findings in Henrich and Henrich 2007). Admittedly, this may sound like a statement of the obvious and the inevitable. With so many relatives in the same vicinity, the odds of cooperating with at least some of them presumably goes up. Who else is there? Beyond this, however, it is important to add that in Angang the border

between kin and non-kin is very porous (as per my **point 2**, above). Because there are many relatives around, and especially because there has been a high rate of local marriage, people often say that they are related to somebody else in Angang – and then find it hard to actually specify the connection. There is a quick fading out, in other words, from absolute claims of kinship ('he is my brother'), to more complex but still firm claims of kinship ('let me think, she is the daughter of my mother's brother), to claims of kinship that have little substance and, in many cases, little real world significance ('he is a Chen, like me, but I don't what the connection is, and I don't have that much to do with him'). Affinal connections fade out in the same way. For example, because some Chens have married some Lis, a local Chen may feel that he is related, in a vague sense, to all the local Lis – but then not be able to say, in particular cases, what this relationship really consists in.

Then there is a deeper point about the porousness of the kin/non-kin boundary in Angang. In terms of traditional Chinese ideologies, one's basic kinship identity is strictly determined by patrilineal descent and the facts of birth and marriage. You either are or are not kin. The reality, however, is that the lived system of Chinese kinship and relatedness is much more 'fluid' and 'processual' in practice than these ideologies suggest (Stafford 2000b). On the one hand, kin who fail to live up to their moral and practical obligations, such as providing 'nurturance' (*yang*) to the elders, may become non-kin – or at least be treated as such for practical purposes. On the other hand, people who are non-kin may become kin – or at least be treated as such for practical purposes – by virtue of giving or receiving 'nurturance' within familial cycles of reciprocity, e.g. to children they have fostered. Moreover, the processes through which non-kin become kin (such as providing care and sharing food) are largely coterminous with the processes through which non-kin, including complete strangers, may be transformed over time into friends and even quasi-relatives – while never quite actually becoming kin, as in the case of 'sworn brothers'.

To put it simply, then: if people in Angang claim that they are one family, it is not only because the majority of them *are* (more or less) related, it is also because many unrelated people in the community end up being treated as if they were.

Given the pervasiveness of kinship in Angang, and the porousness of kin identity, it is not surprising that kinship becomes a factor in virtually 'everything' – including what appear, on the surface, to be examples of non-kin cooperation (as per **point 3**, above). Take, for example, the local branch of the Fisherman's Association, which is explicitly set up as a *cooperative* to promote the welfare and interests of its members. This Association has nothing to do in formal terms with kinship. The reality, however, is that a fisherman from Angang who attended a meeting of this cooperative in the 1980s would likely have been surrounded by his relatives (close and distant), not to mention a number of kin-like friends. If the Association did something to promote the interests of its members this would also, as a matter of definition, be something that benefited his close and distant kin, as well as his kin-like friends. Moreover, considerations of kinship might affect how he votes for officers in the Association, just as they might affect how he votes in local elections for government officials such as the township head.

Needless to say, *if* kinship permeates local life to the extent that it does in Angang, it is going to have *some* impact, and possibly a major impact, on local organizations such as the Fisherman's Association. Again, this just seems inevitable. But I want to give two further, more extended, illustrations of this point in order to show that the ramifications of it can be non-obvious and anthropologically interesting. The first has to do with schooling.

School life in Angang, as elsewhere, involves a lot of cooperative activities: children play sports together, carry out projects together, go on outings together, and so on. Such activities are normally very structured and have a range of more or less explicit pedagogical aims in mind. As in most parts of the modern world, schools in Taiwan are organized nationally, and education in general is considered a major priority – something of political significance. More specifically, Taiwan at the time of my fieldwork was governed by the Kuomintang (KMT, the Chinese nationalists), and schools were a central part of the long-term KMT agenda for turning China into a strong, modern nation. As I have explained elsewhere, one anxiety of the nationalists was the priority that most

ordinary people gave to family loyalties – something they viewed as a direct threat to nationalism and thus to the rise of a properly modern China (Stafford 1992, 1995). In an important sense, then, walking into (nationalist) schools was meant to be about leaving one’s family behind and learning to cooperate with children from other families as fellow students and, ultimately, fellow citizens – that is, to put the nation above kinship. In a place like Angang, however, students entering the school grounds will inevitably start bumping into a number of their (close and distant) kin. Kin considerations thus routinely factor in school-based cooperation, e.g. on the sports ground, much as they factor in the Fishermen’s Association, in local elections, and so on. Moreover, although some of the adults working in the schools – Middle School teachers in particular – are recruited from outside, a good number of them are from Angang, and thus are also relatives of the students.

Then there is the question of what happens outside of school hours and outside of the school gates. During my fieldwork, I came to know well the children in one ‘homework group’ comprised of several sisters, their one brother, and – from time to time – other children from the neighbourhood (these were usually relatives, in line with the kin-based clustering of residence). In the evenings, these children would sit in an upstairs room of their home and – between outbreaks of hilarity – help each other with their studies. This is a simple illustration of how a cooperative activity involving kin, doing homework together, can have consequences for life *inside* the (notionally non-kin oriented) school, i.e. given that the main function of this group was to enhance the children’s grasp of school-based knowledge. Of course, this might be felt to be a rather low-grade type of cooperation: the stakes were not especially high. And yet this was, as I witnessed, a complex activity in terms of its social/psychological/linguistic content and consequences. It gave these young children not only some help with their schoolwork but also repeated opportunities (as per my **point 4**, above) to learn something about cooperation in general, such as the fact that outbreaks of hilarity sometimes make group activity not only more fun but also more productive, an insight they might later transfer to cooperation with non-kin.

Importantly, children's outside-of-school life is typically observed by, and to some extent policed by, relatives. This particular children's group was discretely supervised by the mother of the household and other neighboring adults (normally kin) who occasionally stopped by for a quick look. Moreover, observant adults of this kind, in Angang, really *do* want their children to perform well in school. This relates to a broader point, which again is an obvious one for social anthropologists: that cultural values and ideals prevailing outside of the school grounds, and to some extent 'policed' by local adults, are bound to impinge on the process of school-based learning. As I have already said above, entering KMT schools was – in theory – about leaving one's family behind and *not* being motivated by family concerns but rather those of the nation. In practice, however, local adults in Angang saw schools as the sites *par excellence* where children could fulfill their kinship duties (Stafford 1992, 1995). By performing well academically, that is, they could (eventually) play their part in the cooperative family activity of achieving success and upward mobility – or, more modestly, at least discharge the basic filial duty of securing a job so as to support their parents in old age.

This brings me to the second illustration, which relates to economic life. Many of the shops in Angang were cooperative Chinese family enterprises of a classic kind. In one case I knew well, a woman and her energetic daughters ran a small (and very successful) food and provisions shop. This was essentially a convenience store in which local people bought goods such as beer, cigarettes, betel nuts, snack foods, newspapers, and also everyday religious items such as incense and spirit money. From the mother's point of view, running the shop with her daughters was not simply an economic activity – all kinds of family considerations came into it as well, as one might expect. Similarly, the effort her daughters put into this business, and all the forms of cooperation it entailed (for example, coordinating their separate plans for schooling and outside work so that someone was always in residence in Angang to help their mother out), were not seen by them as work in the

normal sense. It was their contribution to the family, to their mother's wellbeing and happiness, and to their own futures. This business was essentially a kinship thing.

But what about the customers? People from the surrounding neighbourhood visited the shop often, some of them multiple times in a single day, and it was unsurprisingly treated as a de facto social centre. Many locals also seemed deeply fond of the shopkeeper and her daughters: they were treated with great warmth and familiarity by customers, and vice versa. Indeed, people from the neighbourhood often helped out with restocking shelves, rolling betel nets, making deliveries, and other tasks. Beyond this, the women's shop was, predictably, a place in which any given customer was likely to bump into his or her own relatives, as happened to fishermen when they walked into the Fishermen's Association or to students when they walked into the local Middle School. Thus one could say that kinship insinuated itself into this economic space – a local shop – both from the point of view of the owners (it was a family business) and from the point of view of the customers (it was located in a kin-permeated neighbourhood, and was treated by many as this neighbourhood's de facto community store).

Crucially, however, the woman and her daughters were *not* related to their customers. They were basically kin-like friends. And in spite of the points I have made above about the porousness of the kin/non-kin boundary, these women remained non kin. The mother was from elsewhere in Taiwan and had married a man who was also from outside. He was no longer normally resident in Angang, but together they had set up a business in this new place some years previously. Their outsider status was thus clearly marked. You might well ask why local people did not just set up their own shop instead, i.e. one in which kin could sell to kin, thus avoiding the potential pitfalls of doing business with strangers/outside. Various factors may have contributed to this, but when I asked it was explained to me that a person from Angang who opened a shop of this kind would soon find herself giving everything away – to kin – whereas for an outsider it was a little easier to make money and stay in business. The other shop that I came to know well was run on a similar basis: it was a family enterprise owned by outsiders who had become long-term residents.

This example, in addition to illustrating how kinship permeates ‘non-kin’ cooperation (as with the Fisherman’s Association, local elections, and the local schools), thus illustrates a different kind of point. Of course it is true that economic interactions with non-kin – including strangers – carry the risk of being taken advantage of, but exactly the same can be said of economic interactions with kin. In other words, it’s not as if dealing with kin is intrinsically easy whereas dealing with non-kin is intrinsically difficult – in this particular case, the opposite was often said to be true (see also Stafford 2006). This illustrates the broader point that kin-based cooperation can be difficult in ways that overlap significantly with the difficulties encountered in non-kin cooperation (as per my **point 5**, above) – although, I would stress, this is not to say that they are the same.²

I do not think what I have touched on thus far in this chapter – concerning the important role played by kinship in human cooperation – should be very controversial, at least not for social anthropologists. I can well imagine, however, that some readers might think Angang is an odd case study to depend on if the goal here is to make *general* statements about kin and non-kin cooperation in modern China and/or Taiwan, not to mention elsewhere in the world. As I have explained, Angang is a markedly ‘traditional’ place – at least in the view of its residents – in which the locals sometimes claim to be related to everybody around them, even if in truth they are not. Thanks to a converging set of social and historical processes, a strikingly kin-oriented place of this kind might be felt to be increasingly anomalous in the modern Chinese/Taiwanese world. These processes include mass rural to urban migration, the impact of globalization, the decline of traditional ideologies and practices, and the apparent rise of individualism and consumerism.

In fact, however, the points I have made in this chapter about kin and non-kin cooperation are amply illustrated both by previous anthropological research in China and Taiwan and also by the

² For a number of empirical illustrations of this related to (non-human) sibling cooperation and competition, see Roulin and Dreiss (2012).

other case studies in this book, i.e. in spite of the fact that the fieldwork settings on which they are based are often very different from – in some cases, radically different from – Angang. (Note that in some of the comments below I am drawing on my knowledge of the wider projects of the contributors to this book, as opposed to what they specifically discuss in their individual chapters.) For example, the fact that a high proportion of cooperation takes place between kin (**point 1**) is seen not only in Hsiao-Chiao Chiu's case-study of ritual cooperation in Jinmen, Taiwan – a 'traditional' place that in many respects is like Angang – but equally in Desirée Remmert's comparative project based on fieldwork in contemporary Beijing and Taipei. For the young urbanites that Remmert studied in the city centre, inter-generational cooperation between parents and children based around traditional Confucian ideals of filial obedience (*xiao*) remains profoundly important – not least because one's performance as a good son or daughter may have enduring consequences for one's reputation in wider society. (Interestingly, to be over-zealous in caring for one's parents may be seen by others, including prospective marriage partners and their families, as a bad thing.) My point here is *not* that kin-based cooperation in Beijing and Taipei is the same as kin-based cooperation in places like Angang and Jinmen: it definitely is not. Indeed, a crucial finding for Remmert is that kin-based cooperation differs significantly between her two urban fieldwork sites – in spite of their shared 'Chineseness' and their shared modernity. Among other things, the young people she met in Beijing often live much further away from their parents than do young people in Taipei, something that strongly shapes the actual practice of parent-child cooperation across the lifecycle. Nevertheless, the pervasiveness of kin-based cooperation – however problematic and difficult it may be in practice – is there to be seen in all the life stories collected by Remmert, just as it would be in the (arguably much more traditional-sounding) life stories one could collect in Angang and Jinmen.³

3 Other studies of families in contemporary China and Taiwan underline the point that family members are increasingly expected to cooperate in providing for their parents in old age, although

Meanwhile, the fact that the kin and non-kin boundary is porous (**point 2**) has been illustrated in many previous anthropological studies of pre- and post-reform China,⁴ and is also amply illustrated across the chapters in this book. To cite one example, it is seen in Magdalena Wong's account of an unconventional family setup that she observed during fieldwork in Sichuan. In brief, after a couple's son died, his wife (i.e. the couple's daughter-in-law) continued to live with them in their home. Her lover then subsequently moved into this household and – not without some considerable awkwardness – became something like their de facto son. Or should it be son-in-law? The point is simply that the kinship (or quasi kinship) arrangements between these people are not a 'given' thing: the relations between them have to be worked out in practice. And this is equally true for people living in what appear to be much more conventional family circumstances. The porousness of the kin/non-kin boundary is also seen in I-Chieh Fang's account of partner choice and cooperation among women who work together in a Shenzhen factory. These young women are

traditional family structures are being replaced in rural areas by a kind of 'networked family' (Unger 1993), in which adult children form independent households, but retain close cooperative links in productive and childcare activities. In the cities there is little productive cooperation among related families because most people are salaried, but there is still a lot of cooperation in childcare and consumption (Davis 1993).

4 For example, during the collectivization era, *danwei* work units were frequently likened to biological families, 'eating out of one big pot' (*chi daguo fan*) as they provided for all the material and social needs of their members (see Rofel 1999). The reform era has seen attempts by individuals to escape from the obligations of mutualistic cooperation, such as the wealthy Chengdu businessmen described by Osburg (2013) who aspire to personal autonomy but cannot escape the necessity of forming bonds through the sharing with clients and business patrons of food, drink, sex and celebrations – all things which might be associated with kinship.

(mostly) unrelated, and the factory appears to have nothing to do with kinship per se.⁵ And yet their lives are pervaded by ideas and practices emanating from kinship, including the expectation that they should behave, in a deep sense, as mothers, daughters, and/or sisters towards their fellow workers in given circumstances – while, by the way, behaving as prospective wives towards the unmarried men they meet.

Of course, social expectations of these kinds come from somewhere, which brings us to the developmental question – and thus to Anni Kajanus’s study of children in contemporary Nanjing. Her work illustrates the point that children often learn about cooperation in kin-saturated environments and then apply lessons from this in other settings, such as schools (**point 4**). As with the Angang material discussed above, however, this may work itself out in complex ways. Kajanus studied children who attend two different schools in Nanjing and who come from very different backgrounds. The children at the ‘University School’ are from distinctly middle-class, urban families. The children at the nearby ‘Community School’ are from a rural area that has gradually been absorbed into the city, and where kin relations well beyond the parent-child dyad are salient. As Kajanus explains, there are in fact many similarities between the lives of these two groups of children. They are all from the same ‘one-child’ generation and thus have mostly lived their lives as singletons (thereby lacking the chance to cooperate with siblings, an experience that traditionally played a key role in Chinese ideas about child development and personhood).⁶ Moreover, the parents of all of these children, at least on the surface, share many of the same values and basic priorities, one of which concerns the importance of education.

And yet Kajanus notes two important ways in which the lives of the two groups of children are different. The University School children are largely caught up in a separate world for

5 Another study of young female migrant factory workers in reform-era China has shown the enduring importance within the workplace of relationships based on actual kinship or common place of origin (Pun 2005).

6 See, for example, Goh 2011.

children/students, one which occupies almost all of their time. By contrast, the Community School children spend quite a bit of their time in the normal adult world, outside of school, and thus have repeated opportunities to observe cooperation between adults (many of them kin) and to learn from this. It is also the case that the pedagogical orientations of the two schools, in spite of their geographic proximity, are different. In brief, while the Community School is more authoritarian (students and parents defer to teachers), there is in practice much less micro-management of students, and thus of student cooperation, than is found at the University School down the road. This partly reflects the demands and expectations of the two communities that these schools serve and from which their student populations are drawn.

So although this case study illustrates the developmental consequences of kin-based cooperation it does so with an interesting twist. Whether children are able to observe, and thus learn from, 'adult cooperation with kin', is partly a function of the kinds of communities in which they live. Moreover, their own cooperative interactions with other children will be a function, in part, of the schools they happen to attend – for example, those that micro-manage cooperation versus those that do not – and this, in turn, is in part a function of the expectations held by their parents/families/communities about schooling and teachers. My assumption is that some version of the story Kajanus tells is relevant to *all* children in Taiwan and China, and thus by extension to all the other case studies in this book. For example, when I-chieh Fang tells us about cooperation among migrant workers in Shenzhen, or when Wu Di tells us about cooperation within the Chinese migrant community in Zambia, I take it for granted that all of those migrants came from family/community/school backgrounds in which they learned things about cooperation – such as the distinctive roles that men and women are meant to play in it – long before arriving in Shenzhen or Zambia.

Roughly half the case studies in this book (including the migration-focused ones by Fang and Wu, as just mentioned) are about cooperation that is *not* explicitly defined by kinship. This is true of the

case studies by Mark Stanford on the reform era cooperative movement, by Eona Bell on Chinese community schooling in Scotland, by Liu Xiaoqian on state provision of care to the elderly in Sichuan, and by Andrea Pia on water allocation problems (and solutions) in rural Yunnan. Still, in all of these instances one can clearly say, first, that the respective agents in them have come from family and community backgrounds in which they learned things about cooperation *before* the cooperation problems studied by Fang, Wu, Liu, Stanford, Bell and Pia materialized.⁷ Indeed, if one assumes that kinship always impinges on the learning of cooperation (again, **point 4**) it should thus impinge on all forms of cooperation, including non-kin cooperation, as a matter of definition.

But these case studies also illustrate the fact that cooperation with kin may impinge on (notionally) non-kin cooperation in a wider range of ways (**point 3**), i.e. not just developmentally. Indeed, it is difficult to speak of cooperative institutions in the case of China – be they Mao-era communes and urban *danwei* or the reform era cooperative movement studied by Mark Stanford – without taking kinship into account at some point. This is not least because these institutions have been framed, to a significant extent, *against* kinship. As with the Taiwanese schools I studied in Angang, the key question has been whether Chinese people could ever transcend family loyalties enough to do something for the wider (non-familial) collective good instead. Moreover – and in spite of this aspiration – kinship has repeatedly seeped into Chinese collectivism (for instance, see Potter and Potter [1990] on the complex role family and kinship played in communes in the early stages and beyond). Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the starting point for the entire post-Mao reform era in China was a return to ‘family responsibility’ as the basis for agricultural production, i.e. because family is precisely what loomed in the first place over the whole exercise in collectivism.

⁷ This was also the case for environmental protest movements in 1990s Taiwan, where pre-existing social ties, based on kinship, came into play during demonstrations against environmental pollution in local areas (Weller 2006).

Liu Xiaoqian's case study on 'respect the elderly' care homes in rural Sichuan shines an interesting light on this. Briefly: the Chinese state is currently stepping in to provide care to the elderly in cases where, for various reasons, it is not being provided by families. To some extent, this can be interpreted as a 'face project' for the state, i.e. an attempt to show the state in a good moral light. Of course, the folk view in China is that elder care, in line with Confucian values, is a fundamental obligation of children, of families, and of wider kin groups. As a result, one basically cannot have the state providing elder care without kinship considerations permeating all of the relevant institutions and practices at every step. In Liu's project, this sometimes manifested itself in poignant ways that foreground the ethical dilemmas of family-based versus institution-based (and in this case, state-organised) cooperation. To give a small but telling example: the elderly residents are normally expected to eat together at the home, and this is considered a crucial aspect of the state's provision of care. Only exceptionally, on big holidays for example, some residents may be permitted to leave the institution to eat with their kin. In a case recorded by Liu, however, this was a disappointment. On the one hand, the elderly resident in question was pleased to return to the 'normal' condition, i.e. of being an elder among his own relatives, sharing food with them. This highlights the anomalous nature of life in the care home (and of feeding practices there) within the local moral universe. But he quickly found himself annoyed by the way his kin treated him on the outside and actually went back to the home sooner than had been originally planned. One might still say, however, that his kin were present in their absence.

This brings me to the last point I want to discuss. As I said at the outset, the fact that humans cooperate so readily with non-kin can be said to be surprising. As an extension of this, there is perhaps a temptation to think that cooperation with kin is somehow more natural than, and also easier than, cooperation with non-kin – and that it is therefore less in need of explanation. Moreover, we know that many forms of cooperation with kin are at least perceived as being obligatory (this is certainly the case with parent-child cooperation in China), whereas many forms of

cooperation with non-kin are perceived as being optional. You cannot choose your family, as the saying has it. Against this, however, various points can be made, the most obvious of which is that cooperation with kin is often not easy at all – on the contrary. Indeed, one can even argue that cooperation with kin is in some respects a lot harder and more complicated for many of us than cooperation with complete strangers.⁸

Be that as it may, here let me return to the more specific point already outlined above: that cooperation with kin entails many of the same challenges as cooperation with non-kin (**point 5**). With respect to this, Wong's comments in her case study of families in urban Sichuan are highly pertinent. As she explains, her fieldwork interlocutors are not sure at all that 'cooperation' (*hezuo*) is a very good word to use to describe what takes place inside of families. People 'cooperate' in work environments, of course, but the terminology sounds wrong if you are talking about parents and their own children, for instance. And yet, some of her interlocutors, on reflection, do agree that in substantive terms there *is* cooperation within families: people work together towards common goals, obviously, and make different contributions towards this. Similarly, some people she met are not sure if 'fairness' is a very good concept to apply with regard to family life. If you were constantly trying to figure out if family members are being treated fairly – for instance, if the work input of the husband and the wife is balanced – families as we know them simply could not function. And yet, again, it turns out (I should think unsurprisingly) that people *do* care about fairness within their families, even if they are not sure about the terminology one should use to describe this, and even if

⁸ As Cohen (1976) observed, limits to kin cooperation were built into normal family practices: for instance, the division of family property was a recognized point in the family cycle, ending the period of mutual obligation. The difficulty of kin cooperation was also acknowledged in the practice of minor marriage, when future brides were adopted into their husbands' households as girls, in the hope of averting the type of conflicts which could arise between adult brides and their mothers-in-law (Wolf and Huang 1980).

the way of thinking about fairness varies between kin and non-kin contexts. In other words, and further to Wong's evidence, I am *not* suggesting that kin and non-kin cooperation are always thought about in the same way or talked about in the same way. Clearly they are not. (In the economic example from Angang that I gave above, people may want to avoid economic transactions involving kin precisely because these are tricky in a way that transactions involving non-kin are not.) What I am suggesting is that in spite of the differences between kin and non-kin cooperation, and indeed in spite of clear cultural variation in how kin and non-kin cooperation are conceived, there is significant overlap in the problems intrinsic to them.

Here I will not try to present this as a universal claim, but simply base it on my direct experience of China – specifically, on my fieldwork not only in Angang but also in Dragon Head (in northeast China), South Gate (in eastern Taiwan) and Protected Mountain (in southwest China). And what I specifically want to draw attention to is the strong overlap between the issues encountered in kin based cooperation and those that are discussed in the interdisciplinary literature on non-kin cooperation (for example see Baumard, Andre & Sperber 2013).

that I would suggest that it is definitely the case, in these communities, that when it comes to cooperation with kin people care about *free-riding*, for example if a brother does not provide care and support to his elderly parents while his other siblings are doing so, just as they care about free-riding when it comes to cooperation with non-kin. They therefore can also definitely be said, in my view, to care about *fairness* between kin even if they agree that family life is bound to be intrinsically unfair in some respects, and believe that one usually just has to deal with this as it comes. They also, I would note, often confront the problem of *partner choice* when cooperating with kin, just as they confront it in contexts of non-kin cooperation (notwithstanding the widely held folk view that cooperation with kin is obligatory). For example, cooperation between siblings is often selective, i.e. people choose to cooperate with one sister rather than another. Indeed, even when it comes to parents and their own children, choices are made about who to cooperate with, such as which child

to depend on for care in the future, and thus which child to support the most assiduously now. In kin-saturated communities such as Angang, Dragon Head, South Gate and Protected Mountain, examples of this tendency quickly multiply. The fact is that there are hundreds of 'kin' in the vicinity, and it is not as if a given person can do everything with all of her kin, all the time. On the contrary, cooperation in various spheres – religion, for example – is highly selective, and people do often actively take decisions about whom to cooperate with and, conversely, whom to avoid. Further to this, *reputation* is very consequential in the context of cooperation with kin, just as it is in the context of cooperation with non-kin. When it comes to non-kin cooperation, we could say that someone with a good reputation – e.g. for fairness – may be more likely, all things being equal, to be chosen as a partner. But, of course, families themselves (and especially large and extensive kin networks) can be breeding grounds for 'internal' gossip about the abilities, dispositions, personalities, etc. of given individuals, who thereby acquire (good and bad) reputations.

A very interesting case study with regard to this last point is Meixuan Chen's research on a *huaqiao* (Chinese sojourner) community in south China. This is one of the many rural Chinese places where successful overseas migrants have made 'glorious returns' in recent years – and have started investing heavily in their natal villages on the basis of kinship. This is all about cooperation between kin (prototypically between 'brothers') for the sake of the collective good and the collective glory of the ancestors. As might be expected, however, some kin benefit more from this than do others and many people gripe about the whole business (note the parallels in Watson's [1985] study of inequality within a Chinese lineage). For individuals (and/or for individual families, and/or for particular lines with the broader kinship group) *huaqiao* philanthropy – however well-intentioned – is something done in part for the sake of enhancing the reputation of oneself or one's immediate group. It is thus competitive. More darkly, such philanthropy can actually be an act of revenge, as when wealthy kinsmen return to aid the local community but also to humiliate those who wronged them in the past.

As this last illustration reminds us, then, cooperation with kin is sometimes a rough and complex business – but then so too is cooperation with non-kin. By studying the two things together, I want to argue, and also by recognizing the extent to which the boundary between them is porous in practice, we can enhance our understanding of cooperation in general. To put this more critically: I would say that the failure to properly deal with kinship in many of the existing scholarly approaches to human cooperation is indeed a major failure – that is, once one accepts that all human cooperation has kinship at its core.

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