INTRODUCTION

THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ROOTS OF THE REFORMS

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This is the second collection of essays associated with a multi-year project on “culture and social transformations in reform-era China.” We first offer a conceptual discussion of the social and cultural roots of the reforms, viewed against the backdrop of changes in social life and meaning production near the start of the reforms. Our purpose is to identify central links between culture and social transformations and to provide a better understanding of the nature of the reforms. We then highlight the major arguments put forward by the contributors who, in their own ways, engage with and explore a range of key issues related to the central argument of this book.

I. Culture and Society

Before we explore the social and cultural roots of the reforms, we need to first establish a set of concepts and explain our definitions of “social life,” “culture,” and “meaning.” In this collection, “social life” refers to all individual activities under the restrictions of institutional structures and cultural norms. These restrictions include external laws, rules, regulations, public opinion, and norms, as well as internal drives including ideals, beliefs, values, and hopes. Each specific social life is defined by a meaning structure that corresponds to the way an individual grasps those external constraints and acquires internal drive. Put differently, social life is the specific “meaning structure” constructed by active individuals.

Secondly, “culture,” as the sum total of humanity’s awareness of and response to the present and anticipations of the future, is a community of meanings—an objectivized subjectivity transcending both the subjective and the objective. There are three basic conceptions of culture. First, culture equates to humanity and is defined in terms of its contrast with nature, and thus is universal, absolute, and hierarchical. Next, culture originates from specific conditions of life, and thus is pluralistic in nature. The relationship between different cultures can be conquering, subordinate, or assimilated. Finally, culture is understood in terms of social practice.
Because every culture arises from particular life conditions, culture manifests a kind of particularity. Within this community of meanings, the common root of culture lies in “practice.” As a social activity that aims to assimilate nature, structure the environment, and organize society, the practice of culture is only possible under the inspiration of internalized meanings and values. Any external factors or constraints can only influence individual practice after their meaning is internalized.

Finally, “meaning” is a term with wide range. It refers to the intentions, values, norms, and expectations—rational or otherwise—that make life understandable and worthwhile. One's understanding of meaning is conditioned by the past, and thus involves cultural resources. This is the foundation for cultural continuity.

But culture is mainly a response to and a reflection of the present situation, based on available cultural resources of course. In its essence, culture is a basis or foundation for the future, for taking actions, and thus serves the function of directing one’s social life. It can take the form of defending the status quo or (in the case of showing dissatisfaction with an unfulfilled promise) it can appear as an internal critique of the status quo; external critique is possible when there is an invasion of external culture. But any cultural critique of the status quo will quickly disappear if it is not associated with protesting social forces. An interesting consequence of the critical nature of culture is that the present understanding of the past, under the sway of the current cultural atmosphere, is always different from previous understandings of the past. This shift is a result of the difference between promises and the reality of their non-fulfillment. The immanence of the cultural critique underlies the continuity of culture, but its criticality implies and prepares for a breaking with the past and the creation of new meaning and new culture.

As a result of the critical nature of culture, there is always more than one culture in a society. That is, by its very nature, culture in any society can never be monolithic. Multiple and conflicting practices guided by different cultural conceptions about the present and future are normal, rather than exceptional. In this sense, we can say that the main social function of cultural conceptions is to provide a base for legitimating or justifying certain social conditions. In other words, culture by nature offers many

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1 For a discussion of the internal and external critique, see Michael Walzer, Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).