

Preface

It has been nearly fifteen years since this book was first conceived in the form of a research proposal. In the academic year 1987–88, I diligently pored through the existing studies of the Chinese family and kinship, a sub-field that I had chosen as part of my Ph.D. training in anthropology at Harvard University. I was instantly attracted to the interesting and complex issues I read about, yet at the same time I was puzzled by the absence of a discussion of individual agency: most scholarly accounts focused on the structural principles and collective behavior of the domestic group. That was at odds with my understanding of family life in the People's Republic of China, where the family institution has undergone radical and rapid changes since 1949. After I began to teach, my students expressed the same feeling that something was missing from the readings I assigned to them. The questions they asked most frequently were: "Why is the Chinese family so economic, and are people always so rational?"

There are two possible answers to this puzzle. One answer is that the Chinese family was indeed an economic organization, with little room for other aspects of private life such as intimacy, emotionality, and individual freedom. The other answer is that, in order to emphasize the unique features of the Chinese family and compare it with the American/Western family, many studies omitted elements of everyday life that were deemed insignificant or too familiar to readers in the West. As my own research on the subject developed and progressed, I became convinced that the latter explanation is more likely correct.

Generally speaking, academic studies have presented three models of the Chinese family. The first is the economic family, proposed mainly by Western

social scientists, who regard the domestic group primarily as a corporate organization characterized by a common budget, shared property, and a household economy with a strict pooling of income. The second may be called the political family, shown primarily by feminist scholars to have deeply rooted inequalities and power dynamics; their studies explore the resulting political dimension of the Chinese family. Studies of the relationship between the family and the state may also be included in this type. The third is the cultural family; as portrayed mainly by Chinese scholars and cultural elite, these studies emphasize the overarching and enduring influence of traditional values, particularly Confucian ethics, on family behavior. The individual remains at the margins in all three models, and the emotional world of flesh-and-bone people has usually been overlooked.

Yet without individuals and their lived experiences the family would have not existed and family life would have not been possible. My research shows that the contemporary Chinese family, while certainly economic, political, and cultural, is also personal and emotional. Like its counterpart in American society, Chinese family life is characterized by the moral experiences of individuals, whose concerns about privacy, intimacy, emotionality, and individual rights are as important as economic gains. By focusing on the personal and emotional, I hope this book may provide a new way of understanding private life in China and balance the previous emphasis on the structure and collectivity of the Chinese family.

In retrospect, I realize how much my longitudinal fieldwork in Xiajia village benefited from my having spent my youth there in the 1970s. As my fieldwork evolved, I often found myself a stranger in the community where I grew up because the social landscape, the people, and my relationship with the villagers had changed so dramatically. Thus I had to relearn what I thought I already knew. As times changed, so did the mentality of the villagers, many of whom viewed the same social phenomenon differently or even provided different narratives of the same event at different times. To capture the dynamism in people's behavior and mentality, particularly that of village youth who are most sensitive to social changes in larger settings, I simply followed and documented the life course of more than two dozen individuals, a process that would have been impossible had I not shared my own life experiences with them in the 1970s.

I do not intend to portray this rural community as representative of Chinese society as a whole. On the contrary, in this case study I am primarily concerned with how the villagers lived their private lives under socialism and how their local history was shaped by social conditions. I also want to note that the trends of change described in this book, including the privatization of the family, the increasing importance of intimacy and emotionality in family life, the rise of individuality, and the growing crisis of civility, have long occurred in cities and many parts of rural China, as shown by several large-scale national surveys of family change and numerous empirical studies. This is because all Chinese people have lived with the same socialist state since 1949, a state that played a decisive role in transforming Chinese private life. Consequently, the social issues and moral dilemmas that people in Xiajia village have to deal with are largely the same as those dealt with by people nationwide. These same issues and dilemmas also exist in most of the world's societies and thus are relevant to people around the globe. Nevertheless, because people always respond to changes and challenges from the outside world in accordance with local conditions and by exercising their own agency, the specific form and content of their responses vary greatly. Therefore, it is only through local particularities and historical specificities that we may deepen our understanding of the general trends of social change and of the moral experiences of the people. In this sense, I am confident that the implications of this case study have relevance far beyond the boundaries of the village.

During my long intellectual journey since 1987 I have accumulated vast debts to many friends and colleagues and received financial support from a number of institutions, without whose help it would have been impossible to complete this book.

The first person I want to thank is James L. (Woody) Watson, my guru and friend. Woody was the most enthusiastic supporter of the research project from its inception and was untiring in offering advice and critically reading several drafts of the manuscript. As an inspiring and encouraging mentor, Woody has played a decisive role in my intellectual development; as a good friend, he has been extremely warm, caring, and always available. To Woody I owe a debt of such great dimensions that a simple acknowledgment is insufficient; hence the dedication of this book to him.

Similarly, words are inadequate to express my gratitude to Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman, who have far exceeded their obligations in offering support and help ever since I became Arthur's student in 1986. They read several drafts of the manuscript that became this book and offered so many valuable comments that I lost count. I am above all indebted to Arthur for his theoretical inspiration. This book represents my own attempt to write an individual-centered ethnography of moral experience—the kind of anthropological enterprise that Arthur and Joan have long advocated.

I am deeply grateful to the residents of Xiajia village, Heilongjiang province, in northeastern China, for receiving me on two occasions. In 1971, at the age of seventeen, I traveled hundreds of miles from a village in Shandong province to Heilongjiang as a destitute migrant searching for a new home with enough food. During my wanderings from one place to another while performing various temporary jobs, the villagers of Xiajia generously took me in. I thereafter lived in Xiajia as an ordinary farmer until I entered Peking University for my undergraduate education in 1978. In the spring of 1989 I returned to the village as a Ph.D. student from Harvard University to carry out my first anthropological fieldwork; that visit was followed by a series of field research trips in 1991, 1993, 1994, 1997, 1998, and 1999. Each trip began with one or two reunion parties and ended with a long and warm farewell; in between there were equally memorable times as the villagers tried their best to fulfill my seemingly endless curiosity about their work, life, family, and community. Among the villagers, I am especially grateful to Mr. Hu Yanjun, a friend for more than thirty years, whose knowledge, humor, and intellect were instrumental in helping me with the specifics of my fieldwork and who played an important role in my research design. I frequently solicited his opinion on how to deepen and widen my investigations. I cannot imagine how difficult, if possible at all, my eleven years of longitudinal fieldwork would have been without the help and support of the villagers and several friends in the local government.

Many friends and colleagues read parts of or the entire manuscript and generously offered insightful comments. They are my heroes, and I am almost certain the following is an incomplete list: Cameron Campbell, Myron Cohen, Deborah Davis, Stephan Feuchtwang, Maris Gillette, Marjorie Goodwin, Susan Greenhalgh, Stevan Harrell, Douglas Hollan, William Jankowiak, Jun Jing, William Lavelly, James Lee, Bonnie McDougall, Jonathan Parry, Isabelle

Thireau, Jonathan Unger, Wang Feng, Rubie Watson, and Martin Whyte. I am also grateful to Joseph Bosco, Karen Brodtkin, Choi Chi-cheng, Lothar von Falkenhausen, Linda Garro, Guo Yuhua, Xiaoxia Gong, Philip Huang, Jean Hung, Nancy Levine, Liu Dik-Sung, Paula Paderni, Shen Yuan, Sun Liping, and Yang Nianqun for their insights, which were equally important in formulating and clarifying many of my arguments. I owe special thanks to Liang Xiaoyan for sharing with me her acute observations of social change in China and for her critiques of several important points that appear in the concluding chapter.

I was also lucky to find a transcontinental community for invaluable discussions while writing. Françoise Sabban generously invited me to be a visiting associate professor at the Centre d'Etudes sur la Chine Moderne et Contemporaine, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in May 2000. This wonderful opportunity enabled me to write Chapter 8 in a small yet charming apartment in northern Paris, while presenting other draft chapters in three lectures at EHESS. During the following month, thanks to Charles Stafford's kind hospitality, I visited the Anthropology Department at the London School of Economics and presented my research results on two occasions. During my stay in Europe I also delivered materials from this book at the Institute of Sinology at Leiden University, the Center for Asian and South Asian Studies at the University of Amsterdam, and the Institute of Anthropology at Oxford University. In 2001, I gave public lectures at the Institute of Sociology and Anthropology of Peking University and at the Institute of Sociology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. I would like to thank Leo Douw, Stefan Landsberger, Luo Hongguang, Ma Rong, and Frank Pieke for their hospitality and the participants in these seminars for questions, comments, and critiques. Their input greatly strengthened the book; all the remaining weaknesses and errors in the study, needless to say, are entirely my own responsibility.

Two respected scholars carefully reviewed the manuscript for Stanford University Press, providing me with long lists of penetrating questions and helpful advice. I cannot thank them in person because they remain anonymous, but I want them to know how much I appreciate their contributions. As early as 1997, Muriel Bell of the Stanford University Press was one of the most enthusiastic supporters of this project, and her subsequent encouragement, attention, and editorial expertise carried me through the entire course

of writing. As always, I am grateful to Nancy Hearst, whose moral support and skillful editorial assistance made the writing much more pleasant. I also want to thank Jonathan Jackson for compiling the index.

Part of Chapter 3 is based on materials from my article "Courtship, Love, and Premarital Sex in a North China Village," published in *The China Journal*, no. 48 (2002). Part of Chapter 4 was previously published under the title "The Triumph of Conjuality: Structural Transformation of Family Relations in a Chinese Village," in *Ethnology* 36, no. 3 (1997). Chapter 8 is based on an article that appears in the French journal *Etudes Rurales* (nos. 161-62, July 2002), which is entitled "Planning Birth: Changes in Fertility Culture in a Chinese Village." I thank these journals for their permission to include the materials here.

Thanks are due to the following institutions for financial support: the National Science Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange (USA), the University of California President's Office (for its Research Fellowship in Humanities), the International and Overseas Studies Program at UCLA, and the Academic Senate of UCLA. I also owe thanks to my colleagues in the Anthropology Department at UCLA for providing a collegial and stimulating intellectual environment. I am grateful to Department Chair Joan Silk and Dean Scott Waugh in the Division of Social Sciences for permitting me to take a year-long leave in 2000 to concentrate on writing.

Finally, my deepest appreciation goes to Betty Leung, my fiancée. When Betty and I met in 1999, I had just started to draft the first chapter, and now, while completing this preface, I am looking forward to our wedding in August. Over the past three years Betty has transformed my life with laughter and love. It is thus needless to say anything more about her contribution to this book.

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LOS ANGELES, FEBRUARY 2002