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The Aura of the Local in Chinese Anthropology: Grammars, Media and Institutions of Attention Management

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Abstract

Since the late Qing dynasty, Chinese scholars have confronted the challenges of indigenisation: what are the limits of (Western) universalism, and how can social science, history, and anthropology become 'Chinese'? This article deals with a series of Chinese 'native anthropologies', from Republican-era outlines of ethnology and anthropology, to current anthropologies of history, urban experience, and immorality. Rather than an assessment of the merits and flaws of indigenisation in these debates, I analyse the social practices of attention management that decided which scholars and texts became influential, and which ones were ignored. These practices of attention management include the grammars, media, and institutions, within which interaction networks were established and scholarly communities formed. What held the attention of many fellow anthropologists was the aura of the local conveyed: a sense of incommensurability based on the unlikely identification of the anthropologist with the subject of study and with the intended reader. The aura of the local, I argue, appeared precisely when new grammars (such as empiricism and social theory), media (e.g. academic journals, books), and institutions (universities, government offices) made it increasingly difficult for anthropologists to construct shared understandings with the people they studied and the readers they wrote for.

Since the beginnings of modern 'social science' (*shehui kexue*) and 'anthropology' (*renleixue*) in China, the problem of indigenisation has been central to Chinese intellectuals' efforts to create a new kind of knowledge appropriate to their environment, their subjects of study and their audience. The challenge of indigenisation, of the translation and

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appropriation of foreign knowledge, has been framed by anthropologists as 'rendering local', or literally, 'making of local soil', *bentuhua*.

Relatively few Chinese anthropologists have studied non-Chinese 'others' or non-Han 'internal others', and the majority of Chinese anthropologists have focused and continue to focus on the Chinese cultural self. The default predicament of 'indigenisation' in Chinese anthropology is therefore of an anthropologist who studies his or her own self, using a foreign or universal knowledge that needs to be 'nativised'.

The indigenisation of anthropology has been part of the much larger transformation of styles of reasoning in modern China that has been described as the transition from empire to nation-state (H. Wang, 2014), or the replacement of 'Confucianism' by Western science (Levenson, 1968). The rise of logic (Kurtz, 2011), and of empiricism and positivism was never just a wholesale adoption of Western knowledge, but included a re-interpretation of Chinese traditions, for instance in the new historiography of Gu Jiegang (Schneider, 1969). Essential to these epistemic shifts was the transmission and translation of foreign terms and concepts, often from German, English, and French via Japanese: words such as 'society' (*shehui*), 'science' (*kexue*), and 'logic' (*luoji*; Lackner et al., 2001; Liu, 1995).

These shifts in terms and discourse have been central for the modern Chinese self-knowledge that emerged in a shared history. Since the early 20th century, anthropology, and neighbouring disciplines such as folklore studies, sociology, and archaeology have been intimately tied up with concerns about the re-definition of the Chinese self, and the search of national authenticity (*minzu zhenxing*) or national essence (*guocui*). Anthropology, in particular, evolves in this context as the science of self and other, that was born in intense processes of translation and dialogue, travel and exchange.

The problem of indigenisation (*bentuhua*) is always a shared and global problem, as many writers have pointed out (e.g. Bilik, 2001): it is precisely the 'onslaught' of foreign knowledge that makes the local so interesting, including for the local inhabitants themselves. Interest in the 'local' arises in the confrontation of different perspectives, different styles of knowledge production, and different languages. For Chinese social scientists, important foils have been the perspectives of foreign scholars, the evolving bodies of 'Western' social science, and foreign languages – first and foremost English, and to a lesser extent also German, French, Russian and Japanese. It is only in the confrontation with the remote other, that the local acquires its particular significance, and everything happens as if the particularities of local soil (*bentu*) only appear in the mirror of the Western ocean (*xiyang*).

The self-orientalism and essentialism of 'native anthropology' has been criticised by many Chinese anthropologists, who have, for instance, emphasised internal ethnic and linguistic differences against a presumed ethnic or national unity (Bilik, 2002). Recognising the limitations of modernist social science, with its dualism of 'China' and 'the West', and turning instead to long-term history, perhaps Chinese anthropology might be able to take a 'third eye perspective' and engage in critical self-reflection (Wang, 2002).

But even the most critical reflections of native anthropology in the Chinese language convey an aura of the local: that is, a sense of 'being there', that is not explicitly stated, but communicated indirectly through cues that create links between the subjects of anthropological research (who tend to be marginal and remote) and the audience (generally urban elites). This includes for instance the careful use of vernacular language, thus relating to shared understandings about local experience. Ultimately, such indirect cues imply that the intended audience of anthropology can reach sensual identification with the subjects of anthropology – the kind of intuitive understanding that is implied in the Chinese term for knowing and understanding 'physically', *tihui*. The most successful examples of native anthropology resolve the impossibility of 'immediate knowledge', or knowledge without mediation, paradoxically, through perfect mediation: the anthropologist translates so gracefully that it seems no translation and no mediation took place at all, and the reader feels directly with the subjects of the anthropologist's writing.

The argument I wish to make here is that indigeneity in Chinese social sciences and anthropology has acquired a particular 'aura'. Parallel to Benjamin's famous outline of the work of art in the time of mechanical reproduction (1969 [1935]), I argue that this aura only appeared under the impact of the accelerated reproduction and

representation of 'the local'; that is, once new grammars, media, and institutions facilitated the constant exposure of the local to outsiders' gazes and, and once the comparison of particular and universal features became an everyday habit.

The 'aura of the local' in Chinese anthropology is similar to the 'aura of the postcolonial' as described by Arif Dirlik (1994): his point was that the 'postcolonial' only became an issue, so to say, once third world intellectuals arrived in first world academia. Something similar happened with the categories of the local in Chinese anthropology: it acquired a special meaning only once international exchange, translation and travel had become possible. As we will see, this kind of aura first appeared in the early days of Chinese anthropology, in the work of people such as Wu Wenzao and Fei Xiaotong, and is still with us today in contemporary Chinese anthropologies of history and immorality. In the following I will discuss the particular appeal of the local in anthropological scholarship during the Republican Era and since the 1980s. I focus on the work of several influential scholars, including Fei Xiaotong, Wang Mingming, Yan Yunxiang and Xiang Biao. My argument is not limited to the work of Han Chinese scholars, or anthropologists working at universities in the PRC. Instead, I concentrate on particularly influential and telling examples of a longstanding trend in Chinese Anthropology. By Chinese anthropology, I mean a conversation that has been going on in the Chinese language since at least 1926; that relates to anthropological research, and the practices of fieldwork, reflection, debate, and writing. This conversation takes place in anthropological texts, that are discussed in seminars, lectures, and conferences, and circulated in publications. While the meaning of the local is an intractable problem to all anthropologists, the particular aura it acquired in Chinese anthropology has to do with the characteristics of this ongoing conversation; the main participants, and the institutional environment in which they operated.

The local aura has been of such decisive importance in Chinese anthropology, because it made the work of anthropologists appealing to specific audiences: anthropologists channelled the longing for local experience that appeared precisely at the moment when identification with local authenticity became a problem, and a need, for urban elites. Providing the possibility for readers to feel at one with the remote and rural subjects of study, thus became a core trademark of modernist anthropology in China. From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, this aura of the local was decisive for the distribution of attention and the emergence of creativity in Chinese anthropology; at the same time when this particular kind of scholarship became defined as a field, a network, and a series of interaction rituals.

CREATIVITY, ATTENTION, AURA

Two influential outlines in the sociology of knowledge are Bourdieu's theory of fields (Bourdieu, 1988, 1996) and Randall Collins' sociology of interaction rituals (Collins, 2000). Both have been applied to Chinese intellectual arenas: Collins himself discusses over several chapters the development of Chinese philosophy, and Bourdieu's field approach has been used specifically to analyse contemporary Chinese academia (see for instance Tenzin, 2017). Recognizing its indubitable sociological rigour and explanatory power, the field approach has the disadvantage of downplaying the interactive and emotional aspects of intellectual schools; and this is precisely where Collins sets in. Ideas always happen between heads (and not just inside them), and Collins traces the regularities and rules according to which certain ideas become influential. His core analytic is the concept of 'interaction rituals' (such as lectures, publications, and conversations), in which the emotional energy of many clusters around certain 'thought leaders'. In the same interaction rituals, networks are formed that distribute and affirm the reputation of those thought leaders, via certain numbers of 'secondary' and 'tertiary followers', according to Collins. He goes as far as attaching numbers to the 'breakthrough points' at which schools become self-perpetuating, and offers predictions about their growth, duration, and decline.

Social creativity thus emerges in the networks of leaders and followers sharing interaction rituals in a 'market of thought'. Collins' magisterial study of 18 different philosophical traditions the world over very forcefully and

convincingly shows the social constraints and facilitators of creativity. What he ignores, however, are the specific grammars, media, and institutions that determine what kind of interaction rituals can take place, which kind of emotional energy is accumulated, and therefore how networks of reputation form. While Socrates primarily discussed his ideas in person, today scholars constantly talk with each other on digital platforms. Rather than a 'market of thought', the general condition of creativity is mediated recursivity – ideas have to be practised and repeated before anything new can emerge. Yet such recursivity can take many different forms and shapes.

In the following I will look at recursivity in Chinese anthropology, both in the 1930s and today. My core argument is that which scholars and texts became influential depended primarily on the different practices of attention management at their disposal, including the grammars, media, and institutions backing them. The grammars we will discuss include specific new vocabularies and terminologies; but also, importantly, particular styles of knowledge production that emphasised the empirical basis of scientific knowledge, and its justification through theoretical reflection. Such knowledge was communicated via particular types of media, such as newspapers, journals, and books; and continued through the 'interaction rituals' of reading, listening, discussion, and citation. They took place in specific institutions such as academic publications, learned societies, universities; the recursive conditions of creativity were thus situated within publishing markets, emerging publics, and government agencies.

But to fix attention in the cycles of recursivity facilitated by new grammars, media, and institutions, something else was necessary: the promise of a shared understanding beyond mediation. Such a promise might take the form of charismatic leadership and graceful communication: in Chinese anthropology it appeared mainly as the aura of the local. As we will see in the next section, the first and exemplary anthropological texts of the Republic Era circulated in an environment in which the local – specifically the rural – seemed to be disappearing, yet at the same time, the local became crucially important as the particularistic heart of the nation-body, and the core object of empirical research. In the specific grammars, media, and institutions in which 'native anthropology' came to be a thing, the possibility appeared of an un-mediated identification between the subjects and the audience of native anthropology: rather than a traitor who misdescribes the peasants using foreign terms, the anthropologist would be like the 'angel of history', at one both with the subject and the audience, directly expressing 'our' fate.

NATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE REPUBLICAN ERA

'Chinese society is fundamentally rural.' Thus begins Fei Xiaotong's powerful text *China From the Soil* (*Xiangtu Zhongguo*, Fei, 1992). Originally published in 1947 as a series of essays based on lecture notes, the text only appeared as a book in Chinese in 1985. Fei's text was the culmination of discussions with students and colleagues, and lectures he had given; it was also effectively the result of a long process of learning and translating 'Western' social science. In all these aspects, Fei's text is similar to the two texts that 'inaugurate' modern anthropology and ethnology in China, both published in 1926: 'On Ethnology' (*Shuo minzuxue*) by Cai Yuanpei (1993) and 'Nationalities and the State' (*Minzu yu guojia*) by Wu Wenzao (1990) – the first one, in fact, published in a newspaper for Chinese Students in the US.

Fei's famous text is perhaps a suitable end point for the first major period of Chinese Anthropology, extending from 1926 to 1949. The intellectuals who were at the forefront of anthropological production in China at the time – scholars such as Fei Xiaotong, Francis Xu, Tian Rukang, Wu Wenzao – all had studied abroad and wrote both in English and in Chinese. They exchanged perspectives not only with foreign 'social science', but also with their respective interlocutors in China. It is through these exchanges, through translations, and accumulated knowledge production, that a series of symbolic equivalences hardened and came to define the essence of China as rural (Liu, 2002a; Steinmüller, 2011; Wang, 2007b).

This was linked to a new empiricism, which meant the justification of claims to knowledge on the basis of empirical investigation. Such empiricism rested on a series of epistemic shifts, and most fundamentally, the spread of a vernacular language of science that was supposed to capture the world adequately and directly. This new

empirical orientation can be seen for instance in major changes in Chinese historiography, specifically in the writings of Liang Qichao and Gu Jiegang (cf. Schneider, 1969). Similar epistemological and practical changes were decisive for the establishment of the new social sciences, which based their claims on empirical investigations including fieldwork, interviews, and surveys.

Regarding new media and institutions, we have already mentioned the importance of newspapers and journals; there were also a series of other rapidly changing institutions: such as public lectures, students' associations, and the new universities. In this environment, anthropology, together with other modern disciplines (such as folklore studies, archaeology, sociology and philosophy) slowly came to be reproduced through mechanical means – not yet the typewriters that were being used at the same time in the UK and the US, but handwriting that was then typeset in woodblocks and printed (Kittler, 1999; Mullaney, 2017). The mediatic and institutional environment of the first Chinese Anthropologists played a crucial role for their focus on 'the local', and the meanings of nationality (*minzu*), state (*guojia*), ethnology (*minzuxue*) and anthropology (*renleixue*).

The definition of 'Chinese society' was the starting point for a number of influential outlines of Chinese sociology and anthropology. Fei Xiaotong's concept of the 'differential mode of association' (*chaxu geju*) outlined in the essays of *China from the Soil* (Fei, 1992) was perhaps the most famous attempt to suggest a systematic comparison between the essences of Chinese and Western sociality. It should be noted that the comparison between China and the West is entangled here with the oppositions between tradition and modernity, and countryside and city. Various anthropologists have pointed out that underlying this modernist comparison is a series of symbolic equivalences. The peasant family in the village, the countryside as a social arena, and China as a nation, trapped in backwardness and tradition, each in turn opposed to another set of symbolic equivalences: anonymity and individualization in the city, urban life as a social arena, and Western nations, empowered by progress and modernity (Liu, 2002a, 2002b; Steinmüller, 2011; Wang, 2007a, 2007b).

Already before Fei Xiaotong, a number of Chinese thinkers, from Kang Youwei to Liang Qichao to Liang Shuming, had used similar oppositions. It is remarkable that many of them emphasised the (supposed) organic unity of Western society in comparison to the fragmented individualism of Chinese society. Liang Shuming, for instance, in *The Substance of Chinese Culture* (1987, first published 1949) compared a society based on professions in the West with a society based on ethics and ritual in China, that is, a society of rules as against a society of roles, and implies that Chinese society lacks the unity of Western society. He concludes that China should introduce Western science and democracy, so as to be able to build the social cohesion that is necessary for national strength.

In the most influential anthropological texts written in this period, a strong identification with the subject of study and the reader was implied; subject and reader would speak to each other through the medium of the anthropologist-intellectual: the 'aura of the local' is thus basically the promise of the unity and success of these processes of mediation – or rather, the utopia of an un-mediated presence: an unspeakable and incomparable experience, in brief, the experience of 'having been there', of being oneself 'Chinese', and of participating in the language and in the sacred script.

Fellow travellers of the early Anthropologists were thinkers such as Gu Jiegang, who also emphasised the cultural unity of the 'Chinese nation', including Hui Muslims (Jenco, 2019) and socialist intellectuals, whose writing was directly aimed at changing society (Spakowski, 2019). Among these different groups of intellectuals, the emphasis of Chinese and local particularity played an important role: for instance, in the writing of socialists such as Li Dazhao, Chen Duxiu and Mao Zedong, the concepts of 'the common people' and later the 'revolutionary classes' were crucial in adapting and indigenizing socialism (Yuan, 2019). It is perhaps the case that socialist intellectuals had more of a 'vision' in the sense that they better understood social tendencies in China at the time; maybe we can even say that they were better anthropologists than the actual anthropologists in this sense (Xiang, 2016). Alternatively, we could also consider the possibility that for socialists such as Mao Zedong the attention created by the aura of textual identification mattered less than the attention created by the clarity of textual imposition: that is, socialist writing did not need relate to a local aura, but simply and directly imposed the author and the reader's text onto local situations.

NATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY SINCE THE 1980S

Since the 1980s, the social sciences and anthropology have rapidly expanded in the People's Republic of China (Guldin, 1990, 1994; Smart, 2006). There has been a continuing boom in academic production; in the publication of articles and books, an expansion of the academic sector with many more students and many more academic positions. The social sciences are still behind natural and applied sciences in these regards, but even so, the growth has been considerable here too. Several of the scholars educated prior to the establishment of the People's Republic, such as Tian Rukang and Fei Xiaotong, played important roles in the revival of the discipline since the 1980s. Anthropology degrees have been established in a number of universities, and the generation of those anthropologists who went to university in late 70s and 80s are now at the forefront of the discipline. Many influential anthropologists have studied abroad and write both in English and in Chinese.

With the growth of the discipline came a diversification of objects of study; from rural Han-Chinese society, to 'minority studies', to the sociology of urbanization; from the study of popular religion and legal pluralism, to urban anthropology, medical anthropology, and media anthropology; to applied work for government agencies, tourist anthropology and business anthropology. These sub-fields in the PRC share particular networks of scholarly production, and particular forms of engagement with the market economy and the socialist state.

They also apply new grammars, use media and work in institutions that determine the social distribution of attention. These include a new empiricism as a fundamental style requirement, together with the invocation of 'theoretical frameworks' to justify each other. Discourses take place first of all in the lecture halls of universities, in conferences, excursions and scholarly banquets; and they are today mediated through electronic communication, in particular mobile phones and computers. In this environment, there has been a strong growth of factional politics, through which scholars struggle for resources, positions, and reputation (Tenzin, 2017). All these factors also influence the politics of attention that shall be our focus here, and specifically the kind of attention at the horizon of which the sacred aura of the local soil appears.

But why should the nature of 'the local' appear as such a mystified problematic, when really 'indigenisation' (*bentuhua*) has been the single most important challenge of Chinese social science in the Reform Era? My argument here will be that common strategies of indigenising the social sciences, rather than weakening the aura of the local, help to further strengthen it. I will discuss these effects for anthropology as a whole, and then specifically in historical anthropology and in the anthropology of labour, migration, and morality.

The challenges of 'indigenisation' (*bentuhua*) are often opposed to the 'full-scale Westernisation' (*quanpan xihua*) of knowledge. A classical middle way is what Fei Xiaotong has called the 'self-awareness of culture' (*wenhua zijue*) that Chinese social science and intellectuals should promote. He defines such self-awareness as 'people's self-knowledge of their own culture in which they live their lives.' In China, this is does neither mean to return to cultural origins, nor should it be 'total Westernisation', but it should help in the capability for self-determination and in the 'selection of cultural elements in the new age' (Fei, 1998, pp. 52–53, cited in Wang, 2002, p. 162).

Fei's formula of cultural self-awareness has been often cited as a core objective of education and intellectual debate. In recent years, it has been overshadowed by slogans such as the one of the 'great renaissance of the Chinese nation' (*zhonghua minzu weida fuxing*), with a more unambiguously political and official tone. But Fei's earlier ambition of cultural self-awareness still expresses a core ambition of Chinese anthropology: namely to bring into existence the self-awareness of a cultural essence.

Chinese anthropologists and ethnologists have answered this call in different ways: for instance, there is a new historical anthropology (Ji & Liang, 2018); various scholars based abroad keep writing in Chinese (e.g. Yan Yunxiang, Xiang Biao), and others educated abroad have taken up positions in Chinese universities (e.g. Jing Jun, Wu Fei). Somewhat removed from the concerns of historical and cosmopolitan anthropology are rural village studies and qualitative political science (Day, 2013; He, 2003, 2004, 2007).

Some of the most influential concepts traded by Chinese anthropologists and sociologists are focusing very closely on local knowledge, elaborating local concepts to understand local realities: for instance, the notion of

'gambling qi' (*duqi*; Wu, 2005; Ying, 2007; 2011, 2014) or the term 'passing one's days' (*guo rizi*; Wu, 2009a, 2009b). These concepts are taken from ordinary language and are transmuted it into the essence of a 'Chinese' social theory.

The indigenisation efforts made by anthropologists are in many ways similar to what scholars have tried to do in other disciplines. In folklore studies, there is an obvious tendency to emphasise Chinese local characteristics even more than in anthropology (Wu, 2015; You, 2020; Zhang & You, 2019). The situation in China today is broadly similar to the opposition noted by Michael Herzfeld in Greece earlier in the 20th century: folklore studies and anthropology relate in inverse ways to nationalism, when folklore studies researches the particular features of language, history and custom – what makes the nation proud – anthropologists and sociologists like to focus on social organisation and other universal concepts, that have a tendency to make the nationalist ashamed (Herzfeld, 1987).

In legal studies, for instance, Zhu Suli has emphasised the importance of 'local resources' (*bentu ziyuan*), that is, particularly Chinese forms of legal practice. Zhu justifies his emphasis on Chinese legal practices by reference to those local practices, which should be understood empirically, first and formost (Zhu, 2000, 2016). His work has been criticised as essentialising rural practises and ignoring the importance of party rule for law and morality in contemporary China (Upham, 2005). What should concern us here, however, is the defining contrast Zhu draws between his outline of Chinese legal science and distant, urban, and universalising Western knowledge. A similar opposition can be observed in Zhao Tingyang's writings on a particularly Chinese approach to International Relations. The main objective here is to re-discover local sources for understanding political relations between countries as part of an overarching cosmology of 'All Under Heaven' (*tianxia*; Zhao, 2005, 2009).

All these concepts probably achieve partly what Fei had called for: a Chinese 'cultural self-awareness'. But the problem might be that there is actually too much cultural self-awareness, rather than too little: The self-awareness of culture, of which 'local resources' and 'all under heaven' speak, easily combines with essentialism and does never really consider the perspective of an outsider; and while this is true for legal studies and political philosophy, the same has been observed for Chinese anthropology: 'the sense of otherness and academic distance that has been essential to Western anthropology has not matured in China' (Wang, 2002, p. 164).

In the following section I explore two limit cases of contemporary Chinese anthropology that go some steps toward this 'sense of otherness'. When dealing with long-term history and with the sweeping changes of the contemporary world, Chinese anthropologists have left the local soil of the Chinese countryside. But in the same attempts at re-constructing Chinese anthropologies, we sometimes see glimpses of a new local aura.

The new historical anthropology

Wang Mingming's proposal, elaborated in work on premodern anthropology (Wang, 2006), regional theory (Wang, 2008), 'directionology' (*fangxiangxue*; M.Wang, 2007a, 2014) and civilisation (Wang, 2015) is to transcend the constraints of nativism and nationalism, and go beyond the confines of modern terms such as 'culture' and 'society'. Instead, he lays emphasis on the continuous exchanges and mutual interlocking of self and other; and attempts to recover larger cosmological and civilisational frames. Together with colleagues and students, he proposes a new historical anthropology of China, calling for a renewed anthropological engagement with the historical transformations of core institutions (e.g. kinship, ritual, exchange) and a turn away from the modernist obsession with contemporary change (e.g. urbanisation, capitalism, globalisation; Wang, 2005).[1]

Wang and his students have produced a series of important analyses of the transformations of imperial ritual and cosmology (Wang, 2012), the intermediary circles of social exchange at the Chinese periphery (Wang, 2008), stranger-kings at the periphery of Chinese empires (Liang, 2009), and of many other topics within a larger framework of a relational civilisation. In his book *The West as the Other*, for instance, Wang turns around the common opposition of West and East, by looking at particular historical Chinese views of the 'West', long before the

emergence of a Euro-centric and Western-centric world. To relativise the common modern opposition of East and West, he provides a series of interpretations of myth and imperial ritual that suggest what he calls a science of 'directionology' (*fangxiangxue*; Wang, 2007a).

Yet the persuasive power of Wang's argument relies to some extent on the absence of a systematic comparison with other imperial formations and their cosmologies of civilisation. In fact, the concept of 'directionology', for instance, characteristically stands by itself, even though arguably other imperial spaces and polities could be shown to share similar features - for example, in the exchanges between imperial centre and periphery and how they structure space (Wheatley, 1971), and in the cosmology of galactic polities (Tambiah, 1977).

So even though 'civilisation' (*wenming*), 'All Under Heaven' (*tianxia*), or 'ritual' (*li*) clearly transcend the nation-state categories of culture and society, the same terms evoke a new aura of incommensurability. Similar to the anthropologists of the Republic Era, we find a two-way identification between the object of study and the audience of the research, facilitated by the person of the anthropologist: yet, there are significant differences with earlier outlines of native anthropology. Importantly, the 'local' here is not referred to in the vernacular language of the commoners, but also through the sacred medium of classical Chinese. The 'local' as it appears is thus for many readers a barely known or long forgotten myth – such as the stories told of the 'Queen Mother of the West' (*Xiwangmu*) that are the topic of one chapter of *The West as the Other* (M. Wang, 2007a, 2014). The identification between the subject and the reader, here, does not appear through the direct and vernacular language of modernist social science, but rather through the indirect and abstract language of classicist scholarship: the more so, it is surrounded by an aura of incommensurability.

These identifications are premised on the circulation of discourse and knowledge in academic articles and books, but perhaps even more importantly, through lectures, online postings, and blogposts. They appeal both through the empirical research, the reading, and thought that has gone into these arguments, and which is then expressed through characters typed into keyboards, as well as through speeches and lectures.

The very contemporary mediatisation and institutionalisation of these exchanges, is the precondition of the aura of the local: even though in principle lectures, articles, books, and online postings are open to everyone, the particular identification that emerges for those 'in the know' comes from the careful allegations of similarity, of kinship even, in the text and in its communication. We can see a similar effect in anthropological writing at the opposite end of history, that is, when focusing on the moralities of the present – or rather, the immorality of the present.

The new anthropology of immorality

At least since the turn of the millenium, anthropologists, philosophers, TV commentators and ordinary people agree that contemporary China is suffering a moral crisis: there is no moral compass, the young don't respect the old, and everyone is only after power, sex, and money. The moral exemplars of the past, such as Mao Zedong, or Leifeng the model soldier, are now only ridiculous. Corruption is particularly widespread in all the professions that supposedly 'serve the people', such as teachers, doctors, and police. Officials and businessmen know how to play according to 'hidden rules' (*qian guize*), personal connections are the only thing that matters. All this is common knowledge, but it contrasts with the public discourse of the party-state, which promotes one common morality that unites all of China: Constant complaints about moral decline meet the constant promotion of common morality.

Reasons for not calling out the emperor's new clothes (or rather the party's new clothes) have to do as much with the lasting importance of exemplary rule, as with the practical logics of moral power in Chinese society. What is common to both the 'moral governance' of the party state, and the complaints about moral crisis, is the horizon of a well-defined common morality: such as those given in Confucian commentary, in lineage rules, and in Maoist class struggle sessions. The weight of these traditions points toward the possibility of one common, unified morality,

which would consist of particular virtues that can and should be listed, described, and implemented. This is exactly what commentators, philosophers, social scientists and anthropologists have done (Ci, 2014; Liu, 2002b; Yan, 1996, 2003, 2009a, 2009b, 2014, 2019, 2020).

Perhaps the most influential one of them has been Yan Yunxiang, who has analysed in his writings the decline of family relations, the rise of the 'uncivil individual', and many other moral challenges of today's Chinese world; questions such as, is it acceptable for a Communist party member to engage in insider deals? How to combine professional success with harmonious family relations? Should one help strangers, and how much sexual freedom is good? The answers, however, exhaust themselves in a description of the social context of particular virtues: that is, they describe the 'party's new clothes' in the same terms as those suffering from the moral crisis, by reference to a shared morality, a combination of virtues attached to objects such as 'the moral subject' or 'Chinese society'. Communicated in the language of universal anthropology, often there is a characteristic shift from the investigation of moral action to the declaration of moral baselines, from the science of morality to moral science.

The aura of the local that emerges here makes reference to a shared experience that is disappearing: that is the moral disaster that everyone knows about, and which is the common experience both of the subjects of study and the readers being addressed, connected through the anthropologist. The implication is here, as before, that ultimately there is something incommensurable and unique to the particular experience of moral crisis that can never be communicated by the most detailed analysis – and for the same reason, the concepts that are created to capture this experience should not and cannot be separated from this particular context.

Yan Yunxiang is a very important representative of the previous generation of Chinese intellectuals who went to university after the end of the Cultural Revolution. The members of this generation who came of age during Maoism share memories of the moral intensities of high socialism. The intensity of this shared experience slowly fades away in the next generation of intellectuals, and some of them have entirely forgotten about what happened during the Maoist era, before they were born. The new generation of Chinese Anthropologists is defined by other experiences: including the opening of Chinese society since the 1980s, the consumerism that allows for private hedonism, and the possibility of international travel. With all this came new forms of dislocation and moral pluralism.

An important representative of the last generation of anthropologists in China today is Xiang Biao, who studied at Peking University, before he went to Europe for doctoral studies. He is now professor at Oxford, UK, and director of a Max Planck Institute in Germany. Perhaps even more than his earlier studies of migrants in Beijing (Xiang, 2000, 2005), and IT workers in India (Xiang, 2007), in recent years, his work has had a very strong impact among scholars and the wider public through a series of public lectures, interviews, and films.

In these formats, Professor Xiang has communicated core ideas that capture the essence of the experience of many young Chinese. For instance, the 'disappearance of the neighbour' and 'the inability to love' (Pengpai – The Paper 2019); or in more general terms, the feeling of 'suspension' (*xuanfu*), in which Chinese people find themselves (Beijing Daxue Xiaoyou Wang, 2014; Yali Dushu, 2018). Another important concept, that equally expresses the form that alienation and anonymity takes in China is 'involution' (*neijuan*); that is, a kind of competition that is so radical and so crowded that no one can make progress (Pengpai – The Paper 2020).

All these ideas are widely circulated and find a lot of resonance beyond the narrow confines of academic anthropology and even the social sciences. They are communicated in different formats, including printed interviews, online films and talks. The circulation of these media significantly increases the tempo of discussion, which now evolves around catch phrases that have deep emotional appeal based on the identification they promise a wide audience.

Suspension and involution are thus the 'native' concepts of our times; like earlier attempts at nativisation, indigenisation and sinification, they express the perspective of a unique local situation. They embody a local experience shared by billions of individuals that remains local in the sense that it is incommensurable and can only be expressed in the vernacular: and any attempt to use these concepts for non-locals is precluded in principle. The ambition here is clearly not to assess the general validity of concepts, let alone their universal value, but instead to

capture Chinese predicaments, and in particular the shared experiences and feelings of the younger generation who lives and works in the cities.

Thus, the sacred alternative to the experiences of immorality and alienation that are supposedly shared by all informants and all readers, comes in the form of a new local aura. Even among many anthropologists who have widely travelled, who are based outside China, and who write about the long-term transcendence of the local in history and its current transcendence in migration and urbanism, we can still detect an aura of the local that shines at its moment of disappearance. In that sense, you might take the anthropologist away from the local soil, but you can't take the local soil away from the anthropologist.

The local in these works is not any longer the essentialised countryside of poor Han Chinese peasants, or the internal Other of the 'minority populations'. Instead, 'locals' are now those who share urban and migrant experiences, of being uprooted together. If this sense of being local is very new and somewhat paradoxical, the formal properties of the concept of locality in the global city are the same as they were a hundred years ago in the Chinese countryside: that is, a sense of 'being there' that is historically unique and culturally incommensurable.

CONCLUSION: SECULAR NATIVISM?

In the particular circumstances of academic production in the People's Republic of China today, perhaps the best that can happen to social science and anthropology is simply to make oneself a method, as the title of a series of interviews with Xiang Biao has it (Xiang & Wu, 2020). Making oneself a method is perhaps reducing the aura that has surrounded native anthropology to the smallest common denominator, which is one person's objective experience. But if we define our anthropological method just simply by our 'home' (*jiayuan*), do we not ignore a thousand possible ways in which our home has been part of historical and regional ways of knowing the world (Wang, 2021)?

Success and attention in the Chinese-language anthropology of China today, however, is perhaps conditional on such strategic ignorance. Or rather, on the perpetuation of an aura of incommensurability, for instance, when it comes to the 'suspension' (*xuanfu*) that characterises the Chinese experience of hypermobility and precarity, according to Xiang Biao (Xiang, 2021; Yali Dushu, 2018).[2] Even if the reader suspends other purposes to finish the last few lines of this article, your suspension will never partake in the local aura, unless you are authentically Chinese, and the experience is re-described authentically in Chinese language.

The new Chinese anthropology of immorality, and the new Chinese anthropology of history have left the local soil. Both have gone abroad to study, and have found new homes in the Chinese past and in the global city. The most successful and influential texts in contemporary native anthropology still promise the reader sensual identification with the subject, via the graceful mediation of the anthropologist. These texts appeal to the hidden desires and moral emotions of the audience, for edification through exemplary models in the case of historical anthropology and for the titillation of debauchery in the anthropology of immorality, but this kind of excitement is secondary to the identification offered by the mediation of the anthropologist. Modern technology, traffic, production, and media have made this mediation very easy and very difficult at the same time: very easy, because of the convenience and speed through which questions can be asked, people identified, and messages transmitted. Difficult, because the speed and convenience of technological change makes it ever more difficult to identify the subject of study, to recount continuous narratives of self, and to translate between different languages and lifeworlds.

Indigenous Chinese anthropology, that is, the native science that grows on local soil, acquires its sacred aura precisely in this predicament. It is very different with recent attempts by Chinese social scientists to investigate societies outside China such as Indian IT workers (Xiang, 2007), Fujianese migrants in Malaysia, or church groups in the US. Here we have definitely left the sacred aura of Chinese soil, and instead observe a remote interlinkage of self and other, in narrative and theory - in particular when anthropologists use 'Chinese' theories to understand such non-Chinese societies (Liang, 2019, 2020).

Another possibility to confront the aura of local soil in native anthropology, is by critically distancing oneself from their objects of study: which implies reflecting on the double identification (from informant to anthropologist and from anthropologist to reader) I have described here – perhaps it would be useful to break those identifications altogether. In this regard it is questionable whether Chinese anthropologists have managed 'to become "culturally relative" by distancing [themselves] from the state discourse of modernization', and whether the 'folk cultures of the villagers provide sufficient materials for reflection' alone (Wang, 2002, p. 164). To the contrary, in many recent ethnographies of rural China written in Chinese, we still find a strong identification of the anthropologist with his or her subjects: Even though many anthropologists have paid attention to the reflexivity and the many faces of their informants (Tan, 2017), the positioning of the anthropologists themselves has only rarely been reflected upon. While Anthropologists have focused on the complexities of what is variously called 'religion' or 'superstition' (Gao, 2014), perhaps it is time to acknowledge the constitutive mutuality and co-implication of both terms (Chau, 2005; Feuchtwang, 2010). If anthropologists continue using the method of 'peeping' into other people's lives, they should also recognise the awkwardness and embarrassment of doing so (Steinmüller, 2011).

These are some of the possible paths that could radically change the conversations of China anthropology, and allow those conversations to finally move out of the fog of localism. If every theoretical perspective resembles a particular set of glasses that allows us to see particular things better and helps us ignore others, then sacralising the local has long tarnished the vision of China anthropology. Instead of unconsciously making the local sacred, what is required is conscious distance from the local, and a new secular nativism: that is, moving in and out of a native position in a conscious and reflective manner. To do so, anthropologists have to get rid of the assumption that they stand, together with informants and readers, on the same local soil (*bentu*); instead, we have to recognise that informants, anthropologists, and readers stand apart, and only sometimes can share glimpses of each other's world. To travel or to translate foreign theory can allow for such glimpses and can activate a reflective stance toward our own positions; however, in themselves travel and translation are not enough, as long as the core articulations of anthropological knowledge are still shrouded in the aura of the local, that is, the preconception that local authenticity is ultimately incommunicable. To see through the aura of the local, the most important requirement for the indigenisation of Chinese anthropology is critical distance from its subject of study.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available in the articles and books cited in the reference list.

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ENDNOTES

[1] For an overview of contemporary Chinese anthropology, see Ji and Liang (2018) and Zhang (2018).

[2] This article is the introduction to a special issue of Pacific Affairs on the topic; for further examples of the experience of suspension, see the contributions.

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