CHAPTER 11

What Is “Anthropology” as I Understand It?

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People are unable to agree on what “anthropology” is. For many scholars in China, anthropology today is still seen as an academic department that is part of the natural sciences (particularly the Academy of Sciences). In these institutions, “anthropology” essentially studies the “primitive anthropology” through historical morphology. In other institutions (particularly institutions of higher education), anthropology is treated as a sub-department of sociology. In some special education and research that focus on “minorities” (particularly minority schools and minority research academies), anthropology is sometimes seen as much the same as “ethnology,” and, at other times, it is seen as antithetical to science (quite a number of people see “ethnology” as “native” and politically useful while anthropology is a useless word game played by Westerners).

This scientifically “mistaken and messy” positioning of anthropology in China did not occur independently, but has much to do with the profound impact the “West” has had on us.

The belief that anthropology is the study of historical human morphology and that ethnological studies that describe culture are more reputable than anthropology that derives from Europe (including the former Soviet Union). The belief that anthropology is a wing of sociology derives from the French Annales School of sociology as well as British sociology. The belief that anthropology is an all-encompassing “greater discipline” is linked to current American “greater anthropology.”

I do not doubt the value of “greater anthropology” (including anthropological studies on human morphology and culture) and have even always believed that, ideally, anthropology should become a bridge between the natural sciences and humanities, just as it has been in the United States.

The contradiction is that the anthropological research that I have made a career of is closely linked to humanistic thought, sociology, ethnology, and history, and starkly different from “morphological anthropology,” to the point that it is essentially an “antithetical” discipline.1

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1 The reason that this field is categorized as a part of the “humanities” while the general nature of this field does not fall under suspicion, on the one hand, is because it considers one's own academic interest, convenience of teaching, and limitations of knowledge, and, on the
The anthropology I am discussing is in its modern academic form. This form of anthropology does not advocate “body measurements,” “racial distinctions,” “anatomy,” and “genetic analysis,” and, instead, focuses on researching humanity as a complete body of meaning. It pays more attention to the “mind of the body” and “things external to the body.” The emphasis is more on the dialectic of the “ego” and the “collective.” It centers more on understanding the relationships between humanity and things, human relationships (including “we,” “the other,” “ancestors,” and “posterity”), freedom and norms, and the inevitability of “separation” and the imperative of “unity.”

The Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the scientific revolution in the modern Western world system and the “national awakening” of European countries have given birth to the very “anthropology” that we do not propose as well as the form of anthropology that we employ.

People have already demarcated this “soil” as “modernity.” If this definition is appropriate, then our form of anthropology is probably an intrinsic pattern of reflection on “modernity.”

“Discussing the present through the lens of the ancients” is the special “game” of this form of anthropology.

In the narrative of anthropology, the “plot structure” is ancient history as well as the intellectual world and way of life for “uncivilized races.” Anthropologists are concerned with how things are categorized in unique yet familiar ways, how meaning is assigned to the relationship between oneself to others, what dos and don’ts are emphasized in human relationships, and how these come together to form coherent “wholes” within a social or cultural system. These social and cultural systems followed by anthropologists are clearly marked by “mixing.” Economics, politics, society, law, religion, rituals, myths, and verbal forms of expression all exist in a closely intermingled state. Anthropologists have refined an entire social image through the messiness of ancient history and “uncivilized races” and have compared this with the “hierarchies” imagined by people or the “fragmentation” of modern society, leading our own social image to be further “other”-ized.

The anthropology that “focuses on researching humanity as a complete body of meaning” that I am discussing is built on this concept of the “other.”

The nineteenth century was a golden age of anthropology. At the time, anthropologists had an impact on the humanities and social sciences in general through comparative cultural research that was well beyond what we could imagine today.

other hand, is because this definition conforms to the requirements of the Chinese academic perspective.