

For the sake of simplicity: no China, no context

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Introduction

Generations of anthropologists of China have complained about the indifference of their colleagues to Chinese research. The reason for China's marginality to general debates in anthropology was not due to a lack of attention: Malinowski himself saw great promise in the studies of Chinese anthropologists (1939); Radcliffe-Brown famously likened Confucianism to his own branch of structural functionalism (Radcliffe-Brown 1945: 35ff); Firth and Leach nourished a life-long interest in Chinese literature and supported research on Chinese societies; and Robert Redfield promoted research in China as part of wider research in comparative civilisations (Sackley 2012). All these efforts were disrupted by the Communist Revolution, which closed off mainland China to foreign researchers and interdicted anthropological and sociological research for about thirty years. During that period, many anthropologists did research in Hong Kong's New Territories, Taiwan and elsewhere. The People's Republic of China has been open again for foreign anthropologists since the 1980s; hence Maoism itself cannot be the only reason for China being so marginal to general debates in anthropology.

Neither was it because of the absence of good intentions on the part of China anthropologists themselves. Perhaps the definitive pronouncement here is Maurice Freedman's call for 'A Chinese Phase in Social Anthropology' (Freedman 1963). Later reiterations (Pieke 2009) to the contrary, by anthropologists of other regions, continued to ignore China anthropology. Even though the anthropology of China is thriving, both in English and in Chinese, it has not – as the editors of this volume note in their Introduction – produced many texts that are regarded as canonical in the discipline of social anthropology.

This is for good reasons: principally, because China anthropologists failed to strike the right balance of context and substance. Either they adopted context created by other disciplines or they focused merely on context; neither option is helpful in capturing social complexity. In the former

case, generalists are well advised to go to the context directly (that is, read the work of historians or Sinologists, for instance). In the latter case, generalists may read the work of China anthropologists as social commentary on what is happening in China, but not as a contribution to general theory in anthropology. Let me spell out this argument in broad strokes, and then discuss it in relation to specific texts in the anthropology of China.

The problem of context, simple and complex

Complexity is intrinsic to both the ethnographic and comparative enterprise. Anthropologists are concerned to demonstrate the social and cultural entailments of phenomena, though they must in the demonstration simplify the complexity enough to make it visible. What appears to be the object of description – demonstrating complex linkages between elements – also makes description less easy. (Strathern 2005: xiii)

Any form of ethnographic knowledge needs some kind of context: outlining the coordinates in time and place, within which a particular problem is investigated. Accuracy in this description is central for the knowledge claims that ethnographers make: that an ethnography is ‘persuasive’ only in so far as the ‘context’ presented is appropriate (Strathern *et al.* 1987). The context provides the bridge from the personal experience of the fieldworker to the worlds of others. Ultimately the best context for an ethnography is the power of experience, and thus, ethnographic writing needs to evoke the flair and feeling of ‘being there’. Such an experiential context, therefore, is the main source of ethnographic authority, via the many steps that are supposed to embody the bodily learning process of the fieldworker who had ‘been there’ (Clifford 1983).

Given that the exact taste of experience cannot be reflected in writing, the process of translation from bodily experience here to disincarnate text there is always fraught with contradictions. What about the remainder of that which was not translated (because the author missed it, suppressed it, or did not understand it)? What about misunderstandings and erroneous conclusions? Only a minor part of all the complexity of the social world, and of how that world was experienced, can be reflected in a written text. A skilled ethnographer, thus, must carefully balance figure and ground.

And that happens always as part of a literary relation within a web of existing texts. Even though the author might not directly cite some texts, there are countless texts out there that, in one way or another, might be relevant to the ethnographic experience. This is of particular relevance for the study of literate environments, including most Han Chinese societies:

there is a limitless amount of text produced over many centuries by officials, scholars and ordinary people. There are also countless articles and books written by scholars in other disciplines, by writers, poets, journalists and professional China-watchers. Every ethnographer needs to select a minimal choice of relevant texts to situate the respective anthropological question.

In the twentieth-century traditions of social and cultural anthropology that are often traced to Franz Boas in the US and Bronislaw Malinowski in the UK, ethnographic writing became the defining feature of anthropological knowledge claims. In the context of colonialism and imperialism, anthropology covered the 'savage slot' of those radical Others that were removed in time and space from the modern European self (Trouillot 1991). Writers, poets and artists also were fascinated by 'primitive' Others, and similarly pondered problems of culture and history (Manganaro 2002). In history, in the social sciences and in nationalist discourses, the savage Other became an important foil to define the modern self. This kind of 'primitivism' was crucial to early anthropology too (Schüttpelz 2005), but the Malinowskian revolution turned the focus from the modern self to the primitive Other: the primary purpose of fieldwork and ethnography became to understand non-modern Others, in their respective social and historical environments. While the 'imaginary ethnography' of scholars like Frazer and Durkheim was completely de-contextualised and aimed at timeless truth, the new ethnography pioneered by Malinowski ideally could capture the context of a society in its entirety. Malinowski, in his early notes, imagines the ethnographer as a 'Perfect Being [...] able to record all regularities in social grouping and behaviour by objective means of collecting data (including by kinemato-graph and phonograph)' (as quoted in Young 2004: 591–92). Accordingly, Malinowski outlined a method for ethnographic work that tried to capture as much as possible of the relevant context: 'all social action and individual behaviour would be recorded insofar as they were regular and socially conditioned and not merely idiosyncratic' (Young 2004: 592). By differentiating recurring regularities from one-off contingencies, the ethnographer would be able to analyse the structure of that totality called alternately 'society' or 'culture', including the function of each building block.

Real ethnographers, being far from perfect beings, had to sort through potentially innumerable sources of data – texts, objects, pictures, films, recordings and even their own memories – and construct regularities and idiosyncrasies. The tools and machines they developed for this filtering process included a theoretical language (e.g. 'structure', 'continuity', 'practice' and 'event'), and specific media, formats and institutions. The assumption that a 'totality' existed, whether in the 'social whole' or in 'culture', was particularly important in this process, as it promised to limit the endless horizon of context. Capturing this 'totality' may be impossible in principle,

but anthropologists could approximate an understanding of the whole, especially when working with small non-state groups, for instance in the Pacific. In these contexts – where the boundaries of the respective ‘total society’ coincided with the waterline of an island, where relatively few written sources existed, and where communication was mainly oral – ethnographers could get very close to understanding the whole. At least, that was the assumption, and it contrasted radically with other field sites that were part of ‘states’ or ‘civilisations’. In civilisations such as China, ‘total society is beyond [the] individual grasp [of the ethnographer]’, Maurice Freedman wrote, and continues:

And yet, if he is to be informative when he pronounces on his findings, he must have had access to material bearing on the total society and be able to bring his own work into relation with it. It is in this limited sense that anthropologists working on China must aim at the total society. (Freedman 1963: 10–11)

The hypothesis of the ‘total society’ thus allowed the anthropologist to reduce social complexity to relatively ‘simple’ regularities. This was particularly pronounced in classic ethnographies of British social anthropology, which identified social logics and cultural meaning, for instance, in the Kula Ring (Malinowski 1922), in Azande witchcraft (Evans-Pritchard 1937) and in the peasant economy of Suzhou (Fei 1939). Seen in this way, we could say that the anthropological concepts of ‘culture’ and ‘society’ fundamentally made complexity understandable, allowing readers to respond, ‘that’s actually very simple’.

Today, this kind of complexity-reduction has gone out of fashion. Nobody wants to radically ‘reduce’ complexity any longer. Instead, emphasis is placed on irregularity, affect and interconnectedness of the more-than-human world. It is assumed that everything is already incredibly complex, and the goal of anthropological knowledge production is to present this complexity in such a way that the reader can say, ‘Oh, that’s really complex’. Some colleagues even argue that increasing complexity should be the central purpose of anthropological scholarship altogether (Strathern 1995; Dan-Cohen 2017).

Regarding China, anthropologists and others have dismissed the assumption of a ‘social totality’ (Feuchtwang 2001: ch. 1) and have questioned the meanings and boundaries of ‘Chineseness’ (Chun 1996). If certain bundles of social connections – such as those anthropologists found on Pacific islands – never scaled up to the totality called ‘society’, Chinese connections could not be scaled down to that unit and instead had to be related to supra-society totalities, such as ‘civilisation’ and ‘empire’.

At the same time, in the real world, significant social changes occurred that made it even more difficult to delimit the context of a ‘bounded field site’: foreign anthropologists were again allowed to do fieldwork in the PRC, Taiwan introduced multi-party elections, and labour migration, marketisation and consumerism transformed all aspects of everyday life. Today, Chinese products, Chinese people and Chinese ideas can be found almost anywhere on the planet – much more so than in the 1960s – to the extent that ‘China as context’ is omnipresent today (see Introduction, this volume). Both developments – the postmodern critique of master narratives and the globalisation of Chinese culture – pose the problem of ‘China as context’ anew: what is the relevant context? What is ‘China’? And how should one write about it?

Despite the mounting self-criticism of anthropological representation, anthropologists since the 1980s have continued to produce ‘normal science’ that relied on total categories, in our case, first and foremost, ‘China’. Just like anthropologists keep writing ‘ethnography’, even though there might be good reason to drop (the totality of) ‘ethnos’ (Rees 2018), China anthropologists keep writing about ‘China’. Only now, the positions of ‘context’ and ‘China’ have swapped. While Maurice Freedman and modernist anthropology could confidently refer to ‘the context of China’, and leave it at that, since the 1980s, anthropologists have increasingly questioned the meanings and implications of ‘China as context’. Note the frequency of ‘China’ and ‘Chinese’ in the titles of so many articles and books. Markers that were supposed to provide the ‘context’ of the study have now become the primary object of anthropological enquiry: what is ‘Chinese’ about transnationalism (Ong and Nonini 1997) and individualisation (Yan 2010), for instance? The shared ambition is to reach better descriptions of ‘China as context’; if not to understand the context, then at least to add further nuance to it.

Writing ethnography always implies some authority over the relevant scales of knowledge: once the relevant context is determined, we scale down to smaller levels. This movement, by necessity, is a movement of simplification; a narrowing of complexity into a smaller set of possibilities. Conversely, if we start by defining one object alone, we might scale up to a potentially limitless number of relations that possibly refract this object. While this second movement, in principle, increases complexity, the choice of particular connections and scales again limits possibilities and simplifies complexity.

Anthropological writing needs to invoke a context for ethnography, and ethnography can be used to create new context. Anthropologists of China have done both when they invoked ‘the context of China’ for village ethnography, for instance, or when they used contemporary ethnographic knowledge to refine ‘China as context’. These moments roughly correspond to the

certainty of context (e.g. in reified culture) in modernist anthropology and to postmodern play with context; shifting from the authority of the observer toward a dialogue between the readers, writers and subjects of ethnography (Dilley 2002: 450–51). But China anthropology faced specific challenges to do with real-world politics, the overwhelming presence of the category and signifier ‘China’, and the mass of texts produced in and about ‘China’. These factors made it difficult to handle the scales involved and persuade the reader that the ‘context’ invoked or created in ethnographic writing was at the right distance from the world and experience.

Village ethnography: the context of China

For any topic an anthropologist might choose in ‘China’, there are unnumerable texts available that have dealt with the place or the problem before. In most places in Han-China, there are numerous local gazetteers (*difang zhi* 地方志) issued by subsequent dynasties which are readily available. From the great histories and the Confucian classics to modern novels and Chinese social sciences, and from Jesuit accounts to modern travel writers and journalists, the amount of text that could be relevant to an anthropologist’s field site is endless (the complementary WeChat-based research referenced in Qiu, Chapter 1 in this volume – a kind of social media text now suffusing most field sites – is just the tip of a huge contextual iceberg).

This creates specific challenges for ethnographers, regarding what they should read and cite. As it is humanly impossible to cite everything, let alone read everything, researchers must select, paraphrase and sometimes make do with second- or third-hand references. At times they must also ignore certain texts and exclude them from their relevant context.

To give a random example: As a non-native speaker of Chinese, I began learning the Chinese script only in my early 20s. Before, during and after my first long-term fieldwork in Hubei Province, I read widely, especially contemporary novels and Chinese anthropology. One of the first texts I tackled in classical Chinese was *Travel Notes from Rongmei* (*Rongmei Jiyou* 容美纪游) (Gu 1991), in which Qing Dynasty literatus Gu Cai 顾彩 provides observations of the chiefdoms that ruled parts of what later became Enshi 恩施 Prefecture. Two friends (one in Enshi and one in Beijing) who gave me some lessons in classical Chinese, expressed surprise at my choice of text. ‘Why not choose one of the well-known classics?’ my retired school-teacher friend in Bashan 巴山 would often ask.

In my PhD dissertation and the resulting monograph, I ended up quoting at length from Gu Cai’s notes (Steinmüller 2013: 36–39) and included a brief section on local gazetteers from the Qing Dynasty (2013: 40–43).

These references were intended to frame how a local place – such as Enshi – was perceived from the outside over the centuries (primarily as an unruly border area). The selection of references and passages influenced as much by my own limitations as by the canonising efforts of numerous intellectuals and editors before me. Together, this created a context that was, by necessity, a simplification of the real-existing chaos of the social world that I experienced.

Many anthropologists of China have faced similar challenges of choosing the right context. The ‘village ethnography’, in particular, embodies this problem concisely. What were the respective boundaries of the field sites that later became the relevant context of ‘the village’, where people lived *Under the Ancestors’ Shadow* (Hsu 1948) or *In One’s Own Shadow* (Liu 2000)? The authors of those classics, and many others in the anthropology of rural China (Chan, Madsen, and Unger 1984; Madsen 1984; Ruf 1998; Ku 2004), have tried to reflect on the conditions and the wider background setting of their field sites. It seems to me noteworthy that either the framework of ‘village China’, including the equivalence of ‘the village’ with ‘the nation’, was taken for granted (in the first half of the twentieth century) or under-reflected and under-explored (since the 1980s). The careful reflections of Liu Xin on the history and nature of ‘urbanism’ in China confirm the rule (Liu 2002): that for anthropologists at least, the contexts of their studies – the city, the countryside, ‘China’ – were not the main focus of their work. They essentially adopted texts written by others (including historians, political scientists and philosophers) as ‘con-text’ of their own studies.

Take for instance the recent impressive ethnographic study of ghost media, psychiatry and Maoism by Emily Ng. Having introduced the place of study – the ‘landlocked, heavily agricultural province of Henan’ (Ng 2020: 3) – she provides a ‘cosmography for the sake of orientation’ to introduce some necessary background knowledge on yin and yang, heaven and earth, etc., supported by a series of references, including the ‘*Yijing* (commonly known in the West as the *I Ching* or the *Book of Changes*)’, and the following texts: Puett (2002); Csikszentmihalyi (2006); Major (1993); Farquhar and Zhang (2012); Jullien (1995); and Zhan (2016); all in one paragraph (Ng 2020: 6).

The texts cited here provide a ‘con-text’ of the ethnography that follows. Just like the *Travel Notes from Rongmei*, they are largely arbitrary; and might never have been mentioned by fieldwork participants. However, as a chosen context, they provide a window through which certain things can be seen. No matter the frame and size of this window, what can be seen through it, is necessarily less than everything that is on the other side, the ‘great outdoors’ of reality that possibly exists independent of the perception of sentient beings (Meillassoux 2008). But once the window is chosen (and

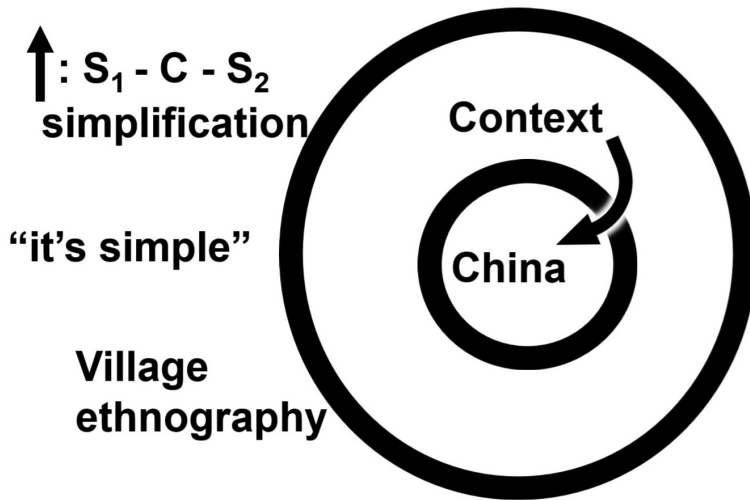


Figure 5.1 From context (S₁) via ethnography (C) to China (S₂)
(diagram by author).

the ‘context’ fixed) we have an initial limitation, a simplification of what happens outdoors. However much complexity (C) becomes visible, the ultimate result will be a secondary simplification (S₂). The sequence thus is one from the context (S₁) via ethnography (C) to China (S₂), or schematised: S₁ – C – S₂ (see Figure 5.1).

Anthropology as social commentary: China as context

The alternative is to focus all one’s effort on the context, and this is the road taken by another group of China anthropologists. In fact, this approach is perhaps more common today: the most influential texts in English-speaking China anthropology – for instance, those written by Yan Yunxiang (2003; 2010) and Zhang Li (2001; 2010) – are largely intended as social commentary. These works identify various social developments in the PRC today, which are analysed using a general toolkit primarily inspired by sociology. For example, how can we understand middle-class housing, individualisation, the psy-boom, competition and precarity in China today? Obviously, these are extremely important social issues, and no one can deny that we urgently need to find explanations and solutions. It is also undeniable that anthropologists have been diligent in providing ethnographic data on those phenomena.

There is however a tendency in this branch of China anthropology to overemphasise the new context. Two benchmarks can be used to recognise

such overemphasis: a) the immense difference the context is supposed to make, and b) the simplicity of the solutions offered. The argument often begins by noting the difference between contemporary Chinese realities and 'Western' theory, and then solves this discrepancy by proposing a theory specifically adapted to the Chinese context – but not generalisable. Ultimately, what is explained here is a new social context, the basic features of social change in China. Due to the history of the Communist government, market reforms and local communities' reactions, we now see certain forms of individualism and class aspiration in China. It seems clear that these arguments make good sense for China but have limited applicability elsewhere. This is not only because they are not meant as comparative or generalist argument, but also because their main aim is to provide social commentary, and as such, to provide a nuanced account of China as context. Schematically, we can understand the thought operation as a movement from complexity to complexity: a context is problematised in its difference and complexity (C1); this complexity is then simplified through ethnography and theoretical analysis (S), resulting in a new complexity (C2), which can be summarised as 'China as context' (see Figure 5.2).

Foreground and background

Core challenges for China anthropology thus lie in context, and the field remains distant from some of the general yardsticks well established in social anthropology. In fact, those ground rules on relevant context were central to Malinowski's outline of participant observation, as opposed to the arm-chair reflections of previous anthropologists such as Frazer. Malinowski situated his arguments about meaning and social relations within a specific empirical locale, whereas Frazer freely jumped from one place to another without such grounding. The 'persuasive fiction' of anthropology, then, was about the 'right context' (Strathern *et al.* 1987); and anthropological description created 'its own context in which ideas drawn from different social origins are kept distinct by reference to those origins' (Strathern 1988: 16–17). However, this kind of reflective engagement with context has been challenging for anthropologists of China, given that in this part of the world 'context' – the sheer number of texts existing in each field site and written about each field site – was overwhelming and impossible to ignore.

'China as context' itself remains the crucial and debilitating Achilles' heel of China anthropology. The volume of text and the weight of meaning associated with 'China' are so immense that anthropologists have struggled to tame and harness them for their own analytical purposes. They have found it difficult to move from context as text to context as situation, from what

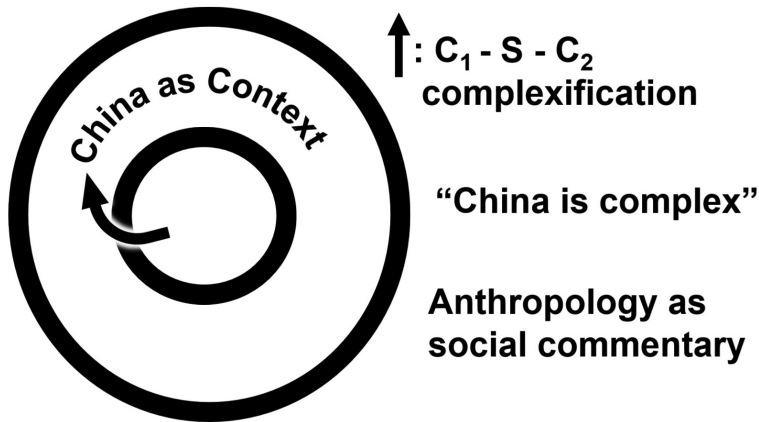


Figure 5.2 A new complexity (diagram by author).

in Chinese is called *yujing* 语境, the literary context, to *beijing* 背景, the background (see Introduction, this volume).

What is needed is to relativise ‘China as context’, and to think about ‘context’ in different ways. This could be achieved, for instance, by following actors in their own practices of attention, through the resonances between background and foreground actions. Such practices of paying attention (and of attention-seeking) are not necessarily tied to ‘China’; they are neither exhaustively given in texts nor ever fully captured in writing. No matter how multi-vocal and ambivalent texts may be, they are always a re-description of reality. Texts simplify certain parts of reality and create new complexities at a second level. Modernist anthropology offered artificial closures of meaning that embodied reductive simplicity. Post-modern anthropology, in contrast, avoids such closures and aims at multiplying complexity. Neither approach, however, helps us understand the pathways between complexity and simplicity.

For such pathways, it is necessary to study the background and foreground of social action without giving in to the temptations of simplification and complexification; that is, without reducing background to ‘con-text’ and without reducing foreground to ‘China’. Only then, it might be possible to appreciate the emergence of complexity and of simplicity, as sums that are larger than their parts.

The two labels ‘context’ and ‘China’ embody the two main problems I am dealing with here: the fact that too much of the relevant background is assumed to exist in texts (‘con-text’) and that too much of the relevant foreground is assumed to lie in ‘China’. The latter is a mega-category that is questionable in its political, cultural, geographical and social aspects (Zhao 2006; Dirlik 2019; see also Hubbert, Chapter 4, this volume). The former is

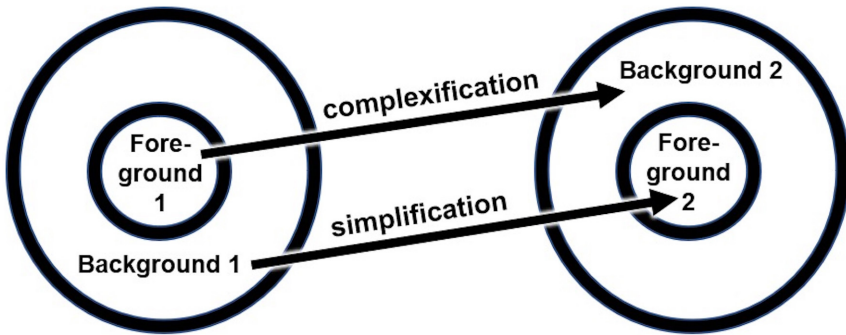


Figure 5.3 Movements of complexification from foreground 1 to background 2, and simplification from background 1 to foreground 2 (diagram by author).

not merely given in ‘texts’, despite the significant role texts and writing have played in Chinese history.

In principle then, ethnographic writing should explicate the movements of ‘backgrounding’ and ‘foregrounding’. That is, it should reasonably and persuasively show how certain features of the world are highlighted, or foregrounded, in perception and action. This movement is, in essence, a filtering of relevance that selects a small part of the background noise, and thus, a simplification (see Zhan, Chapter 7, this volume). It needs to be combined with its opposite, namely ‘backgrounding’: the process of relating a foregrounded element to its background. The reality of this move is a complexification, that is, an entanglement that weaves and intertwines new ties to the foregrounded phenomenon. However, capturing this movement of complexification, again, by necessity, involves a simplification – a limiting choice that, nonetheless, aims to make complexity visible. Figure 5.3 illustrates these movements: the complexification from foreground 1 to background 2, and simplification from background 1 to foreground 2.

Return to China

Can we escape the context of China, if we leave the Chinese mainland, as numerous Chinese students, companies and migrants have done in recent years? Studies of global China today foreground phenomena far from ‘China’ and assemble backgrounds unrecognisable as ‘Chinese’. However, once we examine some recent ethnographies of ‘global China’, it becomes apparent how difficult, if not impossible, it is to escape the context of China. Take for instance the following titles: *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness* (Driessen 2019), *Affective Encounters* (Wu 2020), *Collaborative Damage*

(Bunkenborg, Nielsen, and Pedersen 2022) and *Fabricating Transnational Capitalism* (Rofel and Yanagisako 2019). These are four recent ethnographies dealing with the encounters of Chinese and non-Chinese outside the boundaries of the PRC. Accordingly, the adjective ‘Chinese’ appears prominently in the subtitles of all four books. In a fairly obvious way, by using this adjective, the ethnographers remain tied to China. At the same time, their declared objective is to add nuance to certain phenomena (such as migration, trade, logistics and the politics of empire) – in other words, to explore what is specifically ‘Chinese’ about these contexts: what distinguishes Chinese capitalism, Chinese globalisation and Chinese empire today?

For example, the authors of *Collaborative Damage* (a volume on Chinese state projects in Mozambique and Mongolia, see Introduction and Rippa, Chapter 2, this volume) conclude that ‘there are specific characteristics and logics to contemporary Chinese globalisation, and that one can speak of a Chinese empire in the making’. But they quickly add that these concepts are full of ‘contradictions, conflicts, and constraints’ (Bunkenborg, Nielsen, and Pedersen 2022: 235). Setting apart their work from other studies that posit ‘a general and single logic of Chinese state capital’, they describe their own approach as follows: ‘here we have sought instead to develop an analytics that can move along with the nonlinear dynamics of Chinese globalisation as its paradoxical form takes shape from concurrent sociomaterial processes in different parts of the globe’ (Bunkenborg, Nielsen, and Pedersen 2022: 237). But the reader will search in vain for the exact parameters of the ‘nonlinear dynamics’ and the paradoxes of globalisation and empire. The eventual return to the mega-category of ‘China’ is prefigured by the self-positioning of the authors as speculating bystanders rather than participant observers: three Danish men who are identified with their areas of expertise and respectively ‘defend’ Mongolian, Chinese and Mozambican positions. It is debatable whether the sum of these three outsider positions results in an understanding of global China ‘from within’, as the authors claim it does (7 and 38).

Even though the declared aim is to ‘follow the actors’ as they ‘figure out’ (2022: 237) the context, it appears that neither local actors nor Danish anthropologists have found any persuasive description of what is happening, and it remains unclear what distinguishes the ‘nonlinear dynamics’ of globalisation and empire – other than the suggestion that they are ‘Chinese’. The ‘collaborative damage’ referred to in the title is thus rooted in a shared understanding of China as context, which is based on a random selection of contradictory references yet is asserted all the more forcefully. The collateral of this collaboration is a return to the great simplification of ‘China’.

The empirical references in this text are mostly from outside the boundaries of the People’s Republic of China, making this a lost opportunity to

problematised the ‘background’ of ‘China’. Whatever complexity or simplicity might emerge is ultimately overshadowed by the omnipresent ‘context of China’. Today the ‘context of China’ is pervasive, not just in Mongolia or Mozambique, and not only because products ‘made in China’ are everywhere. But that too is significant, as it makes the question of ‘Chineseness’ an everyday concern for consumers the world over. Products ‘made in China’ are often seen as cheap copies, and in China itself there is a whole genre of *shanzhai* 山寨 products – literally, ‘mountain fortress’, *shanzhai* refers to cheap and inventive copies of brand items. Here too, the standard explanation is the ‘return to China’, or rather, to stereotypes of Chineseness. *Shanzhai*, for instance, may be an expression of the perennial preference for virtuous skill (over authenticity) in Chinese thinking (Han 2017). Even if there is some truth in this, it does not help us understand the specific conditions of *shanzhai* creation today. Rather than an ‘essentially Chinese’ philosophy of creation, such copying should be seen as pragmatic imitation under conditions of radical asymmetry and systematic violence. Many examples can be found for such, and I have enumerated a few for the Wa State of Myanmar that is often called a ‘*shanzhai* version of China’ (Steinmüller 2022b). In our context, this matters because it starts from one particular point – say the experience of living in the Wa State – to question the foreground/background of ‘China’.

Return to context

One might well begin an exploration of China as context from almost anywhere today. Even within the borders of the People’s Republic of China, the same has been done by numerous Chinese anthropologists working on specific local places and their history. For instance, one could outline the contours of a local world on the edge of the Pacific Ocean that, many hundred years ago, had nothing to do with ‘China’ as it is understood today. Wang Mingming paints such picture of the ‘local world’ of Quanzhou, providing exhaustive empirical detail on lineage politics, temple associations and local administration (Wang 2009). He begins his study in a place that is undeniably part of the People’s Republic, only to discover the ‘non-Chinese’ elements within it – the wonders of history and the everyday. In his historical investigation, Wang engages with both Chinese and English concepts, but he consistently returns to Chinese terms, resulting in what he describes as a ‘Chinese model for historical anthropology’, as per the subtitle of the book.

A similar thought sequence underlies another attempt to ‘de-contextualise’: in *The West as the Other* (Wang 2014) Wang reconfigures the relevant background of ‘the West’ as a cardinal direction against which Chinese

knowledge production has operated. He examines Mandarin discourses, local ethnographies and ancient myths of the ‘Mother of the West’ to establish a basis for ‘directionology’ (*fangxiangxue* 方向学), a spatial and practical wisdom where cardinal directions, and specifically the West, hold meanings quite different from the contemporary understanding of ‘the West’ as the site of European modernity and reason.

Wang Mingming’s work on notions such as ‘All under Heaven’ (*tianxia* 天下), civilisation (*wenming* 文明), and the ‘supra-social system’ (*chao shehui tixi* 超社会体系), can be read as an effort to decentre European anthropology, and to reconstruct the foreground and background of a new historical anthropology that is essentially Chinese. However, the risk of elevating a ‘local’ term (such as *fangxiang* – direction, *guanxi* 关系 – relation or *tianxia* – all under heaven) to universal significance is that one may become confined to a particular context that remains unquestioned. If in this move, the theoretical sequence from a background to a foreground is rigorous – both as an empirical sequence and a logical consequence – it still may not justify the final claims about the chosen context. The question remains whether such a concept, with its intrinsic scales and comparisons, can be valid for anything that is not Chinese; and how the concept remains tied to a specific ‘Chineseness’ that is hierarchical, centred and scripted.

Even though the declared aim is to ‘situate’ Chinese worlds in their proper ‘context’, there remains a risk of reverting to an underlying meta-narrative – namely, that of an elite tradition whose authenticity is rooted in a textual tradition. This effect is reminiscent of what Englund and Leach have observed about an earlier school interested in ‘multiple modernities’: ‘The knowledge claims *specific* to anthropologists studying multiple modernities create, unreflexively, an epistemological vacuum in which the ‘wider context’ inadvertently represents the anthropologist’s own superior understanding of the world’ (Englund and Leach 2000: 237, emphasis in original).

The danger of returning to an arbitrarily chosen context for China that ultimately affirms only the power position of the author is most evident in the philosophical anthropology of French philosopher François Jullien (e.g. 1995; 2000). Much like the ‘imaginary ethnographies’ of twentieth-century primitivism in anthropology and literature (Heyne 2020), Jullien’s arguments rely on random snippets of text re-arranged into a grand, unified worldview – a culture and ontology that is essentially ‘Chinese’ and thus radically different from Europe (Matthews 2023). In contrast, anthropologists have been far more cautious in their treatment of the ‘context’ of ‘China’: for instance, when critiquing (Western) social theory of religion,

charisma and ghosts against Chinese ‘context’, the search has been for ‘adequate theory’, rather than ‘Chinese theory’ (Feuchtwang 2010).

The context of Amazonia

However, both anthropologists and philosophers must contend with possible challenges to the contexts they have chosen. If Wang Mingming has arranged extensive background texts to support his arguments about place and cosmology, it is entirely possible to re-arrange these texts, foregrounding different argumentative lines and relegating others to the background. This is precisely what Aurélie Nénot has done in juxtaposing Wang’s argument with those of Philippe Descola and Eduardo Viveiros De Castro (Nénot 2021; 2024). Re-reading the anthropological tradition from Lévi-Strauss onwards, and focusing specifically on the structuralism of Descola, Viveiros de Castro and Wang, she emphasises the opposition between substance and relation, rather than between nature and culture. While all three theorists propose new ways of understanding relations, they neglect the question of substance. The effect is that the body – the specific human body as locus of thought and action, as well as different local models of the body – is ‘erased’ (which is the meaning of the French title of her book, *Le Corps effacé*, or in English, ‘the body erased’). She argues that this effect is most pronounced in Wang Mingming’s work. Once again, this outcome is tied to the power of context.

Descola and Viveiros de Castro draw on Amazonian ethnography in their efforts to decentre anthropology. For instance, Viveiros de Castro explores how the Araweté conceptualise kinship and war as two forms of predation (de Castro 1992), while Descola examines how Achuar interact with plants and animals and engage with everything that Europeans call ‘nature’ (Descola 1996). But in the grand theoretical schemes they develop, ethnographic detail is often subordinated to the formalism of theoretical models: for Descola, four ontological modes as combinations of continuous and discontinuous interiorities and exteriorities, and for Viveiros de Castro, perspectivism or multi-naturalism as universal cosmopolitics. Despite their intentions, both frameworks remain tied to European philosophical traditions, drawing core prompts from Husserl (for Descola) and Deleuze (for Viveiros de Castro).

As a result, local ethnographic differences are minimised or overlooked entirely. Specifically, substances and bodies remain blind spots within the rigid dichotomy of interiority-exteriority, and within the radical a-substantialism of perspectivism, where self-hood is defined by ‘having a point of view’. Many synergies can be identified between such anthropological

relationism and Chinese thought; but there are also notable differences. The radical alterities conceptualised by Descola and Viveiros de Castro are rooted in a particular philosophy of ‘being’, namely ‘ontology’. The same concept, however, seems irrelevant in Chinese thought, where there appears to be no equivalent – or even a good translation possible – for the substantified being of ‘ontology’ (Du 2011; Feuchtwang 2014).

Wang Mingming addresses this challenge directly, and rejects the core propositions of ontological anthropology. He argues that it is impossible to separate ‘ontological modes’ and attach them to social groups, selves or situations, because these modes have always co-existed in each ‘civilisation’ (Wang 2017). Drawing on Fei Xiaotong and classical Chinese philosophy, he points out that each self (*ji* 己) is constituted by ‘Others’, and that everything, from the human to the cosmos, is implicated in flows of life (*sheng* 生) (Wang 2023). His anthropology elevates Chinese terms such as *guanxi* (relation), *wenming* (civilisation) and *tianxia* (‘All under Heaven’) to general anthropological concepts. These moves are rooted in the efforts of Chinese intellectuals to ‘indigenise’ and ‘Sinify’ Western concepts, and are based on a particular reading of this context that emphasises the universality of hierarchical relations. In Névot’s critique, this leads to what she terms a ‘meta-cosmology of relationships’, where the ‘body-cosmos and all that emanates from it are ... erased in order to support the idea of a civilisation co-extensiveness’, and where ‘individuals, cultures, and minorities are ... banished in favour of a broader and more abstract historical and geographical panorama’ (Névot 2024: 5.2). The ‘recolonization of anthropology from China’ (Névot 2024: 5.5) proposed is based on a selective reading of context, and for Wang Mingming, the ‘context’ is indeed a combination of canonical texts in the social sciences (e.g. Lévi-Strauss, Granet), in Chinese history and philosophy.

According to Névot, the body is similarly ‘erased’ (*effacé*) in the work of Descola, Viveiros de Castro and Wang, albeit for different reasons related to the core propositions of the respective theories: the categorical separation of interiority and exteriority (Descola), the metaphysical perspectivism of Viveiros de Castro, and the hierarchical relationism of Wang. Although all three thinkers are inspired by specific ethnographies of Amazonia and China, only Descola’s theory claims to be completely independent of any ethnographic context. In contrast, both Viveiros de Castro and Wang frequently use the adjectives ‘Amerindian’ and ‘Chinese’ to characterise their theories.

Human beings practically know the world by foregrounding and backgrounding. These efforts are interpreted and attached to specific conditions and consequences in anthropological theory. To use a popular example, only when you put on your perspectivist glasses, can you see that for the

Jaguar, blood is manioc beer. Yet, the empirical origin of a theory continuous to matter, for aesthetic, economic and political reasons. There are some remarkable differences between Amazonian and Chinese anthropology in this sense. No matter whether anthropological theory severs its umbilical cord with Amazonian data (as Descola does), claims to transcend ethnographic context or reaffirms this origin (as Viveiros de Castro does), and expands the context through sheer willpower, Amazonian theories seem to hold a certain authority over the use of context. At any rate, more so than Chinese theories.

One core difference lies in the role of writing. In Amazonian sociality, writing did not play a central role, and often, ethnographers and anthropologists were the first to document Amazonian lives in detail. In contrast, in China, writing has been an essential part of the social fabric and central to political power for at least three millennia. This has significant empirical, aesthetic, economic and political implications, particularly on how practical knowledge is foregrounded and backgrounded in Chinese sociality. Anthropological theorists, who attempt to systematise knowledge and action within this empirical environment cannot ignore the impact of textual production on the social processes of foregrounding and backgrounding. To understand the historical and contemporary context, it is necessary to examine the effects of writing on the social; and to the same purposes, it is imperative to engage in systematic reading.

The second core difference stems from the radically different archives and texts produced about Amazonia and China. While there were numerous missionaries, historians and later geographers and social scientists who wrote about Amazonia, the ethnographies of twentieth-century anthropologists in this region carry a different weight compared to ethnographies about China. One simple reason is the relative volume of text produced on China. In addition to the writings of missionaries, historians, geographers, social scientists, there are entire academic disciplines – Sinology and Chinese studies – that operate in all major European languages, as well as Japanese, Russian and Chinese itself. Outside the academy, a professionalised group of pundits, journalists and think tanks also specialise in China. Anthropologists tend to be minor figures within this vast field of textual production and their impact beyond the university is limited. I only have anecdotal evidence, but it seems that anthropologists of Amazonia are sought out more frequently by journalists compared to their counterparts working on China.

A third major difference is that there is a long-standing tradition of ethnography in Chinese, that stands in between the ethnographic ‘Other’ and the anthropological texts produced in foreign languages. Anthropology produced in Chinese generally operated in a different political and economic environment and had different ambitions when compared to British social

anthropology and American cultural anthropology. Rather than pursuing ‘objectivity’, a core objective of Chinese anthropology has been social improvement and national strengthening (see Tan, Chapter 6, this volume). An important factor in determining the impact and success of Chinese anthropology has been the ‘aura of the local’ that anthropological texts could convey (Steinmüller 2022a). Both tendencies have produced powerful ethnographic descriptions and anthropological theories, which complicate new attempts at foregrounding (or backgrounding).

Against this background, we can understand better the different reception of Amazonian and Chinese attempts at decentring anthropology. Each may be criticised on purely theoretical grounds (because they ‘erase the body’, as per Névot); but Amazonian anthropology can claim a privileged position and power over context that Chinese anthropology lacks. In the aesthetics, politics and economics of context production (or in other words, in the transition from *beijing*-background to *yujing*-literary discourse), the ethnographic texts that anthropologists produce in foreign languages about Amazonia acquire a certain authority, whereas in China they are always at risk of being sidelined by competing texts in Chinese and in other languages.

However, the same challenges can also present an advantage for China anthropology. The overwhelming power of the textual tradition in China, along with the number of texts produced about the region, sets China apart not only from Amazonia but also from other regions. One possible approach to mastering the context of China is to problematise writing ethnographically.

Submutance and scriptural shamanism

This is precisely what some scholars have attempted, particularly in studies of Daoism, divination and shamanism. Rather than accepting the authority of certain texts, Sinologists of Daoism and divination have questioned the effects of writing in relation to ritual, divination and body (Schipper 1997; Vandermeersch 2013). Building on this corpus of texts, Névot (2024) adopts the concept of ‘submutance’ from Vandermeersch (2013: 108ff); to carve out a theoretical context for her own ethnographic work on scriptural shamanism in Southwest China. Rather than questions of ‘stable being’, what matters are phenomena ‘that are both placed at the foundation (*sub*) and inscribed in a movement, a mutation (*mutare*) far removed from any stasis and implying, on the contrary, transformation’ (Névot 2024: 17). This concept of ‘substance-in-mutation’ guides her comparison of how Descola, Viveiros de Castro and Wang conceptualise relations, bodies and intentions. ‘Submutance’ originally emerged from ethnographic enquiries into what

happens when Daoists and shamans write. As such, the concept is a tool for ‘backgrounding complexification’, attempting to balance substances and relations by integrating them in one movement. It finds its fullest expression in the ethnographic investigations of scriptural shamans in Southwest China.

The scriptural shamanism of the Nipa, Nuosu and Lolop’o of Yunnan province is doubly removed from the textual traditions of Han-China. In her ethnographic work, Névot details the flows of breath, blood and water that are instantiated by the ‘masters of psalmody’ (*bimo* 毕摩) of the Yi-Sani branch of people now classified as ‘Yi’ 彝 minority in the People’s Republic (2019; 2024: ch. 6). The transmission of *bimo* writing itself follows the bloodlines of lineages, and until recent state efforts at standardisation, each script was distinct from others. Engagement with the script is always ritualised, and rather than separating meaning from context, meaning emerges in bodily movement. Instead of ‘signifying’ objects, ritual writing creates bodies; these scripts, the *bimo* insist, are the flows of breath, blood and water. Thus, in this context, writing does not separate substance-matter from mind-intention, but instead fuses them in ‘submutance’.

Anthropologists of similar writing traditions among neighbouring Yi groups have described the effect of writing as ‘manifesting the invisible’ (Swancutt 2022) based on an Indigenous theory of textuality (Mueggler 2022). Névot shows that these alternative concepts may be seen as different expressions of the fundamental category of submutance (Névot 2024: ch. 6). They similarly problematise writing itself, its reception and meaning, including the usual strategies of translation and classification. Mueggler concludes his article on the Né script of north Yunnan as follows:

the transformation of textuality into ‘literature’ for the consumption of the nation’s majority have reinforced the widely held sense that the cultural legacies of ‘minority nationalities’ are vastly inferior to that of the Han majority. [...] A better approach, more aware of the actual histories of the colonized peoples of the Yunnan-Guizhou plateau, and more useful to indigenous efforts to reconnect with those histories, is to understand indigenous textuality in this region as a form of life. Né script is more than graphs on a page. When considered in the context of its creation, recitation, and reiteration, it can be seen as fashioning a distinctive form of life in which human persons and nonhuman meta-persons emerge as textual marks in the interfolded surfaces of a written world. (Mueggler 2022: 20)

Note the emphasis on context: local practices must be considered within their proper local context, Mueggler claims. This is not the superficial reference to external texts typical of village ethnography; nor is it aimed at a

specific Chinese context in the manner of anthropology as social commentary. Instead, this theoretical approach seeks to provide general propositions, starting from a rejection of 'China as context'. The initial perspective is a local one, distinct from and often in opposition to the Han Chinese viewpoint.

What emerges is a local world transformed through practices of writing at the margins of imperial and communist government. Yet utmost care is taken not to 'jump to the context'; that is, to assume prematurely there is a stable set of relevant texts, let alone, to link them directly to 'China'. Instead, the effect of textualisation itself is problematised. The guiding question is, what does the creation of text – including the processes of translation, collection, archiving and reception – do to the world? Textualisation inevitably has a dual effect: it simplifies and simultaneously establishes further complexity. Text simplifies social reality, offering a single solution from countless options (for instance, which name should be given to a plant? How to describe a ritual?). By providing one particular answer ('this is a wild tea, *Camellia sinensis*', or 'Then the spirits are given offerings to accompany the soul of the deceased'), a new element is introduced and a new connection is forged. The simplifying effect is the movement from background to foreground, the selection of one particular foreground against a background. And the complexifying effect is the reverse, the movement from a particular foreground back to the wider background that surrounds and supports it.

Conclusion

To put it in the simplest possible way: the fact that China anthropology cannot escape the context of China renders it irrelevant to general anthropology. Ultimately, the focus is always on 'China', resulting in either too little or too much context. Anthropologists of China either uncritically accept the context of their study or make the critical commentary on the context the sole object of their study.

Too often, anthropologists of China have not seen it as their task to question the broader context of their study: general history is left to historians, nation-state politics to political scientists and culture and language to Sinologists. In this sense, China is quite different from other regions studied by anthropologists, such as Melanesia and Amazonia. Obviously there have been archaeologists, geographers, linguists and political scientists working in those regions too. In their ethnographies, anthropologists may refer to the texts produced in other disciplines; but generally, they provide the historical, political and social context of their field sites themselves.

That is not the case when it comes to China. For a variety of reasons – including the common perception that ‘China is complex’ – anthropologists surrendered the task of creating the background for their studies and consigned themselves to produce case studies within contexts provided by others. These contexts are literally ‘texts’, or rather, large bodies of work produced by various China observers, including Sinologists, historians and political scientists. As historical and social texts, most of them are radical simplifications of the world and of ‘China’. Anthropologists have adopted such contexts for their own purposes; and even if they do not accept them as factual, they can never escape the simplifying effect. The result is another text that is a fractal mirror of the context, both being radical simplifications of the social complexity that is their object. The circular structure (of the simplification of a simplification) is similar to characteristics for which functionalism in Anthropology has been criticised: the arguments are tautological and teleological (Jarvie 1986), and their ultimate justification lies outside the study’s scope: it is mere context.

Anthropologists of course saw the problem, and realised that Chinese society was possibly quite unique, and shaped by particular histories, politics, economics and cosmologies. Consequently, anthropologists rejected all pre-existing contexts and reconstructed them through their studies. However, this shift has similar effects in terms of capturing social complexity: all the observer’s efforts now focus on the context, aiming to add nuance to its description. The descriptive devices – formulas, metaphors, keywords – encapsulate certain aspects of social change. At the same time, they ignore the actual complexity of that which is outside the ‘text’, such as informal interactions and non-literate exchanges. There is a strong tendency to create types and schemas, to emphasise their singularity and therefore to render them useless for general comparison.

Both village ethnography and social commentary remain tied to ‘China’ and ‘context’ and have struggled to meet the combined demands of simplicity and complexity. Similar criticisms can be directed at anthropological knowledge grounded in empirical references to other regions, such as Melanesia and Amazonia. How persuasive is the ‘anthropological fiction’ of Amerindian perspectivism and the Melanesian person today? The main difference between these theoretical outlines and China anthropology is the valance of China and its context: how, when, where, why and how much people write about ‘China as context’ is very different from what has been written about ‘Amazonia as context’. The difference arises from the role that writing has played in Chinese history, and how ‘China’ is written about today. Anthropologists, in one way or another, have to relate their descriptions to the vast array of texts on the botany, geography, history, linguistics, politics, philosophy and more of ‘China’.

The frames of reference given in these con-texts are different and create a ‘little fish in a big pond’ effect for the texts produced by China anthropologists. But the overwhelming presence of ‘China as context’ also holds enormous potential for anthropological theory. To realise this potential, it is necessary to question the simplicity of ‘China’ and complexity of ‘context’, and instead explore the dynamics of foregrounding and background, and their effects on capturing complexity. Concretely, this can be done by foregrounding ‘global China’ or by re-arranging a new background of literary texts. But such attempts, once and again, either return to ‘China’ or return to ‘context’.

The attempts that bracket the context of China for the longest are those that come closest to strong propositions on social complexity and simplicity. In this regard, the arguments discussed about ‘submutances’ are anything but essential to ‘China’, and the analyses of textualisation in shamanic ritual require a rejection of Chinese context. The discussion inevitably returns to Chinese context, such as the history of Daoism or the colonial language of Mandarin Chinese. But the result is not a blackboxing of ‘China’ or an arbitrary selection of context. Instead, the ethnographic description follows the movements of foregrounding and backgrounding and thereby analytically simplifies complexity.

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