REDISCOVERING CHINESE SOCIETY
IN THE SOCIALIST ERA:
USING THE PAST TO SERVE THE PRESENT*

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Introduction

Sociologists who specialize in China focus almost all of their research attention on the here and now. When we go to China to conduct research, we organize surveys and carry out interviews regarding contemporary concerns. As a consequence, during the past quarter of a century very little sociological research has been conducted about the extraordinary social changes that occurred during the period of Mao’s rule.

This lamentably leaves us with too little knowledge of the first three decades of PRC history, with large areas of important research still left undone. Under Mao, China did not contain a single Sociology Department, and no sociological research of any kind was carried out during most of that period. The only sociological studies of China necessarily were conducted from abroad, by fewer than a dozen sociologists, who largely interviewed émigrés in Hong Kong. The two books co-authored by William Parish and Martin K. Whyte on rural and urban society are examples of the excellent work that could be done using this methodology. Nonetheless, it is obvious that conducting research inside China can provide more accurate information than was available to this earlier generation of scholars. Since the 1980s we have held the opportunity, but we have not taken much advantage of it to interview people about their social circumstances during the Maoist period.

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The 1950s, 1960s and 1970s witnessed major government experiments to reshape society that are almost unparalleled anywhere in history. The chances to examine this are now dwindling. The memories of people about their lives and the social situations and mores under Mao are fading, and the older generation has begun to pass away. If such research is ever to take place, it needs to be conducted soon. And if we do not sufficiently understand those decades, we will never adequately understand current-day Chinese society, which has evolved out of that recent past and still bears its imprint in current institutional settings, social mores, and deep-seated attitudes.

It can almost be guaranteed that practically every sociological issue has been under-studied for the Maoist period, be it on any aspect of family life, or any gender studies topic, or any topic concerning social stratification, social mobility, criminology, you name it. Some topics are unique to China. One that I think warrants renewed research involves the grassroots social upheaval of the Cultural Revolution in 1966–68. The factional conflicts that erupted between contending groups within society provided a window into the hidden social tensions and antagonisms that had built up during the years leading up to the Cultural Revolution. After the mass upheavals were suppressed in 1968 and a political system of tight hierarchical controls was re instituted, many of the same tensions and frustrations re-emerged and persisted throughout the 1970s. Thus examining what was exposed in each sector of Chinese society during those two years of social upheaval during the Cultural Revolution can provide us with a means to better understand the hidden tensions and grievances of almost the whole sweep of the Maoist period.

Rural China provides a second example. Fortunately, there is a worldwide social-science tradition that village studies should trace social change in a modern community over time. As a consequence, a considerable number of village studies have probed back in time into the Maoist period and even earlier. These can present us with

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3 Village studies that contain substantial material on social and political change in the Maoist period include Zhang Letian, Gaobie lixiang: Renmin gongshe zhidu yanjiu (Departing from Ideals: Research into the System of the People’s Commune) (Shanghai: Dongfang Chubanshe, 1998); Zhu Xiaoyang, Zuiguo yu chengfa: Xiaocun gushi 1931–1997 (Crime and Punishment: The Tale of a Small Village 1931–1997) (Tianjin Guji Chubanshe, 2003); two books by Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz and Mark Selden, Chinese