

## Culture-Bound: How We Understand the Past

This past summer the Bush administration hit upon a tactic to discredit critics of its Iraq policies. “There are some,” the president said, “who would like to rewrite history—revisionist historians is what I like to call them.” President Bush’s statement seems to imply not only that his opponents were consciously falsifying or distorting the past for partisan purposes but that history is simply the historical facts that speak by themselves. But history, as one writer has said, is “not a window onto the past but a construction of the past.” Or as Robert Rosenstone, professor of history at Caltech, observed, “History does not exist until it is created.” It is the historian who creates it, that is, who tries to make sense of the torrent, the jumble of words, sights, and happenings that make up our world every day. Rosenstone goes on to say that “we create it in terms of our underlying values.” What does he mean? “Our kind of vigorous, ‘scientific’ history,” he says, “is in fact a product of our history (by which he means U.S. history), our special history that includes a rationalized economy, notions of individual rights, and the nation-state. Many cultures have done quite well without this sort of history, which is only to say that there are--as we all know but rarely acknowledge--many ways to represent and relate to the past.”

Perhaps the most important clause in Rosenstone’s reflections is the parenthetical “as we all know but rarely acknowledge.” Historians are rooted in their particular cultures and contexts. As Professor Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., has put it, “human beings are prisoners of their own experiences.” The histories they create--in subject matter, approach, interpretation, methods, nuance--will reflect to some degree or other their culture and contextual experiences which constitute that “special history.” But, as in

most endeavors people rooted in a particular culture take that culture and its values as the norm—and often quite unthinkingly assume that their values are universally applicable. In his presidential address to the American Historical Association over thirty years ago, noted China specialist John Fairbank argued that “historians in America have been, like historians elsewhere, patriotic, genetically oriented, and culture-bound.”

As an American historian who has spent my career trying to understand Chinese culture with values sharply different from American values, I have been faced with the task of breaking out of my culture-boundedness, my prison of experiences. If I tried to see China and its culture and values through American glasses, I could never get a very clear view of Chinese reality. If I tried to interpret Chinese norms through an American cultural framework, I would be distorting those norms. To illustrate this dilemma today, I want to offer some thoughts on writing biography, something I did several years ago—of a Chinese man named Shen Dingyi, whom you have never heard of—unless, of course, you read my book. These thoughts reflect on the vast cultural chasm that exists between East and West.

How do we see this American culture-boundedness in biographies? One of the four basic elements of American culture noted by Rosenstone is individualism, certainly at the center of our public ethos. Biography as a genre of historical writing obviously fits that ethos well. In the modern West with its glorification of the individual, a biographer usually focuses on his or her subject’s individuality, those aspects, attitudes, and abilities that separate the subject from others. To pick an example, if we follow the listings in the index of American historian Nell Irvin Painter’s award-winning biography of feminist and abolitionist Sojourner Truth, we find such items as “anger of,” “anxiety of,”

“drinking of,” “guilt of,” “humor of,” and “sexuality of.” Painter strives to let us know what Sojourner Truth was like as an individual. In addition, the listings detailing anger, anxiety, guilt, and sexuality suggest that she intends to open Truth’s psyche as best as it can be done long after her death. Modern Western biographers often probe for explanations for life decisions and approaches in the individual by exploring the subject’s psyche. Indeed, based upon the centrality of the individual and such concepts as individual self-realization, it can be said that the social and behavioral science par excellence in the modern West is psychology.

In the last several decades biographers have to some degree or other used psychological insights to shed light on their subjects. Historians have consistently drawn such conclusions as “it is not possible to comprehend people without dealing with the psychological.” Such approaches may indeed be appropriate for Western cultures. But do they apply to non-Western cultures where values, customs, outlook, and priorities differ drastically? Andrew Marsella, widely published author in cross-cultural psychology who has served for many years as consultant to the World Health Organization, argues that Western psychology is often highly ethnocentric, that it’s “arrogant and dangerous to apply Western labels to Eastern experience. They’re culturally irrelevant.” Western psychological theories are, in other words, culture-bound.

As a measure of the chasm between cultures West and East, take the meaning of the word “sincerity.” In the West it means simply “being true to one’s inner feelings.” But its strikingly different East Asian meaning reflects a social **reality** different from that of the West. Sincerity in traditional East Asia is being true to one’s social role: personal

feelings cannot override what should be done according to one's social position. It is living by doing not what you want to do but what you have to do. Thus, a woman obeys her parent and marries the man to whom she has been betrothed by them, though he's 30 years older, ugly, bald, and paunchy; it is an act of "sincerity," the proper fulfillment of the social role of a daughter and woman. The crucial social feature here is clearly one's relationship to others. Sociology, not psychology, would be the social science par excellence in East Asia.

This West/East, psychology/sociology difference is not surprisingly reflected in the reasons that people in these two broad cultural arenas have for reading biographies. From a book review by American historian Robert Darnton: "Biography. . . [b]y focusing on one life. . . gives readers a sense of closeness to the men and women who shaped events. It deals with motivations and emotions. It even answers a voyeuristic desire to see through keyholes and into private lives."

Contrast this with a 1995 piece in *Beijing Review*, the semi-official English language periodical from the People's Republic of China. "Many biographies present an important way to understand political figures and political life. However [the trend of writing about leaders as ordinary human beings] has produced some works that overemphasize trivialities to the neglect of significant historical events. Readers become bored by such works, and sales drastically decline."

Darnton emphasizes the psychological and emotional attraction of biographies for Western readers. He notes biographies' inclusion of motivations, emotions, and private lives beyond closed doors. The *Beijing Review* article argues that the appeal of biographies to a Chinese readership stems from current issues in China's politics.

Nothing about enhancing the “closeness” of reader and biographical subject here: biographies give people information to help them understand contemporary developments. The piece positively frowns on probing the individuality of the subject, on the kind of personal, even voyeuristic appeal of biographies for Westerners, noting that declining sales of Chinese biographies emphasizing such “trivialities” indicate a bored reading public.

The crucial question that any historian must answer is this: what is the most appropriate way to deal with the historical subject so as to best express in a meaningful and coherent way the salient aspects of his subject’s life in its various contexts? The vast differences in social values, priorities, and contexts suggest that biographies dealing with subjects in different cultures may need to ask different questions, have different emphases and priorities, and perhaps use different approaches. The same could be said, in passing, that a foreign policy with such an approach would have a much greater probability of success than one that sees the whole world through American cultural lenses.

It is a commonplace to say that while the basic social unit in the modern West is the individual, in China it is the group. But the social reality is much deeper than is apparent in this simple generalization. It is when one is asked to describe the group in each society that one comes to see that there is a fundamentally different definition for both the individual and the group in these two cultures. For while in the modern West it is accurate to say that--other than in family--individuals precede the group, in China the group precedes the individual. Put another way--and this transcends semantics--in the

West individuals make up a group; in China a group is composed of individuals. Because in the West individuals “make up” a group, they can also, as independent actors freely make demands on the group or even leave the group. In China because the group has precedence over its individuals, maintaining the group and its harmony is of primary concern. The group constrains individuals for they cannot make claims of individual “rights” within the group without completely threatening the group’s unity and cohesion. In this sense, the individual Chinese in traditional society was a much less “independent” actor than in the West. Contemporary Chinese poet Bei Dao ends his “Notes from the City of the Sun” with the line “Living: A net.”

A Chinese individual is constrained by his or her relationships within groups much as if he or she were linked to others by invisible threads that tied them into a net. As in the West, individuals can leave the group, but in the process the Chinese will tear or break the net, and social and personal damage can be severe. Thus, in approaching a Chinese individual as a biographical subject, much attention must be focused not simply on the individual, but on those people in various groups that hold him in their nets. While the biography of someone in the West would consider people who play a large role in the subject’s life or who help provide context and support, their treatment would not likely loom so large because of the difference in the Western understanding of the greater autonomy of the individual. Thus Painter describes the “networks” of Sojourner Truth’s antislavery feminism, but they seem to exist primarily for her individual benefit; Painter tells us that “[t]hose networks sustained her materially and spiritually, steadily broadening her horizons.”

What kinds of relationships within groups create the particular dynamics of Chinese society on which a biographer must focus? Basic social identity comes not only from one's family and his or her place in it, but from social connections and the networks that develop from them. As one Chinese writer has said, "The Chinese 'instinctively divide people into those with whom they already have a fixed relationship, a connection, what the Chinese call *guanxi*, and those that they don't. These connections operate like a series of invisible threads, tying Chinese to each other with far greater tensile strength than mere friendship.'" Connections and their next step, networks, were established in various ways.

Some relationships were certain to bring "connections." Friends were the only one of five Confucian bonds that was a relationship nearing equality rather than one of hierarchy. People from the same village, hometown, county or even province (called in Chinese, "native place") would have built-in connections. Men who received civil service degrees in the same year and teachers and their students would have connections for life. Certainly social connections are important in every culture, and any biography—East or West—must consider them. But Chinese culture has developed connections to the nth degree. From the bureaucracy of the traditional state to that of the Communist and post-Communist states, people have used their personal connections to get what they want or need. The person who uses connections to gain certain ends spends social capital and builds up social debts to the one who dispenses favors or facilitates actions. His repaying those debts through reciprocal actions further nurtures the connection that they share, making its "tensile strength" very great indeed. The accumulation and repaying of obligations is a continual social reality that a skillful biographer must take into account.

China's most famous twentieth century sociologist Fei Xiaotong has written about the importance of connections and networks in the fundamental structure and processes of Chinese society. Networks may encompass many people. Their basic structure is dyadic, based on the connections of two people, and then two others, and so on. The strength of any two connections varies. Similarly, individuals may find themselves to be a part of a number of networks; and the strength of the personal connections to people in each network also varies. This situation has definite ethical implications. Noting that Chinese society is structured as "webs woven out of countless personal relationships," Fei argues that "[t]o each knot in these webs is attached a specific ethical principle." In this society, "general [ethical] standards [do not apply]. The first thing to do is to understand the specific context: Who is the important figure, and what kind of relationship is appropriate with that figure? Only then can one decide the ethical standards to be applied in that context." Thus, there is no universal ethic to be applied to all people and in all situations. Ethics in China were traditionally determined by connections; they varied with particular people and situations. This reality is also one that the biographer of a Chinese subject must be aware in interpreting the actions of a subject; what might seem to be the most logical explanation may in reality cover up the actual workings of a social network. These kinds of social realities give Chinese social life considerable fluidity, in many or perhaps most cases providing a considerable challenge for the biographer.

So, though I, as a Western biographer of an early twentieth century Chinese man named Shen Dingyi, was interested in the individuality of my subject, my primary focus



had necessarily to be on questions of social relationships. In the fluidity that was and is Chinese society, the biographer must be continually aware of context, because the subject is embedded in different social networks in various arenas of action. He must analyze as carefully as possible the individual connections and attempt to judge the relative strengths of connections between the subject and those with whom he has guanxi. He must be aware of the various networks of which the subject is a part, of the strength of each network in its effect on the subject, and of social dynamics within the networks. He must be aware that the subject likely plays different roles in each of his connections and in each network and that these different roles give him different identities.

Further, the biographer of a Chinese subject cannot assume that the modern Western conception of stages of human development--infancy, childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, middle age, and old age--applies to Chinese nor that age stages have the same meaning in China and the West. We would do well to remember that studies of early Western culture have shown that during the Middle Ages there was no sense of childhood as a separate stage of life and that adolescence was not seen as a separate stage until the nineteenth century. In this vein, Professor Kenneth Keniston, Mellon Professor of Human Development at MIT, has argued that "In other societies or historical eras, puberty is . . . not followed by anything like what we consider an adolescent experience. . . . If, therefore, a given stage of life or development change is not recognized in a given society, we should seriously entertain the possibility that it simply does not occur in that society. And, if this is the case, then in societies where adolescence does not occur. . . the psychological characteristics which we consider the results of adolescent experience should be extremely rare": characteristics such as, trying to assert one's independence

from the family and struggling to find one's self-identity and belief system. So when as a young adult, Shen rebelled against his father, I necessarily had to try to discover the source of his actions and not automatically assume that he was simply a rebellious adolescent.

China did not have a conception of adolescence as a separate life stage. In Confucianism "adulthood" was conceived as made up of three "equally significant periods of human life"--youth, manhood, and old age. "Maturation was perceived mainly in terms of self-cultivation"; adulthood was a "process of realizing what was thought to be the authentic human nature." Though there was a difference between youth and manhood, there was no sense of a "between period." Without the Chinese sense of adolescence and discrete stages of life, Western psychology is hard-pressed to contribute much to an understanding of a Chinese subject.

Yet another cultural constraint on writing a biography of a Chinese person is the nature of the sources. Chinese sources detail those things that Chinese would see as important. Since biographical sources were expected to provide records of public accomplishments to serve as a memorial to the subject and grist for didactic accounts, available sources are the public "facts" of one's life and those ideas in his published essays, documents, and poetry.

In addition, those that do exist are shaped by Chinese cultural interests and values. Thus, the father-son relationship is frequently one that is talked about and reflected upon; it was the prime Confucian social bond. Brother-brother relationships were also key. Yet I have **never** seen mother-son relationships discussed. Nor were husband-wife relationships described. We may learn how many wives and concubines a

man had, but we generally know nothing about the nature and dynamics of relationships between (among) them. Fei Xiaotong, in his description of rural society, reports that husbands and wives generally had little to do with each other socially, seeking same-sex companionship instead. Husbands and wives were often betrothed in childhood, itself indicative that childhood was not envisioned as a discrete stage from early adulthood. Women on their marriage would leave their natal home for their husband's where they were in inferior positions to husband, father-in-law and, the most notorious relationship of all, to mother-in-law. In the traditionally patriarchal society, females were mostly invisible. Thus, those relationships that in the West would be standard fare and probably pivotal in most biographies--mother-son, mother-father-son, husband-wife, lover-lover--are not generally recorded.

So when I came to write a biography of Shen, I had to **focus on his social networks**. He was an intellectual, journalist, politician and revolutionary in the 1920s. His assassination in 1928 had never been solved, so I set out to solve it, writing the book as a murder mystery. A strong-willed man, he had antagonized many people during his lifetime. There were at least five major suspects with long-term grudges against Shen, the most likely from my initial Western perspective was powerful landlords who were bitter about Shen's leading a rent resistance movement against them. But in the end, I think, his murder came because he was mistakenly perceived by one political network as trying to link two threatening networks in a coalition against it. Mistakenly perceived, because Shen was no longer a part of either of the two threatening networks yet his identity remained marked by those associations. Networks provided identity, defining

and interpreting its members. The tragedy is that Shen was defined as someone he was not.

Just these past two weeks I have struggled with doing a short biography of an early 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese revolutionary, struggled because I tried to isolate him as an individual in order to fit him into a short study. In the end it became obvious that I couldn't really tell his story without telling the story of two others within his revolutionary network. Living: A Net.

In the end, I think I could probably amend Clinton's 1992 campaign slogan, by saying to historians and anyone who takes world society and politics seriously, "It's the culture, stupid." Yes, it is clear that culture does not determine a person's actions or decisions. The biographer must study his subject as an individual person **within a particular culture**, aware all the while that culture ultimately may or may not play a major role in helping to shape or confine or direct his actions. In many ways, Shen was quite an "atypical" Chinese, a brash knight errant, willing (sometimes, it seemed, almost eager) to make enemies, relishing the flaunting of tradition, reveling in his individuality. Yet, as I studied and wrote, what I found continually striking was how much Shen's life and death were shaped by and within the confines of his culture and their traditions.

The last word goes to, Li Ao, Taiwanese essayist and critic. He takes us beyond biography to the general understanding of the culture of the Other. "China is a massive thing, still hidden in the mists. Foreigners don't understand China; all they know is Chinese chop suey. . . . to understand China [and the Chinese], you must come to grips with the tradition." To see the world in its richness and diversity and to be able to react

to it intelligently, we must, in other words, break out of our culture-boundedness, freeing ourselves from the prison of our own tradition to see the actuality of other ways.