

A Chinese Case Study in Using Psychoanalysis for Ethnography

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In this article I explore a surprising conversation that I had with a Chinese Muslim woman named Sheng Lanying. Her persistent tendency to see images of Mao that were no longer present led me to examine how personal, emotional meanings informed her experience of nation-building. After providing basic historical context about the Chinese revolution, I present the conversation between Sheng and me. Then I discuss how anthropologists can use, and have used, psychoanalysis for ethnography. I next apply the psychoanalytic approach that I find most useful to Sheng's memories. I conclude with a discussion of what anthropologists can gain from integrating psychoanalysis with ethnography.

A brief history of 20th century China

Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party founded the People's Republic of China in 1949, beginning China's second modernizing revolution of the 20th century. Like the Chinese Revolution of 1911, which toppled the Qing dynasty, the Communist revolution was iconoclastic. Until Europeans and Japanese colonized Chinese territory in the late 19th century, Chinese elites had believed that China was the pinnacle of world civilization. Members of the Chinese Communist Party and other reformers wanted to "save the nation" (*jiu guo*), which had become "the sick man of Asia." They argued that Chinese society and culture had to change.

In 1949 Chinese society was predominantly agrarian. Family and kinship were defined through male links (Baker 1979). Patrilineages held land and other assets in the name of deceased male founders and held regular rituals that promoted solidarity among male agnates (Potter 1970). Sons were preferred to daughters. Elders arranged marriages. Daughters married out and went to live with their husband's kin, typically in a separate community. Proper women were sequestered (and had bound feet). Harmony was a key goal, and could be achieved if each person knew his or her place in the social hierarchy and performed accordingly. The concepts of *zhong* (loyalty), *xiao* (obedience), and filial piety expressed the central

values of deference and loyalty. The imperial state had reinforced these values and social practices through laws, punishments, and public honors (Baker 1979).

Chinese Muslims, or Hui, shared these practices and ideals with non-Muslim Chinese. Chinese Muslims claim descent from Arab and Persian traders who traveled the Silk Road from the 7th to 9th centuries and settled in China. They have “Muslim [patrilineal] grandfathers and Chinese grandmothers,” as my informants put it. Differences between Chinese Muslims and non-Muslim Chinese relate to Islam (Lipman 1996). An important way that Chinese Muslims express separateness from non-Muslims is food. Chinese Muslims do not eat pork, avoid pigs, and refuse to eat food cooked by non-Muslims. Currently there are about 20 million Chinese Muslims in the PRC, mostly living in the northwest.

The Communist Revolution began in the 1950s with a land-to-the-tillers program and a new marriage law that made arranged marriages illegal. The Chinese Communist Party formed mutual aid teams for agricultural production and brought women into the public labor force (Davin 1979). Islam was declared legal to practice and Chinese Muslims were given official minority status. They received food subsidies, educational assistance, and disproportionately high levels of political representation. The government also institutionalized the Feast of the Breaking of the Fast and the Feast of Sacrifice as official holidays for Muslims.

Mao Zedong, China’s premier leader from 1949 to 1976, favored a rapid transformation of Chinese society rather than a gradualist approach. In 1958 Mao instigated “religious reforms” that shut down most religious institutions and sent religious professionals to work in factories and labor camps. He began an erosion of political benefits to Chinese Muslims that would be completed during the late 1960s. Mao wanted China to “catch up with England in ten years and surpass America in twenty.” He started the “Great Leap Forward,” creating huge communes, standardizing agricultural practices, and centralizing eating. He encouraged Chinese citizens to melt down their cooking pots and other personal items to smelt iron in backyard furnaces. These Great Leap Forward policies, combined with some bad weather conditions, caused three years of famine and the death of more than a million people (Thaxton 2008).

Mao’s next revolutionary program was the Cultural Revolution. Beginning in 1966, Mao incited students to attack “old thoughts, old customs, old habits, and old culture.” He advocated public struggle sessions against China’s remaining “counterrevolutionaries.” Citizens with “bad class labels” (people who had been, or were descended from, large landowners, rich peasants, and capitalists), intellectuals, and Mao’s political rivals, were beaten, maimed, and killed. Mao sent urban youths to the countryside to “learn from the peasants” and closed most educational institutions (MacFarquhar and Fairbank 1991).

Mao died in 1976 and in 1979, Deng Xiaoping emerged as China’s top leader. Deng ended Mao’s radical politics and focused on economic development. He implemented “Reform and Opening,” or marketization and internationalization, and created China’s One Child policy to slow China’s population growth. Deng reinstated many of the affirmative action policies from the 1950s that protected Chinese

Muslims, and allowed them to have two children. The Chinese Muslim residents of Xi'an's old Muslim neighborhood were quick to take advantage of Deng's "Reform and Opening" policies. They started small private businesses, many associated with the production and sale of food. They rebuilt mosques, opened new Qur'an schools, and expressed their Muslim identities overtly (Gillette 2000).

Despite three decades of government policies aimed at changing the structure of Chinese society, in contemporary China harmony, loyalty, and obedience are still public values. Patrilineal kin cooperate for production and ritual activities. Most families arrange marriages—although children now can consent or refuse prospective spouses— and post-marital residence is predominantly virilocal. Sons inherit family property and are still preferred to daughters in some respects.

An afternoon conversation

One afternoon in June, 1997, Sheng Lanying and I walked together down Big Leatheryard Street. Sheng and I had been friends for three years, and I had gone to visit her at her father's house, where she ran the Sheng family's noodle business. That particular day she and her husband and two sons were expecting me for dinner, so she and I walked together toward her (marital) home.¹ At that time both the Sheng home, where Sheng Lanying worked, and the Wu home, where she lived, were large compounds housing kin related through males. In 1997 Sheng's father and mother, her father's brother's wife (who was also her mother's sister), her five brothers and their wives and children, and her oldest brother's son's wife made up the Sheng household (neither Sheng nor her three sisters lived in their father's home). In the Wu household lived three of the Wu brothers, their wives (including Sheng) and children, their father's brother son, his wife, his three sons, and his oldest son's wife and baby (For information on residence patterns in this neighborhood, see Gillette 2000: chapter two). As we traveled that familiar route, I asked Sheng about a wall we were passing on the right side of the road. The wall was twelve feet tall and made of gray stone, with a decorative molding. It looked old and important to me, as if it were in front of some special place. The wall was near the Big Leatheryard Street Mosque but was not part of the mosque complex. Gesturing in the wall's direction, I asked Sheng, "What is that (*na shi shenme*)?"

1 The location of Sheng Lanying's "home" is a problem familiar to those interested in China. Sheng referred to both her marital home and her natal home as "our home" (*women jia*), though never during the same conversation (for example, if she called the Sheng home "our home," then she called the Wu home "their home"). Sometimes Sheng referred to the Sheng home as her "mother's home" or "girlhood home" (*niang jia*). Sheng's husband always referred to the Sheng home as "their home" (*tamen jia*), and occasionally spoke of his wife "returning to her mother's/girlhood home" (*hui niangjia*). The residence listed on Sheng's residence permit (*hukou*) was the Wu home on Big Leatheryard Street, and this was where she slept at night. However, we might argue that Sheng Lanying had two "homes," and that "home" differs dramatically for Chinese men and women (for further information on women's residence patterns in China, see Jankowiak 1993, Mueggler 2000, Wolf 1972, Watson 1986).

“That’s a portrait of Mao Zedong,” Sheng replied. “There’s a huge one across from our house [the Sheng home] too, covering the entire wall. The people with bad class labels, the “cow ghosts and snake spirits” (*niugui sheshen*), used to gather there every morning to receive their instructions for the day’s activities (*zao qingshi*), and they returned to report every evening (*wan huibao*). Other people came to put fresh flowers in front of Mao’s portrait, as a way of expressing their feelings for him.”

I was surprised. “That wasn’t what I meant,” I said. “I didn’t know there was a portrait of Mao there.” “Oh,” she replied, “I thought you were looking at the traces of red paint still on the wall.” I didn’t see any red paint, but said nothing as she continued. “The government puts those there,” she said, “and the big dumpster in front of our house [the Sheng home] too.” I realized that she was talking about the nine or ten trash cans in front of the wall. “Both of those buildings are state-owned (*gongfang*). Otherwise the government would never be able to put the trash containers there. Nobody wants to have the garbage near their home, it is so dirty and smelly.” She spoke for a few moments about trash removal, and then I explained that I had been asking about the decorated wall, and wondered if something special were behind it. Sheng replied that there wasn’t, only a semi-abandoned work unit.² “In the old society,” she said, using a government phrase to refer to China before the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, the walls had belonged to officials. With this we arrived at Sheng’s (marital) home and the conversation ended. Later that evening, Sheng reminisced for a long time about her girlhood experiences during the collective era and Cultural Revolution.³

When I typed up my notes that evening, Sheng’s comments made me pause. Look, I thought, a site where citizens working to build socialism had once gathered to report to and express their feelings for Chairman Mao—a kind of shrine, almost—was now a garbage dump. “How ironic,” I wrote in my notes. “The passing of an era. Great opener for a story.” Later I focused on the gap between what I had seen and what Sheng saw. Sheng and I were good friends and our conversations were usually straightforward. I often asked her to explain others’ remarks when they didn’t make sense to me. This time *she* had produced something weird. I couldn’t see Mao’s image on the wall that she and I were passing, and had never heard of a Mao image there. I wasn’t clear why she connected this old grey wall with a decorative molding to the wall across from her home, which was white-washed brick, had no decorations, and was much more recently constructed. I had never seen or heard of a Mao image there either. I asked Sheng a literal question: “what is that.” I had *not* asked “what do you think of or remember when you look

2 Prior to the reform era, work units (*danwei*) were not merely places of employment, but usually also included employee housing, clinics, and canteens. Generally speaking, the tighter the links between the central government and the work unit, the more goods and services the unit provided for employees. See Walder 1986 for a study of a Chinese work unit (a factory). In late 1990s Xi’an, most work units were privatizing employee housing, contracting out services, and renting or selling work unit property.

3 I published an earlier analysis of this story in the *Journal of Urban Anthropology* (see Gillette 2004).

in that direction?" Yet Sheng saw Mao and talked about two walls rather than one. Why? And what caused Sheng to speak extensively about her experiences under Mao that night?

Psychoanalysis and Anthropology

In a volume on psychoanalysis, gender, and culture written for anthropologists (1999), Nancy Chodorow argues for the existence of a realm of psychological life in which individuals produce personal unconscious meanings. Chodorow suggests that transference, projection, introjection, and unconscious fantasy, concepts from clinical psychoanalysis, best convey the dynamic, emotion-filled processes through which unconscious meanings are created. These psychic processes are innate human capacities, different from, though intertwined with and affected by, cultural meanings, discourse, and the external world. Chodorow writes that anthropologists must attend to individual psyche processes or the "power of feelings" to understand subjectivity, experience, and how individuals exist in culture.

Chodorow reviews anthropological writings on the person, subjectivity, and emotions from Durkheim to the present and identifies several patterns (1999: chapter five). First, cultural anthropologists write as if their informants were always rational decision makers. Second, we privilege social and cultural constructs, language, and discursive power as sources of meaning and subjectivity. Third, we disregard individual idiosyncracies in favor of general patterns, and leave individual differences unaccounted for and undertheorized.

Chodorow's findings apply to much of the literature in the anthropology of memory, including when authors are explicitly psychological. For example, in "Death and memory: From Santa Maria del Monte to Miami Beach" (1996), Ruth Behar gives herself a psychologically complex subjectivity while attributing rationality to her Spanish informants. Behar accepts that an unconscious desire to avoid her grandfather's death drove her to do field work during the summer that he died. She reflects on the unconscious processes behind ethnography, writing "anthropology is about displacements" (43). By contrast, Behar's Spanish informants experience their emotions directly and act in ways that make sense given their feelings. The elderly villagers mourn the deaths of loved ones and recognize the end of their village way of life as they consciously relinquish their patterns in favor of modern ways that guarantee greater comfort and more opportunities for their descendants. Behar identifies generational cohorts as the source of differences between villagers, with each cohort acting rationally according to its historical experiences.

Vieda Skultans in *The Testimony of Lives: Narrative and Memory in Post-Soviet Latvia* (1998) does not deny her informants psychological complexity, but her book is an example of how anthropologists who study memory privilege cultural meanings and fail to account for individual differences. Skultans studies the autobiographical narratives of Latvians in the post-Soviet period. She compares the narratives of individuals who are well with those of individuals who somatize their feelings, and demonstrates convincingly that meaningful autobiographies

are informed by Latvian narrative conventions (e.g., the forest protects us, good Latvians versus bad Russians, a quest paradigm in which the hero learns to love his family and home). However, she does not explain why particular informants choose one idiom over another to characterize their experiences, or why some of her informants are able to draw on cultural tropes as a resource and others are not.

Vincent Crapazano's *Tuhami: Portrait of Moroccan* (1980) is an example of an ethnography that emphasizes general patterns, even though Crapazano describes the book as a study of how an individual uses cultural idioms to represent himself. Crapazano provides a series of "recitations" by a Moroccan tile maker (it is not completely clear whether these recitations are largely a response to Crapazano's questions, voluntarily generated by Tuhami, or produced in some other fashion). He explains them in terms of Moroccan beliefs in and practices surrounding spirits and demons, gender relations, late colonial and post-colonial social history, and socioeconomic class. Crapazano also presents the recitations as examples of purportedly universal psychological dramas such as the Oedipal conflict, competitions between parents and children, relations of dominance and subordination, and sexual desire. Tuhami gains a little particularity only at the end of the book, when Crapazano describes conversations that he and Tuhami had two days before Crapazano was leaving Morocco (part five). Here Tuhami and Crapazano reveal that they have become attached to one another, and act on that attachment in what Crapazano indicates are individually patterned ways (e.g., Crapazano implies a transference relationship).

I would add a fourth pattern to Chodorow's list, at least in the anthropology of memory. Anthropologists also apply psychoanalytic models designed to characterize the individual psyche to groups. Anthropologists who use psychoanalytic theories in this way include Michael Lambek, who discusses spirit possession in Madagascar and the Comoros Islands "in the key of object relations," as the collective dramatization of a group's experience of loss (1996); Charles Stafford, who uses Bowlby to define and investigate Chinese cultural practices for mediating separation and reunion, including poetry, architecture, and terms for departure and greeting (2000); and Maris Gillette, who uses Freud on separation anxiety in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to explore the gift giving practices of Chinese Muslims who make the hajj (2003). None of these authors indicate the mechanisms by which individual psychodynamic processes come to characterize group praxis. Their use of psychoanalysis bears a resemblance to Freud's later writings on culture, in which Freud wrote as if group actions, collective representations, and historical processes were simply individual psychodynamic processes writ large (e.g., *Totem and Taboo, Civilization and its Discontents, Moses and Monotheism*).

Psychoanalysis for ethnographers. Ethnographers who are interested in how people produce meaning can adopt some of the methods, theories, and assumptions of clinical psychoanalysis. Relational psychoanalysts emphasize the importance of human relationships for individuals, a perspective that ethnographers should find compelling. Like ethnographers, analysts cultivate long-term relations with their analysands to learn about their particular biographies, experi-

ences of relationships, and emotions. In detailed clinical case studies (as opposed to the theoretical work that is divorced from clinical encounters), psychoanalysts describe the personal unconscious feelings that a particular individual experiences in her relationships (e.g., Freud's case studies in Freud 1989, Yalom 1990 and 1999, Eigen 1999; see also the brief sketches of clinical work in Chodorow 1999, chapter three).

A basic premise of psychoanalysis is that human speech and actions often manifest unconscious motivations. Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* gives a number of entertaining examples of how a person's repressed materials affect her speech and acts in ways that she does not consciously intend (1965). Clinical psychoanalysts attend to an analysand's personal relationships in the present, including with the analyst, and in the past, including relations with parents and siblings. The analyst assumes that the analysand's present experience evokes responses that she has developed in her significant relationships and relates to her feelings about them, and looks for patterns in the analysand's relationships. In trying to understand their patients' subjective experiences, psychoanalysts accept that a single psychic event is meaningful for the analysand on many levels. These include both manifest (surface, obvious) and latent (deep, hidden) meanings. Freud wrote extensively about the manifest and latent contents of dreams, which he regarded as "the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious" (1909: 33), but he applied this idea more generally to his analysands' narratives, physical symptoms, and behaviors.⁴ One method that psychoanalysts adopt to get at disguised meanings is to attend to sequences. Psychoanalysts listen to the order in which a person makes her remarks and the movement that she makes from one idea to the next. The analysand's associations often reveal emotional connections and significances of which she may be unconscious or only partly conscious.

In her recent writings the ethnographer Jean Briggs uses psychoanalysis in a way that illuminates how individuals internalize cultural values (1987, 1992, 1998). For example, in "Mazes of Meaning," Briggs analyses an interaction during which several Inuit adults teased small children of two and three years old. She argues that these intervals of teasing, which she calls "dramas," force Inuit children to confront conflicting feelings and the complexity of human relationships. Briggs uses analysis of a single drama to show how cultural messages are made meaningful and intense for particular individuals. Her analysis is based on the psychoanalytic premises that humans are motivated by emotions, including unconsciously, and that close human relationships stir up powerful feelings. In what she calls her "natural history mode" of analysis—which I would call a psychoanalytic mode of analysis—Briggs scrutinizes the sequence, details, and contexts of the drama, using the participants' particular biographical details to gain insight on their actions and responses. For example, in part of the drama, Maata teased a three year-old girl about taking her and her puppy to Maata's home. Maata's teasing forced the girl to confront a number of emotionally powerful questions: what happened when the

4 Freud saw dreaming and remembering as related. As he wrote in one of his case studies, "dreaming is another form of remembering" (1918: 419).

girl was attached to adults outside of her immediate family? To whom did she belong? To whom did her puppy belong? Could she control what happened to her and her puppy? If she chose to stay home with her family, would she lose something that mattered to her? Maata stopped teasing the child only after the child had repeatedly responded to these concerns in ways that Maata and the other adults considered to be appropriate and demonstrated that she had control over her emotions. The teasing forced the child to internalize a culturally acceptable response to a situation of conflict. It also allowed Maata to perform her personal conflicts and desires: Maata was an adult woman who had been adopted, was recently married and hoping to have children, and shared a name with the three yearold girl. Briggs' analysis illuminates how an individual agent negotiates cultural values, how diversity is possible, and how meanings are built and develop. She produces a richly textured, thick description of a process through which powerful feelings make culture personally meaningful for individuals.

Exploring personal meanings

Sheng's afternoon memories. Returning to Sheng's and my conversation in June 1997, two features of Sheng's response to my question "what is that" suggest the presence of unconscious personal meanings. First, Sheng saw Mao when Mao's portrait was not there to be seen. The wall that Sheng looked at was about 100 hundred years old and its size and decorations indicated that it was from late-imperial China. In contemporary Xi'an, the most valued past—the one most frequently referred to in public representations, and the reason why most tourists visit—is dynastic. Sheng's neighborhood is known for its late imperial relics. In 1997 the Muslim district housed the city's fourteenth-century drum tower and eight mosques built during the imperial period. Sheng's response reveals Mao's significance to her.

Sheng was born in 1948 and grew up in the Communist "New China." Mao's policies had an enormous impact on her childhood and young adulthood. For example, as Sheng told me later that night, when Mao called for urban students to "go down to the countryside" (*xia fang*) to "learn from the peasants," Sheng went to live in a village. She was the only member of her family who lived in the countryside: because Sheng was willing to go, her seven younger brothers and sisters were allowed to remain in Xi'an. Sheng only returned to Xi'an because she was ill and had injured her back. Most "sent-down youths" could return only after Mao's death.

Second, Sheng associated the wall we were passing with the wall of her 12 childhood home. Many walls in the Muslim district once displayed Mao's image, so the former presence of a Mao portrait on the wall by the Sheng house cannot fully account for why Sheng brought it up. Sheng's personal history was the impetus for her association. Sheng lived in her natal home for most of Mao's reign. She spent only six years of the Maoist era outside the Sheng home, two years in the countryside and four in her marital home. Officially she lived in her childhood

home until 1982, when she finally changed the address on her residence permit (*hukou*) to her marital home.

Sheng's natal family was extremely important to her. Sheng talked about the Sheng family as "our family" (*women jia*) and called going to the Sheng house "returning home" (*hui jia*). When she said "our family" and "our home" I often had to ask whether she meant the Sheng family or her marital family.⁵ Sheng spent a great deal of time at the Sheng household. Since 1990, she had run the Sheng family noodle shop, a job which she described as "helping my father" (*gei wo ba bangmang*). Sheng labored for her natal family at all of their ritual and social events. When Sheng's husband was laid off from his job at a collective factory, Sheng asked her younger brother to find him a job in the brother's restaurant. Sheng's recollection of the wall across from the Sheng home reveals her strong attachment to and identification with her natal family. Reciprocally, Sheng's connection with her family is implicated in her memories of Mao and the collective era.

Three other features of Sheng's comments are noteworthy. First, Sheng links the Mao portrait with obedience: neighbors receive instructions and report on their activities there. Second, Sheng links the Mao portrait with devotion: locals give flowers to Mao's portrait to express their strong feelings for him. Third, Sheng's memories are ambivalent. The spontaneous gifts she describes her neighbors making to Mao's portrait are pleasant. The "cow ghosts and snake spirits"—Sheng is using a phrase from the Cultural Revolution—are residents of the Muslim district who were considered "enemies of the people." This memory points to something unpleasant.

Later that evening I asked Sheng about her class standing. Sheng said that her class label was unproblematic (she was a "city person") but those who had bad class labels suffered terribly during the Cultural Revolution. Their families did too, she went on. "People thought then that a family was like a tree: if the trunk was rotten, the whole tree was bad." The collective era, then, contains both pleasant and unpleasant memories for Sheng. Mao inspires obedience and devotion. But while Mao was in power some people and their families were harmed.

Sheng's evening memories. After her husband and sons had gone to the mosque to bathe, Sheng told me many details of her life that I had never heard before. Sheng's evening narrative revealed more about what the collective era meant to her, and how Mao and her family were related. Her reminiscences are too long to explore completely, so I quote an excerpt, and then examine it for signs of Sheng's personal emotional meanings. Sheng began her evening remarks by talking about food, perhaps because we had just eaten dinner.

Times were hard in 1960. In those days each person received 27.5 jin of grain per month. 30 percent of the grain was rough and 70 percent was fine. I got very thin because the grain was so poor. No one had enough

5 See Gillette 2001 for further discussion of married Chinese Muslim women's dual sense of "home" and the process by which married women come to regard their marital residence as "home."

to eat. My parents sold a tree in our courtyard to get food. We used to have a big tree in our courtyard, it was hundreds of years old. It gave us shade and kept our house cool. Now we bake in the sun (shai). My father cut down the tree and sold it for 80 yuan. One yuan bought three jin of turnips on the black market, so he bought turnips for us children to eat. You could buy grain ration coupons on the black market too. A coupon for one jin of grain cost 3.5 yuan. In those days my father only earned 56 yuan per month, and we had six children in our family. My mother sold all her dowry jewelry of gold and silver to buy us food.

The government distributed vegetables, but you had to go get them. The place to get the vegetables was far out of town, very far, and you had to bring them back home yourself. My father would go to pick them up. He rode his bicycle and pulled a cart behind it. He left at 4 in the morning and didn't return until 10 at night. My mother had to work, so I stayed home and watched my brothers and sisters. But we could only get the vegetables in the winter when the weather was cold enough for them to keep. The vegetables rotted in the summer, we couldn't eat them. We ate their leaves too. Everyone swelled up from the poor nutrition. We were all puffy and swollen. Adults would do anything then, any kind of work to get food for their children. You could earn money, but there was no food to buy.

I finished junior middle school just as the Cultural Revolution was beginning. From 1966 to 1968 I stayed home. My braid was down below my waist, but I had to cut it short when the Cultural Revolution began. I did go on a political pilgrimage (chuanlian) to Beijing. I went with some classmates, we took the train to Beijing. We walked to Tianjin from there. We rode the trains for free, all the trains were free. It was so hot. The trains were packed with students. We female students (nü xuesheng) suffered especially, we couldn't take off our shirts like the boys did. Boys and girls sat in separate parts of the train.

I stayed in a school in Xizhimen for a month. We lived for free. We wore signs which said that we were guests invited by Chairman Mao (Mao Zhuxi qinglai de keren). Food was brought to us by a special organization set up to take care of us students. We were treated so well. People were so honest back then. Our facilities were excellent, we had thick blankets for our beds, and no one stole them. We had heat in the dormitories. We never had to wash our bowls. There was only one small bucket where we could get water, it was too small to accommodate so many students washing their bowls. A horse-drawn cart came every day and brought new bowls for us to use. We just threw away the old ones.

I was one of the few Chinese Muslims to go on political pilgrimage. We all lined up for food, our food was centrally distributed. I stood in line for a long, long time. Finally I got to the front of the line. The man who was serving the food accidentally stuck his thumb into my bowl. He was not a Muslim. I started crying. I was so hungry and so tired, he had stuck his

thumb into mybowl and now I couldn't eat the food. He asked me why I was crying, and I explained that I was a Muslim, and I couldn't eat what he had given me. He was so good to me, he fried an egg for me, specially, so I could eat. Everyone was sogood to us.

I was in the last group of students to see Mao, and Liu Shaoqi, at the Great Hall of the People. I was in the sixth row of students, right up at the front. I went to read the political posters at Beijing University too. But I didn't see anything else! Can you believe how stupid I was? My one trip to Beijing in my life, and I didn't go look at anything else.

Sheng's memories begin with the grain rations that she received. She does not say who provided the grain rations, which was the Maoist government. She says that the rations were inadequate: Sheng grew thin from the poor quality grain, and everyone was hungry. Sheng does not attribute blame for this hunger, but her next thought is about her parents' efforts to provide her and her siblings with food. The desperate measures that Sheng's parents take are not enough to keep their children fed. Sheng again associates trees and families: she has already told me that the family of a person with a bad class label is like a tree whose trunk is rotten. Sheng's family, and their tree, both suffer injury during this time of hunger.

After remembering that her mother sold her gold and silver dowry jewelry to get food, Sheng remembers that the government provided vegetables (the movement from grain to vegetables may recapitulate a Chinese sense of what makes a meal—*fan* (grain) and *cai* (vegetables)).⁶ Sheng's father went to procure them. Here Sheng links being fed with the government and with her father. Sheng indicates that her father complied with the government's requirement that he come to their distribution site to get the vegetables. She points out that her mother worked in a factory: Sheng's mother was also complying with government policies. Sheng in turn obeys her parents and stays home from school to watch her siblings. Despite this compliance, there is still not enough to eat, not even when the leaves are consumed. Again Sheng does not attribute blame. She focuses on how hard adults worked to provide food for their children.

Next Sheng remembers going to Beijing to see Mao. Like her previous memory, with this association she indirectly names who caused her hunger and her family's suffering. Sheng begins this story with another sacrifice: she cuts off her long hair. Sheng's cutting off her braid parallels her mother's sale of her dowry jewelry and her father's cutting down the family tree. She then remembers leaving her family for a month to make a political pilgrimage, in what was probably her first trip away from home. Closeness to Mao requires "cutting" the family.

Sheng's memory of her time in Beijing is about her being special. Because of Mao, Sheng rides the train for free. She and her classmates are Mao's special guests in Beijing. Mao ensures she is well-treated: she and the other students have ample food and are warm, comfortable, and treated respectfully. Mao is a good provider for Sheng, unlike her natal family in Xi'an.

⁶ The significance of *fan* vs. *cai* is spelled out in Cooper 1986.

The story of the egg problematizes this fantasy. On the one hand, Sheng is again getting special treatment. The man is attentive to Sheng's special needs as a Muslim and ensures that she gets fed. On the other hand, the man can ruin Sheng's ability to eat because he is not a Muslim. To accept food cooked by this man, Sheng must compromise her standards. In 1966 she eats impure food (the egg) that she would never consume in 1997. But in her reminiscences she stresses the man's, Mao's, and everyone's goodness.

Sheng begins the final portion of this memory by telling me again how she was special. Sheng was in the last group of students who got to see Mao and she got very close to him. However the satisfaction of her closeness does not sustain her. She interrupts her memories to berate herself for only visiting revolutionary sites on her political pilgrimage and neglecting all the wonders of Beijing's imperial capital. Sheng's memories after this comment continued this turn toward the negative: she remembered the hardships she suffered as a "sent-down youth" in the countryside, and the failure of the farmers to feed her when she got sick.

Sheng's evening memories connect her family and Mao, whose policies affect the most intimate domains of Sheng's and her family's lives. She describes herself and her parents as obedient: her parents comply with government policies, Sheng complies with her parents' requests, Sheng complies with Mao's demands. Sheng's parents make sacrifices for their children, and Sheng makes sacrifices for Mao. Sheng does not directly blame anyone for her hunger and sacrifices, although the sequence of her memories points toward who is responsible for her sufferings. Consciously, Sheng is loyal to her parents and to Mao. To apportion blame or get angry would violate the values of harmony, loyalty and filial obedience (*zhongxiao*), and devalue the deeply personal sacrifices that Sheng and her parents made during the collective era.

Sheng's memories of Mao in Beijing are a fantasy of her specialness. Her trip loosely recapitulates the trip that a bride makes from her natal home to her marital home: she cuts ties with her family, is carried away in a vehicle provided by the groom, is feted and fed on her arrival, and finally gets to see the man she is marrying. Sheng idealizes her treatment, to the point of overlooking compromises such as eating unclean food. Sheng's story of the egg captures the compromises she experiences in her memories of Mao. The hardships that she and her loved ones suffered compromise her efforts to retain a positive memory of her childhood and young adulthood. Sheng's experiences are challenged even more by Deng Xiaoping's reversal of Mao's policies during the "Reform and Opening" period—all of the reasons for Sheng's and her parents' sacrifices have disappeared. Sheng's interruption of her Beijing memories expresses some of her dissatisfaction: how could I only have done revolutionary things, why was I so short-sighted?

Psychoanalysis for ethnography. During her afternoon remarks and her evening memories, Sheng told me something about what gave her life meaning. She articulated how she participated in the project of nation-building in China, and what that meant for her personally. It seems to me that Sheng's experiences of her relationship with the government under Mao were so deep and so intimate

that her powerful feelings must also affect her response to the government in the present. If nothing else, Sheng's experiences under Mao influenced her expectations about how the government should treat Chinese citizens. For example, in 1997 I was shocked by Sheng's violent reactions to some police officers who may or may not have killed a Chinese Muslim man in 1996. She wanted the policemen to be executed immediately (perhaps my shock was my counter-transference). Now, I think that her memories of Mao and her fantasy of specialness help explain her angry demands.

Conclusion

Malinowski once characterized the task of anthropologists as studying "native society from the native's point of view" (1921). In my opinion, ethnographers who are interested in natives' points of view or what makes a native's life meaningful should not stop at investigating collective representations and discourse. We should also consider how a person's emotions, unconscious fantasy, and biography color her experiences and influence her narratives and actions. Such an approach brings us closer to our informants' experiential worlds. It helps us understand how individuals personalize cultural values and practices.

Writing these accounts, in turn, might cause us to add a psychic dimension to how we think about collective identities, socialization, and meaning. Sheng experienced her relationship with the government as direct, intimate, and personally meaningful. If we studied nationalism in China as subject to emotional meanings, we might be able to clarify why people of Sheng's generation are so much more positive about the Maoist era than the hardships and violence of that period seem to warrant. We might also be able to make more sense of Chinese citizens' vigorous, and to many Americans, unexpected responses to such international incidents as the Belgrade bombing of the Chinese embassy under the Clinton administration, the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington D.C., and the Anglo-American invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. If individuals experience national belonging as a significant personal relationship, than nationalism is subject to the same unconscious psychic processes that characterize all of an individual's meaningful relationships. Our anthropological understandings of nationalism or other collective identities would be enriched if we also explored their psychic dimensions.

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