

ETHNOGRAPHIC INVESTIGATION OF CHINA

by

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First I must define precisely what I mean when speaking about ethnographical investigation of China. As any other ethnographer, I understand that such an investigation has to cover the whole cultural adaptation of the population of China¹. How deep and broad the investigation must be carried out depends 1. on the degree of differentiation of the given population, i. e. an objective condition; 2. on how far the investigator must go with his description of the elements constituting the culture; this description cannot become clear until the relative value and relative weight of elements are defined after the elements have been grouped into complexes; 3. on the degree of preparedness of the investigators, their observation and analysis.

The problem of unit of investigation is closely connected with the first condition of the population. Theoretically speaking among a culturally uniform population investigation of a single family is quite sufficient. However, in China we are facing a strong social differentiation and an ethnical differentiation, to use the improper term "regional" differentiation². If we adopt the dynamic point of view for social differentiation, the latter presents no difficulty for the ethnographer who differentiated groups. With the ethnical differentiation the situation is far more difficult.

How should an ethnographer approach this problem? First of all there must be done a preliminary work of distinction of groups from some point of view. Since the language is perhaps the easiest and the

1) Under the term "ethnographic" I understand a semantic adjective of "cultural complex" as it is observed in ethnically and socially differentiated populations.

2) My reluctance of using the term "regional" is for the reason that the same region may shelter different ethnical units, or at least populations affected in various degrees by the process of ethnos which have to be distinguished. The investigation carried out in a "region" with a differentiated population living in it, actually will deal with the units based upon ethnical differentiation.

most simple character, it may be put at the basis of the map which at least will show the approximate territorial limits of groups which are distinct at least in respect to the spoken language³. Should other cultural elements and physical characters of the population be different too, we have to accept distinct units and here also "regional units". If our investigation reveals that, besides the linguistical and other cultural characters, the distinction involves consciousness of the kind in its various forms, we have to separate the units found from those which are the object of the ethnographers final inquiry, i. e. the ethnical units in their crystallized form and units of incomplete formation. We may expect from such an investigation that there will be revealed groups speaking not only Chinese dialects with sometimes undefinable boundaries, but also non-Chinese languages, and an ethnical map, the first important result of inquiry, will be ready. If we have such a map we may not rely upon trying village after village, but proceed with our investigation of ethnical units where it will be possible to distinguish easily common elements from the accidental, and often misleading, occurrences, and cautiously avoid publication of too many partial investigations which in future may burden our knowledge with undigested material and so-to-say refuse left be the experimenting apprentices in ethnography⁴. When the preliminary work is over, the ethnographer may further proceed to the grouping of units according to various methods, e. g. according to some cultural complexes related; for instance, dialects can be grouped into larger classificatory units, connected with the changes of leading ethnoses in whole China; should there be found sharply distinct social groups extending beyond the boundaries of ethnical units, the ethnographer may analyse socially differentiated groups and classify them accordingly; should there be important and determining geographical conditions, the ethnographer may use regionalism as a mean of building up larger classificatory units, e. g. the valley of the Yangtse River, the coastal region etc.; should there be revealed determining cultural factors, e. g. the cattle

3) The main difficulty — both theoretical and practical — here consists in finding out the dialectical boundaries which in a number of cases will appear as intermediary zones of mixed dialects — the fact which commonly occurs. However, if one assumes a dynamic point of view as to the nature of ethnical unit, dialect etc. it will not hinder the classification needed by the ethnographer.

4) Not everything needs to be published at once. Not before the ethnographer becomes familiar with the subject of his study, he begins to distinguish what is of importance (relative value and relative weight of the elements in the complexes) and what is not of importance for taking upon himself the responsibility of publication and of leaving the raw material unpublished. It is here presumed that the investigator is prepared for this kind of work.

breeding complex, the millet and rice areas, even the form of government etc., the latter may be used as objective bases of classification of population according to the cultural cycles.

By this I do not want to assert that the village as a unit should not be used for other purposes, especially such ones as those pertaining to this mode of settlement, e. g. the common law, administration, means of communication, economics, census etc. where inferences were made having as their object the village unit and where inferences cannot be generalized unless one is certain that a single example may warrant conclusions. Moreover, in the beginning of his work the ethnographer has to go through the stage of preliminary work. Village, when it exists, is a territorial and administration unit, it is an economic unit in a lesser degree, like the work on the family as a unit of larger units is necessary before proceeding to the clan, village etc. The life of a single family may ethnographically constitute the subject of a special study, but such a luxury is not practically needed. However, the life of a village taken out of the ethnical unit cannot form an independent subject for this life, cannot be fully understood within itself and should be studied within the reality in which it only forms a constituent unit.

However, it is not incidental that a number of investigators have come to the idea of confining the work to the village as unit, but it cannot become a defensible assumption. First of all, the idea itself of fixing any unit of investigation methodologically is erroneous. No such a standardization is possible, for it is the ethnographer who has to find out from his preliminary survey how he will go about with the differentiation of the material, — the ethnical units are not standardized and "village" is not a system universally practised in China. Since it has already been fixed we may ask ourselves for the reasons of such a choice. There exist two fundamental conditions to be accounted for. Those who have fixed it were not trained in modern methods of ethnography. They attacked the problem from the sociological side the theory of which had been built on the facts of non-Chinese social experience. They even attacked it from a still narrower point of view, such as "rural economy" etc. Secondly, all of them had a rather confused idea about China while the Chinese themselves in their desire of reaching political unity, could not even think of China otherwise than a unit, a nation, which however might be built up of distinct ethnical and regional components⁵. Naturally, under such

5) It is a mere misunderstanding originating from an inadequate knowledge of the nature of "nation", evidently supplied by those who wanted to "westernize" the Chinese, according to their own shape and small extend of knowledge. While abroad, being chiefly interested in political problems, the Chinese had only the choice between political and semi-political circles, where the opinions of the Chinese students had to

circumstances there remained only one odd chance of giving a scientifically motivated solution of the problem of the unit of investigation, in fact it was reduced to that technique, while actually it had the greatest importance of a methodological order.

When the regional groups are investigated the ethnographer will not remain indifferent to the socially differentiated groups both within ethnical and regional groups. They form the same ethnographical material without being differentiated in territory, they are differentiated in the so-called horizontal sense⁶. The methods of investigation are alike.

Before the ethnographer possessing a certain historical sense arises the historical aspect of the investigation. In fact, any ethnographer in order to understand the observed cultural complex has to use the historical method in his work. Therefore, in order to be prepared for this kind of work he has to master specific methods used by the ethnographers in their historico-ethnographical work. Of course, this holds good also for mastering the methods pertaining to the theory of cultural complex, of the mechanisms of changes and of the theory of ethnical units which equipment will save him from committing elementary errors.

How far the ethnographer has to go into details of his description depends on the character of the facts observed. Should there be found a great variety of cultural elements of importance, they must be described. Should there be unusual regularity in their associations, the phenomenon must be carefully investigated, for it may lead to the important historical

be formed according to the aims of various "engineers" and practical sociologists, the first step to which was to win the sympathy of the Chinese youth by accepting their national aspirations. Such a behaviour affected not only practical sociologists, but also some physical anthropologists. So I have before my eyes the case of L. H. Duddley Buxton who published two popular books totally or partly dealing with the "racial problems" namely, "**China, The Land and the People**", Oxford, 1929 and "**Peoples of Asia**", London, 1925. He in a self-humiliating manner recommended himself (cf. *Man*, January 1927, in a review of one of my anthropological publications) as belonging to the "plain bluntmen" of the kind of anthropologists whom he defined as "rather practical men". He asserts that the Chinese being very uniform, are merely southern or a "Pareoan" branch of yellow man discovered in England by his superiors, in spite of a number of observations which have demonstrated the heterogeneous character of the population. The same idea was expected from practical men who wanted to be pleasant to the Chinese youth, but did not know what kind of connexions exist between "race", "ethnical unit" and "nation".

6) "Horizontal" is a rather misleading term. It points out a pyramidal structure of the society in general which is not correct even as a metaphor.

and constructive conditions of the existing complexes. Much will also depend on the personal ability of the investigator and his competence, when facing the problem of selection of field ethnographers who must first of all be prepared for their work and must also be tried on some work or, still better, be trained in field work by experienced observers. However, here it must be pointed out that besides the above requirements the beginner must possess some special aptitudes for this kind of work, such as tact in dealing with the people to be investigated, a kind attitude towards them, the ability of observation, an unprejudiced, unbiassed and, at the same time, critical behaviour in facing new facts and situations, not speaking of elementary honesty in dealing with people and facts. It is thus evident that not every candidate, educated and trained for this kind of work, may prove to be fit for ethnographical field work.

As to how long a period of time an ethnographical investigation may and should last cannot be defined, — all depends on the character of the material, its complexity and volume. Some groups may take an extremely long time, while others may occupy no more than what is required for registering striking differences⁷.

I now leave aside the question of technical and other equipment for it is of strictly professional interest. However, I deem it useful to remark that the equipment depends on the totality of conditions of investigation including individual requirements of investigators, but in no case it should become a burden for carrying out the investigation. The

7) I notice a kind of abuse of terms which define the character of the work undertaken. Sometimes a short trip within the city for collecting some data is styled "fieldwork". Indeed, we may speak of fieldwork as being different from that carried out in a library or laboratory, where the ethnographer comes into direct contact with the population. However, if such a work is irregular and unsystematic or carried out occasionally, it cannot be termed fieldwork which supposes a certain regularity and accomplishment. Furthermore, if the ethnographer has to be specially equipped and has to travel long distances with the aim of exploration, we can speak of an "expedition", which however should not be used to replace the suitable term "visiting", if the ethnographer travels to well known and easily accessible groups. To go to villages around Ningpo by passenger boat from Shanghai which was reached by the ethnographer with some ocean boat from other continents, and to spend a couple of weeks there, does not mean "field-work" either nor "exploration", nor "expedition". We may also specify two types of work, according to their character, namely, "stationary" and "sporadic". To stay for a long time in the same region for carrying out an exhaustive investigation, does not mean that the ethnographer has not to move from the spot; it means that he remains for a considerable period of time in direct contact with the object of his investigation; then we may speak of a "stationary investigation". If it is done with interruptions or during a fast moving expedition we may use the term "sporadic investigation". In China there may be used all forms of investigations which will be conditioned by the character of the material to be collected.

same holds good for the expenses which generally speaking are not as heavy as in other kinds of field-work⁸.

If one reads the works like that by *Hsiao-Tung Fei* or that by *D. H. Kulp* one may get a quite wrong impression of the ethnographical investigations in China in general. In this respect we are not so helplessly poor as it may appear to those who are not familiar with the actual situation. The contrary is right. We are, perhaps, too rich, but the material needs a skillfull hand for making this material accessible to those who cannot devote all their lifetime to study it. In fact there are branches of Chinese culture which have already been perfectly investigated, e. g. literature, religious, philosophical and moral systems, social organization in so far as it reflects upon the legislation, manifestations of art such as architecture, painting, sculpture, ceramics, music, theatre etc. Secondly, of some regions and social groups we have very valuable descriptions of observations concerning customs and practices often figured under the name of "superstitions". I do not now mention the facts found in various literary sources such as provincial histories and general literature. As a matter of fact there exists an abundance of literature not only in Chinese but also in foreign languages. There now also exist very valuable ethnographical collections of folk-lore partly stimulated by analogous work elsewhere⁹. Even the works of the type of those by *Ku Hung-ming*¹⁰, by

8) Those who are interested in the details of technique of ethnographic investigations may find some remarks scattered in the Introduction of my book "Psychomental Complex of the Tungus". I consider it practical and very useful to prepare a special manual containing all needed informations for future ethnographer-explorers in China.

9) I do not intend here to review the existing literature pertaining to Chinese Ethnography. My present aim is to stress the fact how far the ethnographical studies are already advanced. The famous H. Cordier's Bibliography of China when completed with the new publications represents a special work of a historico-bibliographical character which might serve beginners in ethnography of China as a kind of general introduction which will show what is known and what remains to be known. Naturally such a work is a huge task which requires not only a good general preparation in ethnography, but also a thorough knowledge of all languages which have been used for publications. I may certify that the works by old sinologues, such as by the French Fathers and Father Hyacinth Bičurin with his colleagues of the Russian Orthodox Mission in Peking, did not at all lose their value both as a historical documentation and as an analysis of various cultural phenomena. In such a summary work the rule "Rossica non leguntur" should not be used as an excuse of ignorance. The same holds good for the Chinese sources supplying material for such a general work. This work alone may constitute one of the current aims of Chinese ethnographers. Realising the necessity for it, I am aware also of the difficulties which have to be overcome by the combined effort of several contributors. For a real advancement of our knowledge and a shortening of ethnographical work in China, it may be not less useful than the making of an ethnographic map. I think it perhaps more useful than the description of a dozen of villages taken at random.

10) "The Spirit of the Chinese People". Peking 1915.

A. Smith¹¹, by R. Townsend¹², Count Sforza¹³ and Lin Yü-t'ang¹⁴ in experienced hands of ethnographers may assume a certain scientific value. This wealth, however, is difficult to approach for there is no systematic review of it—excellent bibliographies cover only special branches of culture and problems. What is needed, is a History of Chinese Ethnography, where all branches would be represented and all sources used. Such a critico-bibliographical survey will reveal what is actually known and where gaps are to be filled up. Of course, such a work should not be a kind of clerical automatic handling of bibliography, as it is nowadays becoming common with the bibliographical work done by unskillfull persons. It may be supposed that it will require perhaps a certain period of time before such a scholar, well trained and devoted to this task, will accomplish such a work. Indeed, should there exist such a source of knowledge, it would be possible to avoid a useless loss of time for re-discoveries and imperfect digestion of the literature.

When speaking about the preliminary steps, such as the making of an ethnographical map and the building up of an adequate history of Ethnography, I do not mean to say that all field-work for the time being must be stopped. Those ethnographers who are able to go on with their direct observations may gradually proceed with their investigation of various groups both Chinese and non-Chinese in anticipation of better conditions when the map and history of Ethnography will be at their disposal. Therefore, there should not be great hurry with the publishing all the raw material collected especially by the beginners. Indeed, they would greatly benefit if they receive guidance of specialist-ethnographers familiar with China and local conditions.

It now becomes evident that a rational organization of this work requires the establishment of a special Ethnographic Institute whose main duties must be 1. the collection of the material for an ethnographical map of China by means of comparison of the published data and special investigations at the spot; 2. the preparation of the material for a Systematic

11) "Village Life in China" . . . Cf. also Doolittle "Social Life of the Chinese"; Leang and Tao "Village and Town Life in China". Hsiao-Tung Fei "Peasant Life in China. A field study of country life in the Yangtse Valley". London, G. Routledge 1939.

12) "Ways That are Dark. The Truth about China". New York 1933.

13) "L'enigme Chinoise". Paris 1928.

14) "A Tray of Loose Sands: How the Family-Minded Chinese Behave as Social Beings in the Absence of Social Consciousness". Asia August 1935. "The Way out for China". Asia October 1935. And others.

Critico-Bibliographical History of Ethnography of China; 3. the training of ethnographers for field-work and other needs of the Institute; 4. the organization of a special Library; 5. the organization of an Ethnographical Museum; and 6. the direction of the current investigations¹⁵. Practical benefits of systematization of ethnographical investigation of China are evident. First of all it will result in a great economy of means thrown away for inadequately planned works, carried out by the persons who are not always prepared for investigations. Secondly, there will be avoided a repetition of the same work by different persons. Thirdly, there will be eliminated an incidental character of the investigations often not done for the sake of science, but for various reasons which have nothing to do with science. Fourthly, the material known will later be used and systematized in the body of scientific positive knowledge of China which may be used not only by scholars, but also by "practical men" and Chinese statesmen, all of whom may thus avoid errors inherent to the present state of things.

15) I cannot enter here into a discussion of the technical side of the organization and functioning of such an institution.