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The 'New Feudalism': a problem for Sinologists

Abstract

Since the 1980s, child brides, Taoist priests, lineage halls and other representatives of the so-called new feudalism have characterized Chinese social life. This essay argues that current explanations for this phenomenon are unsatisfactory, and proposes to view the return to traditional social forms as a search for the emotional comfort, essential to human nature, of a familiar social environment during a period of general uncertainty.

The rise of the 'New Feudalism'

We hoped; we waited for the day
The State would wither clean away,
Expecting the Millennium
That theory promised us would come:
It didn't. Specialist must try
To detail all the reasons why.

W. H. Auden
New Year Letter
(January 1, 1940)

In the summer of 1988, while waiting for a ferry, I spent several hours in a small, walled town on the Fujian coast near Putian. To escape the midday sun my companions and I sought shelter in a temple, where, as always, a few old men were dozing or playing mahjong. We took advantage of their leisure to learn what we could of the history of the town and local custom. When the drift of the conversation brought us to marriage, I asked our hosts if there were many *sim-pua* (little daughters-in-law) in the town before Liberation. I was careful to specify 'before Liberation' because our party included two cadre from the country government. The most articulate of our hosts replied: 'Oh, yes, there were lots of them. About a third of the girls here were *sim-pua*'.

Later that same day, after visiting the *ben-xiang* (root) Mazu temple on a small offshore island, we were again delayed at the town we had visited in the morning and again sought shelter in the local temple. Most of the men we had met in the morning were still there. To get the conversation back to where we had left it, I again queried the man who had answered my question about *sim-pua*: 'This morning you said that before Liberation about a third of the girls here were *sim-pua*. Is that right?' 'No, no,' he replied, 'There weren't so many *sim-pua* here before Liberation. There weren't that many until a few years ago'. He then explained that because brideprices were rising rapidly and people on the dry coastal plain were poor, many adopted *sim-pua* because they feared they would not otherwise be able to acquire wives for their sons. The girls came from clinics in the county seat where strict application of the birth control program gave people reason to avoid registering a birth if the child was a girl. One way to do this was to arrange for the midwife to sell the infant 'out the back door' to a poor farmer.

When I told this story to a friend in Hsiamen, he commented, sarcastically, 'Ah, the new feudalism (*xin fengjian*)'. That was the first time I heard the phrase, but I have heard it many times since. One day during a brief visit to Chendai (a small coastal town near Quanzhou) my companion and I struck up a conversation with three young men who were lounging in a small lineage hall. They were self-proclaimed products of post-reform society, proud to tell us that they did not work in the fields. 'We let the old men do that. Or we hire someone to do it. You can make a lot more money working in a factory or doing business'. When it turned out that one of the young men was about to be married, I asked him how much he had paid as brideprice.

'A lot,' he replied, 'The girl's family wanted RMB 50,000, but settled for RMB 40,000. You can't get a wife in this town for less than RMB 30,000. The girl's family has to have enough money to buy a refrigerator, a sewing machine, a motorcyle, a sofa and chairs, and a lot of clothes'. Then he smiled and added jokingly, 'It's the new feudalism'.

The term is usually applied humorously, but it is also used to make a serious political point. One day on my way to Anqi (in southern Fujian west of Quanzhou) I noticed that my bus – and most of the buses we meet on the tortuous mountain road -had a large portrait of Mao Tse-tung pasted on the front windshield. When I mentioned this to my companion after our arrival he pointed out that two small shops near the bus station were selling portraits of Mao together with incense, spirit money, and images of Kuan Yin. 'People now treat Mao like a kind of Buddha. Bus drivers think that if they put his portrait in the window, it will protect them from accidents. Most people no longer know what Mao really stands for. It's the new feudalism'. My companion in this case was a man who believed in the goals of the revolution as articulated by Mao and regarded the policies implemented since his death as a betrayal of those goals.

Sim-pua, bride prices, dowries, Taoist priests, expensive funerals, big wedding parties, refurbished temples, and rebuilt lineage halls – these are the most visible representatives of the new feudalism. The term did not come into common usage until the mid-1980s, but the behavior it refers to was evident as early as the late 1970s. In 1979-80 I spent a year interviewing old women in seven communes in seven different provinces. My purpose was to collect the data needed to reevaluate the demographic conclusions drawn from John Lossing Buck's 1929-31 farm surveys (Barclay, 1976; Wolf, 1984), but I took advantage of my stay to assess as best I could the consequences of the reforms just then getting underway. The most obvious of these was the resurrection of traditional funeral rites. I attended funerals in Jiaomei (in Longhai *xian* in southern Fujian), in Dayi (in Dayi *xian* in Sichuan), and in Fenghuo (in Liquan *xian* in Shaanxi). My impression in all three cases was that these were the first funeral rites performed in the traditional fashion for a long time. Only a few of the old people seemed to know what to do and they often ended up arguing with one another about what certain mourners were to wear and where they were to line up in the procession.

Auden and his generation were disappointed to see that the Soviet state did not 'wither clean away'. My generation experienced their disappointment, and did not expect so much of the revolution in China. But we did expect that after thirty years of repression, the more exotic aspects of Chinese culture were dead. For thirty years the temples were closed; for thirty years the lineage halls were used to store grain or farm machinery; for thirty years the Taoist priests worked in the fields; for thirty years there were no funeral processions; for thirty years Mao's portrait replaced the ancestral tablets; and for thirty years young people married without the benefit of either brideprice or dowry. Generations were born and spent their impressionable years reading Mao rather than Confucius. The Red Guards were taught to destroy all the 'old things' they could find. Yet within only a few months of Mao's death, many of the trappings of the old society were once again on display. We, the specialists, 'must try to detail all the reasons why'. We face a serious challenge. China has presented us with what we can treat, without affront to the Chinese people, as a great natural experiment. Nearly a billion people were put through thirty years of political socialization designed to change their beliefs about human relations and the supernatural. They were subjected to more than just posters and slogans, re-education campaigns, and the threat of being labelled backward or subversive. They were subjected to life in a society reorganized in dramatic ways. If social psychologists can alter people's attitudes by subjecting them to what they know are contrived experiences, why did the Chinese Communist Party fail in its attempt to remould the men-

tality of the Chinese people? Many of us have spent our entire professional lives studying such things as *sim-pua*, mourning dress, ancestor worship, and Taoists priests. Unless we can now explain why these elements of Chinese culture survived such a concerted effort at eradication, we will have to admit that we know very little about them. This is the challenge of the New Feudalism.

Current explanations

There are scholars who argue that the New Feudalism is new and should not be treated as a revival of pre-revolutionary practices (see, for example, Siu, 1978 and 1987). The argument is that while once again mourners are wearing hemp and marriage requires payment of a substantial brideprice, these are not really resuscitated pre-revolutionary practices because their meanings have changed. This must be true in some sense and to some degree.[1] How could it be otherwise given the extent to which Chinese society was restructured after 1949? But it does not blunt the challenge presented by the New Feudalism. The essential questions remains: Why are so many people in the People's Republic behaving in ways that look very much like the ways their parents and grandparents behaved? The meaning of burning incense for Mazu may have changed, but why are people still burning incense for Mazu? Why, I ask those who would deflect the challenge of the New Feudalism in this way, do people still do things the old way despite changes in the meaning effected by changed circumstances?

It will not do to argue that the revolutionary government did not make a serious effort to do away with old things. They may have chosen the wrong way to go about it, but they did make a serious effort. My first impression of just how serious they were came in 1978 when I visited China in the company of a delegation of American animal scientists. Our first stop in China after Beijing (*Peking*) was Huhehot where we were taken to visit a meat-packing plant in the old part of the city. I was not impressed with the plant, but I was impressed with the old city and was determined to see more of it before our departure the following morning – so determined that when I arose early and found the doors of our guest house locked from the outside, I climbed out a window into a tree and thence over the wall to the street. I arrived in the old city just after dawn and after a few minutes located a great *pailou* (commemorative arch) behind which I found piles of broken rock and tile. The *pailou* had once been the entrance to a lamasery. While I was inspecting the ruin, two elderly Mongols joined me and explained that the Red Guard had demolished the compound with hammers and picks. Their gestures and the chips of stone underfoot left no doubt that the demolition had been both thorough and violent.

The lamasery in Huhehot was not the victim of particularly enthusiastic (or particularly violent) youth. Everywhere I went in 1978-79 I found bits and pieces of what were once temples recycled as paving stones and land fill. And it wasn't just temples that had been destroyed. My first field site in 1978 was the famous Evergreen Commune on the outskirts of Beijing near the Summer Palace. To establish their approximate place in the pre-revolutionary social hierarchy, I asked each of my informants what had been included in their dowry.[2] This led very quickly to the discovery that during the Cultural Revolution students from the city had sought out and destroyed all the blue and white vases (*huaping, danping,* and *zhayeguan*) that were once the centerpiece of a proper dowry. More than one old woman cried when I asked her about her dowry because it reminded her of her loss.

It must be added that this effort to destroy

[1] I say 'in some sense and to some degree' because these authors never define what they mean by 'meaning'and never attempt to measure degrees of difference.

[2] It would have been simpler to have asked for each informant's *shenfen*, but I was prohibited from doing so by the authorities who arranged my research.

old things was not completely successful. One of my elderly Evergreen informants saved her dowry vases by burying them in a field near her house. She was proud of her defiance and insisted on my taking a picture of her with her resurrected dowry. Similar defiance preserved the genealogies (*jiapu* and *zupu*) that are now the objects of so much scholarly attention. How they were preserved was suggested by a former land reform cadre I met in 1979 in Jiaomei. When he proved responsive to my questions about his lineage, I risked asking him if his lineage still had a *zupu*. 'Oh, no,' he replied smilingly, 'We burned it. We burned it three times'.

It must be assumed that people who defied the effort to destroy the old culture by hiding such things as flower pots and *zupu* also held fast to many traditional values. And it must also be assumed that many of those who were not brave enough to hide things, did conceal subversive thoughts. Why then, can we not explain the New Feudalism as the expression of those long-repressed thoughts? The problem with the argument is that it forces us to ask another, equally difficult question. In its early years the government of the People's Republic was extraordinarily successful in improving the lot of the Chinese people and enjoyed massive popular support as a result. Between 1949 and 1979, life expectancy in China rose from less than 28 years at birth to more than 70 years, a change which can be only be interpreted as symptomatic of an unprecedented, nation-wide improvement in the standard of living (Bannister, 1987). Old people like my informants in Evergreen were not aware of this actuarial fact, but they were acutely aware that their lives had improved immensely. The woman who had buried her dowry told me that after walking to Beijing from Shandong, her family had lived for years in their landlord's cow shed. 'I never even dreamed of owning a house. People would have called me mad if I had said that someday I would have a house of my own'.

It is easy to understand why members of the old elite hanker after the good old times and the good old culture (See, for example, Nien Cheng, 1987 and Betty Bao Lord, 1987). But why did a woman like my informant defy the directives of a government that had, by her own account, brought undreamed-of prosperity? Admittedly, the government squandered much of the goodwill it had earned in the Great Leap, a tragedy directly responsible for something more than 20 million deaths (Bannister, 1987). But though it was the result of human mistakes, the Great Leap came and went like a natural disaster. The standard of living in the countryside quickly recovered and after only a few months began again to improve. Thus the argument that the New Feudalism should be understood as an expression of the conservative mentality of the Chinese people must answer a difficult question. The government in Beijing enjoyed massive popular support. It was powerful enough to successfully implement a birth control program that ran counter to the most fundamental of all traditional values. Why, then, despite the destruction of temples and lineage halls, did it fail to root out the beliefs and ideas that motivated these practices? An argument that appeals to the strength of traditional values cannot answer this question. It has to assume that having done things one way for a long time people will forever want to do them the same way.

And there is an even more damaging objection to the idea that the New Feudalism is just an expression of the long-suppressed ideas that supported the Old Feudalism. By the time the New Feudalism was old enough to be named, most of the people who grew up in the old society were dead or nearly so. The old women who cherish their vases and the old men who revere their *zupu* are now only a small and daily dwindling proportion of the population. The great majority of Chinese people – and the most active and energetic among them – were born after the revolution. They are the people who, as Red Guards, sought out and destroyed old things. Why don't they object to practices that they once worked to eradicate? Why, instead of objecting, do they patronize temples and lineage halls? Why do they work to accumulate the money necessary for brideprices and dow-

ries? Surely we cannot say that they are just helpless agents of tradition.

It is possible that the problem posed by the New Feudalism is partly an illusion created by our lack of information about what people actually did during the years China was closed to foreign visitors. We cannot doubt that material and public expressions of the old culture were destroyed or repressed, but it could be that its less obvious aspects lived an underground life. One of my field sites 1978–79 was located near Shaoxing in the hills that Lu Hsun took as the setting for his 'New Year's Sacrifice'. The foreign affairs officer who accompanied me there was a local man who made an effort to help me see the society for what it was. Not only did he arrange for me to attend a wedding in a little hamlet called Linjia, he made a point of asking the groom's father the amount of the brideprice. Indeed, after reassuring our frightened host that I was a foreigner and didn't matter, he got him to show us the marriage contract where the amount was recorded. It wasn't very much money by contemporary standards, but it did indicate that the practice of demanding cash for women had never died out.

I have since seen other contracts from the 1960s and 1970s in villages in Fujian. In Pinghe *xian* I was shown (and allowed to copy) a manual written in the early 1970s by a man who had made his living drawing up contracts recording the details of such transactions as marriage, adoption, and family division. The form and the content does not differ from similar manuals from the nineteenth century. Might it not be, then, that there is nothing new about the New Feudalism? Might it not be that my initial assumption that the old culture was effectively suppressed is in fact wrong? In this case there would be no need to appeal to the strength of traditional ideas. The New Feudalism could be interpreted as the renewed, public expression of practices that led active but covert lives throughout the revolutionary period. The change would only be a change in their visibility and could be reasonably attributed to the vicissitudes of government policy.

The evidence now available is not adequate to evaluate this possbility, but even if it were affirmed we would not be at the end of our inquiry. A strong case can be made for the view that Chinese society was revolutionized. Land was confiscated, redistributed, and eventually collectivized; the landlord class that had ruled the Chinese countryside for a thousand years was dispossessed and discredited; the solidarity of the traditional village was broken and made an agent of state policy; patriarchy was not destroyed but it was challenged and shown that there were limits to male domination. Thus even if many traditional customs continued, the dilemma posed by the New Feudalism would not be resolved. Instead of asking why, after thirty years of neglect, people suddenly turned back to traditional practices, we would have to ask how some of these practices survived, not only thirty years of suppression, but also destruction of the social body of which they were part and from which they drew their sustenance.

Hill Gates' analysis of the basic constitution of Chinese society suggests an answer to this question and yet another way of interpreting the New Feudalism (See Gates, 1996). She argues that since at least Song times Chinese society is best charactized as a balance between two, partly contradictory modes of production, a dominant tributary mode and a subordinate but powerful petty capitalist mode. On the one hand, a strong state extracted resources in the form of taxes and labor from a compliant peasantry; on the other, small entrepreneurs turned their households into workshops that produced goods for a dynamic market. From the grand perspective offered by this analysis, there is an important sense in which the Chinese revolution was not revolutionary. It merely brought the tributary mode back to the position of nearly total dominance that it had enjoyed during the Yuan, the early Ming, and the early Qing. The balance of power is now shifting in favor of the petty capitalist mode, but this change is no more revolutionary than the shift that occurred in 1949. It is just another adjustment of the relationship

between the two tectonic plates the relative positions of which determine the most prominent features of the Chinese social landscape.

We should not, then, be surprised to see the return of *sim-pua*, brideprices, ancestral tablets, Taoist priests, and temples dedicated to gods representing a supernatural bureaucracy. Temporarily supressed by a foreign ideology promulgated in support of the revolution, they reclaimed their former place as soon as that suppression was relaxed. They are not 'survivals' in Edward Burnett Tylor's sense of the word (1898). They are integral parts of a social formation that came into existence in the Song and that continues in force to this day. To attribute their revival to nostalgia, sentimentalism, the force of tradition, or, worse yet, an innate Chinese conservatism, is to miss the fact that they express the peculiarities of a particular social order and will survive so long as that order survives, even if they are occasionally persecuted by representatives of the order in the name of the order.

The argument has intuitive appeal for me because of my own reaction to the experience of life in the People's Republic. When I first visited the country in the summer of 1978 it seemed a different world than the one I grown accustomed to during five years in Taiwan. But after a few months of continous exposure, I realized that most of the social forms I had learned on Taiwan were practiced in only slightly modified form in the People's Republic. Visible expression of the hierarchies that defined social relations were avoided in public places, but the hierarchies were nonetheless real and structured most social encounters. Collectivization, destruction of the landlord class, and cooptation of the local community had altered but by no means revolutionized Chinese society. Again and again I found myself embarrassed by the authoritarian behavior of the officals who arranged and supervised by research. When, after six weeks in Jiaomei, I went to thank the leadership of the commune for their hospitality, my companions from the national, provincial, and prefectural governments accompanied me, but when on the same day I went to thank the leaders of the brigade whose members had actually participated in the research, they refused to accompany me and were more than a little irritated when I insisted on going by myself. The *laobaixing* ('the old hundred surnames') were still only the *laobaixing*. In private the cadre with whom I worked always used the term in preference to 'the masses' or 'the people'.

An alternative view

Whether they interpret it as the revival of long-suppressed traditions, a new movement clothed in traditional dress, or the expression of a persistent social formation, most analysts will probably agree that the source of the New Feudalism is some aspect of Chinese society.

There is, however, at least one analyst – the author – whose view is that the New Feudalism is only superficially Chinese. I take my cue from the physiological psychologists Donald O. Hebb and W. R. Thompson who argue that 'man is the most emotional as well as the most rational animal' (Hebb and Thompson 1954:761). We are such emotional creatures that we could not tolerate death if we did not have clearly-regulated ways of dealing with the corpse. We could not even interact comfortably with one another if we did not have the support of well-practiced ways of saying 'good morning' and 'good night'. This is not to say that human emotionality is an undesirable trait. The rational but unemotional human being is a dangerous psychopath. On the one hand, our emotional capacity makes us vulnerable to the kind of alienation exposed by Ludwig Feuerbach (1841); on the other, this same capacity makes conceivable the kind of society imagined by Karl Marx (1848).

Might it not be, then, that the New Feudalism is rooted in human nature rather than in Chinese social structure? Might it not be that after thirty years of uncertainty brought about by the effort to establish a socialist society, the Chinese people, faced with even

more uncertainty occasioned by the effort to dismantle that society, sought the emotional comfort of a familiar social environment? Anyone who talked to old people in Gutian *xian* (in the hills of Southeastern Fujian) would probably be willing to consider the possibility that certain aspects of traditional Chinese culture endure because they satisfy a human need. In 1928, the year before the Communist Party held its famous meeting in Gutian, Fu Bocui, the Japanese-educated son of the local landlord, initiated a movement to collectivize land and reform old customs, a movement that was completed by the Communists. By 1929 all the land in the county was collectivized, and marriage customs were simplified to eliminate brideprices and dowries. The land remained collectivized until 1949 despite the departure of the Communists, but during the 1940s marriage customs reverted to their old form. They were reformed again during the Marriage Reform Campaign in the early 1950s, but by the time I visited Gutian in 1992 brideprice and dowry were again essential to complete a marriage. Temples in Gutian had not been rebuilt, but not for lack of interest in religion.

Gutian's population has been through not one, but two social revolutions, and has been exposed to campaigns to destroy old things for not just thirty years, but for at least fifty years. There are other ways of explaining the persistence of traditional practices in Gutian, but such dogged resistance in the face of such determined efforts does implicate human nature. At least it is important for us to understand arguments of the kind suggested by Hebb and Thompson's conception of the human condition. Because they find the source of the more exotic aspects of culture in human nature rather than in particular social structures, they can explain the New Feudalism without reference to the Chinese government's attempt to destroy old things. All they require is the assumption that in the late 1970s many people remembered the old culture well enough to reenact it. Given this one assumption they could explain the New Feudalism even if it were shown that old customs were effectively suppressed for thirty years and even if it were agreed that little or nothing of the old social structure survives.

I began by characterizing the New Feudalism as a challenge to our competence. I will conclude by suggesting that it is also an opportunity for us to prove our worth. There is more than one plausible explanation of the New Feudalism. This makes the phenomenon a challenge because if we cannot show that one of these explanations is superior to the others, we cannot claim to understand much about what is happening in China. But it also makes the New Feudalism an opportunity because if we can show that one explanation is superior we will have discredited the assumptions on which the others are based. This will advance our understanding of human nature and human society as well as our understanding of China and Chinese culture. The assumptions at risk are the assumptions that have defined the differences between the theoretical traditions that have dominated Western social science since the seventeenth century.

There are several reasons for preferring the New Feudalism to the many other problems that invite our attention. The phenomenon is concrete, easily identified, and easily observed; the political and social context in which it originated is well-known; its history can be reconstructed in detail and from the participants; and, most important of all, the phenomenon is the result of a kind of natural experiment. A long tradition of religion and ritual was suppressed at a known point in time and then after a lapse of nearly thirty years that suppression was relaxed. We do not know precisely how the suppression was effected and what the results were during the intervening years, but this history still can be reconstructed by interviewing the people involved. It is a shame that when Mao died sinologists of my generation did not have the foresight to ask our colleagues in the social sciences what would happen if his successors relaxed the prohibitions on religion and ritual. Had we done so, we could now use their predictions to evaluate their assumptions about the sources of such behavior.

That we missed this opportunity was probably because we all assumed that we knew what would happen. That was a mistake, but it was a mistake that can be rectified. There is still time for us to turn this challenge into an opportunity to make the history of the Chinese Revolution a central concern of social scientists everywhere. We need only focus our efforts on inquiries that address the assumptions underlying alternative interpretations of that history.

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