India-China Comparisons: state and society

Indian and Chinese societies seem an obvious case for comparison, but until recently there has been little intellectual interaction between Indian and Chinese scholars, while comparative works remain few and far between. The India-China Comparisons: State and Society workshop served as an orientation for the field to Indian, Chinese, French and Dutch scholars.

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By Peter van der Veer

India and China are the two largest societies in the world, both with ancient civilizations. Together they weigh over 20% of the world’s population, and since 1800 and are becoming so again. India is the world’s largest democracy while China is a communist state; both have important diaspora populations.

There are other reasons and points for comparison, but European or Western modernity has to date been the largest framework for comparative research.

When Indian and Chinese scholars engage in comparative research, they invariably look to the West — previously to Europe and increasingly to the Unit- ed States. For European scholars, the effort to master a Chinese or Indian language and to gain expertise in the study of either is already a daunting task; to begin comparing these societies seems like an insurmountable task. It is perhaps the fact that the comparison of India and China has yet to take off. Inter-Asian comparisons still need to be developed.

Civilization, nation and culture

Patricia Uberoi pointed out some of the disciplinary reasons within the social sciences for the inadequate development of comparative work, and raised the question of what should be compared. She noted the lack of a strong presence of Chinese studies in India. Tan Chung, look for deep civilizational comparisons, understandable from the viewpoint of a scholar whose father was brought to India by Rabindranath Tagore to set up Chinese studies. Puay-Peng Ho, from the perspective of art history, and Peter van der Veer, from the perspective of anthropology, plead- ed for a historically informed perspec- tive on questions of civilization, nation and culture. Ho looked at the revolu- tionary changes that are taking place in Chinese art and architecture as sig- nifiers of Chinese national identity, while Van der Veer underlined the his- toricity of the concepts of religion and secularity when applied to Indian and Chinese societies.

While these were larger theoretical questions, much of the conference was devoted to the presentation of empiri- cal research on comparative develop- ments. Ravi Thakur and Satish Deshpande looked at social stratification and the role of the middle class in both countries, while A.R. Vasisi explored the crucial issue of equity in education and literacy.

Avoiding Harm: medical decision making and East Asian values

Bioethicists discussing family values often refer to ‘traditional’ and ‘secular’ notions of the family. Behind these lie holistic notions of the ‘Eastern family’ and ‘Western individualism’. These notions can affect decisions of life and death.

As a believer in the merits of individual choice and transparency, Stephen Wear of the University of Buffalo defends the practice of truth-telling under all cir- cumstances. The individual should be able to decide for him or herself. Wear illustrated this argument with the exam- ple of a Taiwanese woman diagnosed with breast cancer. Her parents did not tell her and decided she should receive Chinese medicinal treatment. The can- cer spread; when she returned to the hospital for help it was too late.

Tradition and harmony

Defending what she regards as the tra- ditional Chinese family, Samantha Mei-chei Pang from Hong Kong argues that, because harmony in the Chinese family is important, the family in some cases may justifiably decide for the individual – to protect the patient. Con- fronting the patient with his or her imminent death is too painful; it there- fore becomes taboo in the patient’s presumed interest. But consider the following example of a Japanese family, one that raises the issues of gender, the generation gap, and issues of institu- tional power. When the husband vis- ited his wife after an operation and was diagnosed with cancer. He chose a course of treatment, and presented the family with the facts. His disease subse- quently developed. At around the same time, the grand- mother was also diagnosed with can- cer, but neither her daughter nor the physician told her the truth. As a result, her situation received little attention. Such responses to medical diagnosis are not always the result of rational decision making, but are embedded in the work- ings of local medical institutions. Thus whether the grandmother would really be hurt by the truth is not discussed; whether the physician finds it medical- ly desirable to inform the patient about his/her disease is not a central issue. Traditional habits and sanctions have institutional memories, although they change, they do not always do so in pace with social and medical developments.

A discussion on the cultural and socio- economic logic of rapidly changing soci- eties may be necessary to take measures against the random disintegration of tra- ditional institutions. Stephen Wear, sus- picious of avoiding truth-telling but sen- sitive to cultural circumstances, concedes that the family should have a chance to explain the diagnosis and prospects to the patient, but only if the physician is in a position to verify it afterwards.

To conclude, the dichotomy of Eastern and Western family is not very helpful since we are trying to understand the diversity of family institutions anywhere. Medical paternalism was as strong in the US and Europe not so long ago. Family forms that resemble the multi-generational family are widespread amongst wealthy industrialized soci- eties, East or West. A reduction in aver- age fertility rates in combination with education and the rising standard of living in women usually lead to increasingly independent individuals. It also needs pointing out that familialistic views of medical decisions and life issues are often ineptable from official ideology.

De-emphasizing individual autonomy tends to go hand in hand with invasive pressures from the state, the communi- ty and the family on the most vulnera- ble individuals. The question, then, remains: on what authority can we decide if the morality of the family con- flicts with the interest of the individual? Finally, we could ask if it is true that strong notions of state and individual in the West have led to an impoverishment of intermediate institutions such as the family and the local community. The lib- eralism and socio-cultural pluralism characteristic of many modern states has created confusion, but possibly richer- er notions of family organization and morality as well.

Notes

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