Lineages and the Making of Contemporary China

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In many parts of rural China today, the most imposing structure in the village is a stately ancestral hall that houses tablets representing the spirits of the ancestors. These halls have been rebuilt or constructed anew by the villagers, often at huge expense. Wherever they are found, and even in some places where they are not, rituals of ancestral sacrifice have been invented or revived, with elaborate liturgies, rich offerings, and lively theatrical performances for the spirits (and their descendants) to enjoy. The spread of ancestral halls has roughly followed the patterns of economic growth. In southern coastal regions the first halls were rebuilt more than thirty years ago and are already due for renovation; in other places in central and western China halls are being built in large numbers today for the first time. The reappearance of ancestral halls seems a surprising by-product of the reform era. Are they the architectural expression of an ancient but enduring system of values, still relevant for the people of 21st century China? Or are they simply hollow shells, nostalgic relics of a cultural system that is now gone forever? The recent publication of countless thousands of lineage genealogies prompts similar questions. Some are new editions of works lost or destroyed in the Cultural Revolution; others completely new efforts to promote kinship solidarity; still others exist only virtually, in the form of online genealogies. Why is the tracing and recording of shared ancestry seen as socially productive in the rapidly modernizing and urbanizing China of today? Other more subtle expressions of patrilineal kinship raise different questions. Political scientists have found that kinship organizations play a significant role in village elections, that village roads and schools tend to be better—in technical terms, that provision of public goods is stronger—in communities where local cadres are embedded in patrilineal kinship organizations. After more than century of revolutionary change, how can this be?

This chapter explores these questions by outlining a history of the lineage in mainland China since the late 19th century. Three concerns justify attention

* I am very grateful to Xue (Snow) Rui and Qiao Jiyan who provided excellent research assistance and to Ma Xiaohe and Liu Jingjing of Harvard-Yenching Library who helped locate several sources. I also thank Ian Matthew Miller, Mel Thatcher, Rubie Watson, Martin Whyte, the volume editors, and the students in my seminar on Chinese historiography in 2014, especially Dong Yuting, Hua Rui, and Shi Yifei, for their comments.
to the subject of the lineage in this book. First, while the lineage can be a social and political organization, it is also a ritual organization. The lineage therefore ought to be part of any discussion of ritual and religion in contemporary China. Second, organized patrilineal kinship clearly remains relevant to many domains of social life in China. The once-influential paradigm that treated the lineage as the fundamental structure in Chinese society has been justly criticized as an account of the past, let alone of the present.\textsuperscript{1} But this does not mean that organized kinship no longer matters to the lives of rural people. Among other things, it remains an expression of a value system. Third, despite vast transformations in China over the past century, there are striking continuities with and parallels to the intellectual discourses around the lineage. Contemporary debates about the lineage can be fruitfully compared to positions that were argued a century ago as well as to contemporary debates about religion. These parallels may have something interesting to tell us about the intellectual world and transformations of values in modern China.

The article is structured chronologically, covering three broad phases in the history of the lineage: the period from the late 19th and early 20th century to 1949, the Maoist period from 1949 to the mid 1970s, and the subsequent period of reform and opening. I use this chronology to make four basic arguments. The first argument has to do with the relationship between lineages and modernity. By the early 20th century most modernizing elites had come to think that the lineage was incompatible with the future they desired. They typically concluded either that the lineage needed to be eliminated in order for China to become modern or that it would disappear naturally in the course of China’s becoming modern. It now seems that both variants of this conclusion were incorrect. There was no fundamental incompatibility between lineage organization and modernity. Kinship organizations, principles, and languages proved flexible enough to be adapted to new and modern purposes.

The second argument has to do with the impact of organized attacks on the lineage by successive state regimes. The leadership of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) party-state accepted the basic argument that the lineage was incompatible with the modernity they envisaged. They sought therefore to eliminate it by attacking its material and ideological foundations. But despite the apparent disappearance of the lineage after 1949 the PRC system unwittingly and sometimes deliberately replicated elements of the very institution it sought to eliminate. Not only did state policies fail to eliminate the lineage, in some ways they actually strengthened it.

\textsuperscript{1} For an effective critique, see Steven Sangren, “Traditional Chinese corporations: beyond kinship,” \textit{Journal of Asian studies} 43.3 (1984), 391–415.