

# *The Value of Comparison*

Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures 2013

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## *Section I: The Fragment and the Whole*

### Chapter 1: Introduction

As is well known, Lewis Henry Morgan contributed substantially to the study of kinship and the study of social evolution. Today Morgan is still a household name among Chinese anthropologists due to the influence he has had on Marx and Engels. Morgan's thought became part of Marxist orthodoxy and thus fundamental for the Communist Party's approach to minorities in China. The Han majority was seen in evolutionary terms as more advanced than the minorities, a theory well suited to earlier civilizational ones. Superior in its material civilization (agriculture) it had the historical task to lead the minorities to higher development. It is an irony of history that the ghost of Morgan, a brilliant capitalist still haunts the academic institutions of Communist China. Fei Xiaotong, one of the fathers of Chinese anthropology, still asserted this theory in the 1980s and it continues to be one of the pillars of Chinese policy towards nationalities.<sup>1</sup> Fei argues in his Tanner Lectures that an ethnic group, first known as Hua Xia and later as Han, which lived in the Yellow River area in Central China, expanded from this area by absorbing other groups. This became the nucleus of 'the Chinese people'. The name 'Han' came from the Han dynasty,

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<sup>1</sup> Fei Xiaotong's 1988 [Tanner lecture](#) in Hong Kong, "Plurality and Unity in the Configuration of the Chinese Nationality".

but only after the ethnicity had already been formed. Fei thus proposes a theory of gradual absorption, partly by expansion by the Han, partly by absorption of non-Han peoples who had conquered Han areas but adopted Han names (p-186). Fei's explanation of this successful expansion and absorption is the Following: "What, then, has made the Hans a nucleus with such centripetal force? The main factor, in my view, has been their agricultural economy. Once a nomadic tribe made its entry into the plains and found itself in the midst of the careful, orderly society of farmers, most of the nomads would eventually throw themselves all too voluntarily into the embrace of the Hans." (p.214). When Fei moves from his historical exposé to contemporary ethnic policy (that he helped to develop) he argues that "the policy is for the better-developed groups to help the underdeveloped ones by furnishing economic and cultural aid."(p. 219). His entirely a-political view of the processes involved is best illustrated by the following comment on the last page of his lectures: "The Tibetans, for example, who are used to living and working at high altitudes, can play a major role in the effort to develop the economy on the highlands, while cooperating and exchanging with other ethnic groups for the ultimate purpose of general prosperity." (p.229).

Outside of China evolutionary comparisons of contemporary societies have become widely discredited, at least in academic discourse, although, as we will see, evolutionary perspectives in relation to cognitive science have again come into vogue. This rejection of evolutionism should, however, not lead to a rejection of comparison. The main purpose of the present book is to show the value of anthropological comparisons that are not grounded in evolutionary theory through essays on topics as varied as iconoclasm, urban poverty, social exclusion, and mountain people. The case material for the comparative essays presented here is taken from work done in India and China. That material is only partly ethnographic. Much of it provides an anthropological lens on historical material. The connection laid between anthropology and history is certainly not new. It has its ancestral roots in the work of the French school, including Mauss, Granet, Dumezil, and later Dumont. This is the basis of Marcel Detienne's passionate plea for comparison between

contemporary and past societies and for connecting anthropology and history.<sup>2</sup> Such a plea, though with a somewhat different genealogy and execution, is also made in the work of Bernard Cohn.<sup>3</sup> It has inspired my comparative work on Britain and India as well as that on India and China. In this book the focus is on the problematic notion of civilization that informs issues like social inequality, ethnicity and nationalism, representation, and religion.

One of the previous Morgan lecturers Ward Goodenough who recently passed away and was in the late eighties my (very senior) colleague at the University of Pennsylvania delivered the Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures in 1968 on the topic of Description and Comparison in Cultural Anthropology. Goodenough argued that the description of the basic emic categories, primarily those of kinship, that one's informants used, could be used to reconstruct their culture, as if it was a language. This reconstruction then could be the basis of comparison in the service of generalized knowledge. Description is a means to the end of generalization by way of comparison. This research program came under heavy critique in the 1980s. Generalization from fieldwork seemed no longer seen feasible and the main task of anthropology became description. As Ladislav Holy observes: "the word comparison itself has completely disappeared from the vocabulary of methodological discourse".<sup>4</sup> In Holy's view, "the high value ascribed to non-comparative analytical description reflects the redefinition of anthropology as an interpretative humanity concerned with cultural specificity and cultural diversity, rather than as a generalizing science" (p.8). What Holy sees as the remaining possibility of a comparative approach in a humanistic interpretative anthropology that emphasizes description of specificity is to search for formal principles of human cognition. This indeed is a move which was fundamental to structuralism, but has been highly stimulated over the last two decades by advances in cognitive psychology and brain research. Some of those who developed symbolic anthropology under the influence of structuralism, like Dan Sperber and Maurice

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<sup>2</sup> Marcel Detienne, *Comparing the Incomparable*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> B.S. Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians*.

<sup>4</sup> Ladislav Holy, 'Introduction', in Ladislav Holy (ed) *Comparative Anthropology*. London: Basil Blackwell, 1987, p.7.

Bloch, have come more and more under the influence of cognitive science. Others like Marshal Sahlins, though equally influenced by structuralism, have rejected the sociobiology that underlies much of the combination of anthropology and cognitive science. Again others like Harvey Whitehouse have embraced sociobiology by arguing that “anthropology should be to the cognitive sciences what fieldwork is to experimental primatology”.<sup>5</sup> Since Whitehouse seems to represent an extreme case of enthusiasm for cognitive sciences among anthropologists we may have a look at some of his ideas. In a recent article Whitehouse and Cohen want to show the importance of anthropology to the study of cognitive evolution by focusing on group synchronous activity (like singing or dancing) in explaining human cooperation. While the idea that anthropology should play a role in the development of a multidisciplinary study of human cognition is correct, the focus on singing and dancing might fall short in explaining human cooperation. The proposal to reduce the various forms of human cohesion to two types: “the one small-scale uniting face-to-face communities and the other large-scale uniting ‘imagined communities’ and to argue that ‘these divergent patterns of group formation are a consequence of the frequency and emotionality of ritual performances” (p. 408) certainly does not help in providing such an explanation. Using the Human Relations Area Files and coding 644 rituals from 74 language groups Whitehouse and Cohen come to the astonishing conclusion that “groups with high frequency/low-arousal rituals tend to be much larger than groups with low frequency/dysphoric rituals”. What could this possibly mean? One could say that this finding seems to be confirmed, for instance, by the ethnographic descriptions of the small-scale society of the Marind-Anim where initiation rituals in New Guinea are anxiety producing and intense and happen only when a group of youngster comes of age.<sup>6</sup> And, in contrast, by the fact that the Catholic Mass is happening every Sunday and appears to be less intense, although one does remember that in Europe pogroms often happened after the celebration of Easter (but once a year and thus low frequency, although not entirely dysphoric). But what about Hindu death rituals or Daoist possession cults, or Korean

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<sup>5</sup> Harvey Whitehouse, Emma Cohen Seeking a Rapprochement Between Anthropology and the Cognitive Sciences: A Problem-Driven Approach. *Topics in Cognitive Science* 4 (2012) 404-412

<sup>6</sup> Gilbert Herdt *Guardians of the Flutes: Idioms of Masculinity*. New York, McGraw-Hill. 1981

shamanistic performances? In fact, we have such a wide variety of practices that we put in the container category 'ritual' and indeed such a wide variety of societal forms that the attempt by Whitehouse and Cohen to reduce them to two types that are correlated with two types of societies seems absurd. More than of the precise linguistic descriptions of Ward Goodenough it reminds one of the sweeping materialist evolutionism of Marvin Harris but this time with a focus on mental processes and emotions (thanks to the cognitive sciences) instead of material conditions.<sup>7</sup> There is a seemingly indomitable desire for generalization in the name of theory that has revived an interest in large data sets, such as the Human relations Area Files that were started by Murdoch in the 1950s, but had become unconvincing after the rise of Geertzian interpretive anthropology. Geertz's critique of "common-denominators of culture" is that it should demand "that the universals proposed be substantial ones and not empty categories; (2) that they be specifically grounded in particular, psychological, or sociological processes, not just vaguely associated with 'underlying realities'; and (3) that they can convincingly be defended as core elements in a definition of humanity in comparison with which the much more numerous cultural particularities are of clearly secondary importance. On all three of these counts it seems to me that the *consentium gentum* approach fails; rather than moving toward the essentials of the human situation it moves away from them."<sup>8</sup> This critique is still fully valid and does not imply that anthropology is not scientific in its pursuit of detailed particularities. However, it does imply that the rise of the cognitive sciences, largely based on new (less intrusive) observational techniques), while of great importance, cannot be expected to answer many of the important questions that are asked in anthropology (not yet, and maybe never). Both Freud and Levi-Strauss believed that a science of society and of the mind would ultimately rest on an understanding of the brain and there are good reasons for believing that, but till now there is hardly a productive way in which brain research can be connected to the interpretation of ethnographic materials. Our human nature is shared, but our languages, beliefs, practices are immensely diverse.

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<sup>7</sup> Marvin Harris *Cannibals and Kings: The Origins of Cultures*. New York: Vintage. 1977

<sup>8</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture*. New York: Basic Books, 1973, 39.

On the other hand, there is also no reason to essentialize cultural differences as is done in the recent assumption of radical ontologies. Philippe Descola, for instance, comes up with a fourfold taxonomy of ontologies, differentiated in their assumptions of physicality (what is believed about bodies) and interiority (feelings and beliefs both inside oneself and in relation to other intentional beings).<sup>9</sup> The problem with this kind of taxonomy is that it captures only part of what is clearly in most societies a debate about relations between humans and things that is constantly changing instead of characterizing an entire culture's way of thinking. For example Buddhism's emphasis on ahimsa (not killing, not harming) emerges in the context of a radical critique of Brahman sacrifice, but never comes to dominate the debate entirely, so that several ontological options remain available. There is certainly no sense that the participants in such debates cannot understand each other, because of the radical differences in their ontologies. Structuralist approaches have never shown much interest in the historical and fragmented debates that characterize society.

Surely there are great and sometimes fundamental differences between the kinds of debates that are going on, for example, among the ancient Greek and the ancient Chinese. As the classicist G.E.R. Lloyd, who tries to compare these two worldviews, helpfully, puts it, where the Greeks would have seen things, the Chinese would have seen events (p.23). This quite substantial philosophical difference does not prevent us from understanding both points of view and even choose among them. At the same time one needs to recognize that Lloyd may overstretch his point, since not all Greeks see 'things' instead of 'events', since the processual nature of things is also emphasized by some Greeks as in the famous 'panta rhei', everything flows. While these are internal debates within civilizations it is the characteristic of our common age that we are more than ever interacting with different worldviews in shared spaces. While there is quite a scope for misunderstanding and error this does not seem to be an obstacle to many forms of communication, such as travel and trade. Philosophical arguments within civilizations like

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<sup>9</sup> Philippe Descola,

China or Greece should not be taken to characterize the entirety of these civilizations since they are often only held by some social actors, and always subject to debate.

Similarly the sinologist Edward Slingerland is right in arguing that the early Chinese did not lack concepts of body-mind dualism, but wrong in thinking that he has found anything significant. His entire debunking of the way in which leading sinologists have assumed a radical difference between Western (dualist) and Chinese (holistic) thought by showing evidence that dualism also existed in China is based on the premise that one can reduce complex arguments to simple oppositions. What is understood as ‘mind’ or ‘body’ has been subject to much too complex arguments in both the West and in China to be simply captured under the terms holism or dualism. It cannot be a surprise to anyone that Chinese make a difference between the living and the dead and that Confucius, cited by Slingerland on p. 8) thinks that the dead have lost something that is basic (ben, 本).

Whether this implies that Confucius made a sharp distinction between body and mind is an altogether unsupported claim by Slingerland and can only be argued by a deep hermeneutical engagement with the Confucian corpus. Slingerland, however, has opted for a radically different approach, namely to get rid of possible bias in selecting our textual evidence by “a keyword-focused random sampling of passages from the pre-Qin corpus”.

To me this describes the problem of abstract generalization in a nutshell. One seems to think that one can get at the meaning of a corpus by selecting one term (in this case heart 心) and mechanically code it in its relation to, say, the body. If this would get us at the development of early Chinese thinking it would be great, but in fact it only gets us at a corroboration of Slingerlandt’s Theory of Mind (TOM) that is a universal human propensity that ascribes intentionality to mind-possessing agents and mindless things. In short, the Chinese also have a Mind. This does away with the intricate arguments in philosophical texts in the West and in China about ‘intentionality’ that are unresolved and thus still engage us: not to mention the anthropological complications in interpreting ritual practices in both the West and China.

This book makes the claim that it is fruitful to continue the comparative approach initiated a century ago by Mauss and Weber without striving for unified theories. It resists the growing tendency to define science as a method of model making based on variables and quantitative samples and to portray ethnography and historical sociology as 'unscientific' since they do not strive for generality. Many of these battles have been fought before, but the ascendancy of model making in sociology and of cognitive evolutionism in anthropology make them again inevitable. My own work over the last decades on nationalism and religion raises the issue of 'generality' also at another level, since both nationalism and religion are totalizing ideologies.<sup>10</sup> The difficulties are both at the level of the object of study as at the level of method and theoretical representation. For instance, Partha Chatterjee has eloquently shown the contradictory fragments inherent in anti-colonial nationalism in Bengal, but his neat division of spiritual and material domains in nationalist imaginations again reifies structural oppositions.<sup>11</sup> In the face of such ideologies one needs to do an extra effort to capture their distance from the much more fragmented and contradictory realities people inhabit. Obviously, this is in itself a general claim and, just as obviously, one constantly makes general claims. This, however, is different from the demand that a case study of, say, a particular region of China should be generalizable to all of China, if it is to be of any value. It might be more important to show the specific difference from other parts of China. To give an example: Kenneth Dean has in a number of important publications on his fieldwork in Putian, a region in Fujian (South-West China), shown the existence of a regional system of ritual alliances that seems to have connected the region more with South-East Asia than with Central China. This evidence goes against the grain in Chinese studies to show a Confucian civilization that unifies all of China. It is not that such regions are entirely separated from the rest of the Mainland but that they are in conversation with the rest without being assimilated or entirely unified. In one of the rituals that Dean shows in a recent documentary a Confucian master is incorporated in local ritual instead of local ritual being incorporated in the

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<sup>10</sup> Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism, Hindus and Muslims in India*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994

<sup>11</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.



Confucian worldview.<sup>12</sup> Often such diversity is only recognized in the case of ethnic minorities, but the Putianese are so-called Han, although they speak a language that is entirely unintelligible for Mandarin-speakers or Minnanhua speakers who live in adjacent regions. Again, one can see the power of ideologies of unity that are replicated in dominant forms of scholarly work.

Assumptions of civilizational unity are also found in the study of India. The caste system has been often understood as a 'system' that integrates a wide variety of peoples with different languages and practices. Again, a number of historical studies have shown that while there are castes everywhere in India it is hard to see it as an integrated system that organizes Indian society as a whole. There is not such a system and principles of kinship and value intersect with structures of opportunity and mobility to produce 'castes' like Rajputs and Brahmins. Today's India shows a highly diversified picture in which caste, class, regional identity, and transnational mobility are combined with Hindu nationalism to reproduce inequality in education, health, social services, and ultimately politics. Similarly the idea that Sanskrit civilization provides unity has been argued, for instance by M.N. Srinivas, but also shown to be highly ideological and 'a view from above' which discounts even the great differences within Sanskrit traditions that have developed in different parts of India.

My own work has focused on India for a long time, but has over the last few years developed a comparative perspective on India and China. This kind of work is 'secondary' in the sense that it tries to make sense of a wide variety of arguments by historians and anthropologists without going into the interpretation of primary sources and fieldwork data, unless one's own fieldwork or historical research contributes significantly to the problem selected. The growth of specialist knowledge on these societies has grown exponentially since Weber wrote his studies in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the Weberian comparative enterprise to discover the unique features of Western historical developments has been replaced by a non-comparative urge to make sense of national societies on their own. The marginalization of comparative analysis is particularly glaring in history, the

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<sup>12</sup> [www.boredinheaven.com](http://www.boredinheaven.com)

national discipline par excellence.<sup>13</sup> However, it has also become glaring in anthropology that was supposed to be comparative from its beginning. As I will argue, at some length later in the book, there is no escape from comparison when we deal with ‘other societies’ as historical sociologists or anthropologists, since we are always already translating into Western languages what we find elsewhere, using concepts that are derived from Western historical experience to interpret other societies and other histories. It is therefore necessary to engage one’s implicit comparison and make it more explicit. At another level, comparison should highlight certain aspects of a society that are not given enough attention by specialists and which are highlighted by the study of another society. India and China are huge agrarian societies with deep civilizational histories that go through similar transformations in the interaction with modern Western imperialisms. The pathways and solutions chosen by actors in these societies are very different and their comparison helps us to understand them better, namely as historical options rather than the inevitable outcome of their cultures. My work seeks to help develop a historical sociology that applies an anthropological perspective and is based on historical materials as well as fieldwork that raises new questions and highlights differential patterns and their causes.

At this point let me summarize briefly for the reader what is in my view the comparative advantage of anthropology which I will seek to demonstrate and illustrate in the rest of the book:

1. Anthropology is primarily an engagement with ‘difference’ and ‘diversity’ and focuses on problems of cultural translation. As such it offers a critique of the universalization of Western models and provides thus a basis for a comparative historical sociology. Ethnographical data derived from fieldwork form a big part of anthropology, but the study of other kinds of material, historical, textual, visual, also benefits from an anthropological perspective.

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<sup>13</sup> Marcel Detienne, *Comparing the Incomparable*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2008

2. A necessarily fragmentary approach to social life, in which the intensive study of a fragment is used to gain a perspective on a larger whole, offers a greater potential for social science than the analysis of large data, undergirded by game-theory and rational choice-theory. One should not confuse this attention to 'the micro' with any form of methodological individualism which assumes that 'the macro' emerges from the actions and motivations of individual actors. The study of a fragment cannot be generalized to the level of 'society as a whole' or Weberian 'ideal-types'. The construction of the individual as a rational actor in order to be able to make large-scale generalizations is part of a modern ideology of individualism and the very opposite of a comparative approach as proposed here.
3. What I will call *generalism*, namely the assumption of integration of nations and civilizations or the assumption of society as an integrated whole is different from anthropological *holism* which implies the drawing of larger inferences from the intensive study of fragments of social life. This approach derives from Durkheim's emphasis of studying 'social facts' which he conceived to be different from other facts; and especially from Mauss's focus on the 'total social fact', that is simultaneously legal, economic, religious, and political. Mauss's example of such a 'total social fact' is 'gift-exchange', a phenomenon that can be used to elucidate important aspects of social life by comparing a number of very different societies. The other major inspiration is Weber who tried to understand the specificity of historical developments through comparison.
4. Anthropology has always taken the body (its symbolism, its functions, its gender) as a focal point of the study of society. However, from Durkheim onwards, the anthropological contribution to the study of embodied practice emphasizes the social and provides a critique of socio-biological determinism by showing that it is full of Euro-American prejudice. An anthropological emphasis on 'the body' and its disciplining requires an attention to

configurations of power that cannot be replaced by psychological experiments or tests.

From a methodological point of view the intensive study of a slice of human reality in relation to what Durkheim calls 'the representation' of that slice allows one to question many assumptions that come out of the preoccupations of Western common sense. For instance, the conceptualization of the relation between humans and material objects in Sumba, Indonesia is so radically different from Calvinist missionaries that the conversion process is one of constant miscommunication and translation.<sup>14</sup> If that slice can capture immediate attention of a general audience (say, casinos and gamblers in Macao in relation to notions of 'good fortune' and speculation) anthropology approximates investigative journalism in observation and description, but the difference lies in the conceptual contribution to deeper interpretations of risk and uncertainty as aspects of larger cultural wholes. Some contemporary work like the sociologist Eric Klinenberg's writing on a heat wave in Chicago or on Hurricane Sandy in New York is good journalism, but what makes it also good sociology is that it proposes some theoretical understandings of the social responses to climate challenges.<sup>15</sup> Comparative sociology comes in when one goes beyond the analysis of American responses to climate challenges and compares it to, say, responses to earthquakes in Turkey, Iran, or China. What I would see as the anthropological contribution is the analysis of grief, pain, and lament as part of a holistic interpretation of what is, variably, seen as the divide between nature and society and between human agency and 'acts of god' in different societies. A good ethnographic example is Eric Mueggler's work on the ways a Yi community in South-West China deals with a history of violent state formation, focusing on a major political aspect 'rotating headman-ship'. Mueggler is able to show the poetics of local memory that summons up and exorcises the terror of the past.<sup>16</sup> Obviously, nobody would claim that this picture would be

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<sup>14</sup> Webb Kenae, *Christian Moderns*. Berkeley: University of California Press,

<sup>15</sup> Eric Klinenberg, *Heatwave: A social autopsy of disaster in Chigao*. Chicago University Press, 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Eric Mueggler, *The Age of Wild Ghosts. Memory, Violence, and Place in Southwest China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

generalizable to China as a whole or even the Yi as a whole. That is clearly not the purpose of this kind of work that nevertheless provides the reader with a penetrating comment on historical events like the Great Cultural Revolution. It depends on the fragment that one focuses on and the research questions that one asks what larger problem is addressed through one's study. For example, Jonathan Parry's excellent ethnography of Hindu death rituals cannot be used to explain the rise of Hindu nationalism, but it gives us an important picture of ideas of death and regeneration of life in India that are comparable with ideas and practices elsewhere.<sup>17</sup>

Comparison is, in my view, not in the first place a question of the right research design, the correct choice of cases to be compared (the 'what' and 'how' to compare), although this is obviously important, but of an awareness of the conceptual difficulties in entering 'other' life worlds. That 'otherness' should not be exaggerated, since everyone is in some way interacting and communicating with everyone else. Moreover, anthropology is highly equipped to engage problems of translation, and of bridging different semantic universes. Its contribution is therefore not to utter always the qualifier 'but' when social scientists are generalizing, but rather to contribute to radically new and open ways of understanding reality. This is an uphill struggle and against the spirit of the time (*Zeitgeist*) that is deeply convinced of universality and generalizability and the ultimate genetic basis of all and everything. Nevertheless, it is a struggle worth pursuing.

What would be an example of a 'fragmentary approach' that allows us to ask questions about a larger whole? It might be helpful for the reader if I give a concrete example. I am inspired here by Sydney Mintz's brilliant expose of the story of sugar that connects a seemingly marginal commodity (a fragment of social reality) to the emergence of world capitalism, including the production of sugar in plantations across the world and the increasing use of sugar in Britain. In the case of the comparative analysis of India and China it would be tea and opium that could provide such an example.

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<sup>17</sup> J.P. Parry. *Death in Banares*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Bloch and Parry, *Death and the Regeneration of Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

When I came to North India in the early 1970s I drank a lot of tea. Tea was available everywhere. It was cooked with milk and sugar and thus pretty nutritious. In fact, in my fieldwork it was the breakfast that my host served me every morning at 6 AM and the only thing I would get till 11 or 12 when the first (of two) meals were served. Alcohol was not available in the Hindu pilgrimage center where I did my fieldwork.<sup>18</sup> More in general, drinking alcohol was a thing for men in secluded booth or at private parties and mostly not social, but to get drunk. It was also seen as a foreign thing. In my first passport I had a license to buy alcohol in the dry (alcohol-free) state of Tamil Nadu, mentioning that I as a foreigner needed alcohol. For the rest, drinking country liquor (and smoking beedi) was for the lowest castes and my Brahman hosts in North India would frown upon it. They would see it as habits that belong to lower natures and reproduce lower natures. So, tea was the drink and it was safe, because it was cooked. Only once in a while sharbat would be served, a sweet rosewater drink, or some fizzy soft drink like Limca (coca cola was banned in the 1970s; and now again in some states). Since it was the only real universal social drink (coffee was only served in elite coffee houses for men in cities). I took it for granted that it had been in India forever. Moreover, I was aware that tea was produced in Assam, Darjeeling and Ceylon, since we drank tea with these names in Holland. I never wondered why Indians mostly used a relatively cheap British tea brand, called Lipton.

These days of naiveté are over. I now realize that the tea with sugar that I drank at home in Holland had only been spread over the population in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and that the quintessential British ritual of the afternoon tea is of similar recent vintage. Tea plantations in India were started by the East India Company in the 1820s to break the monopoly of the Chinese and to produce for British consumption. Only in postcolonial India tea became the widespread drink that I found in the 1970s and today 70 percent of India's huge tea production is consumed in India itself. It is hard to imagine India without tea, but it is even harder to imagine that that is such a recent phenomenon.

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<sup>18</sup> Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth. The Management of Religious Experience in a North India Pilgrimage Centre*. LSE Monographs. London: Athlone, 1988.

China's tea is a whole other story. Tea is made from the young leaves of what were originally trees that were for production reasons reduced to shrubs. There is all kind of speculation about the origins and development of tea (bitter drink, called tu or ming). The historian Barend ter Haar argues that in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century it becomes a replacement for alcohol in the context of the rise of Buddhism (propagating bujiu不酒next to busha 捕杀), and in the context of the emergence of the imperial exams where one needed to keep oneself awake.<sup>19</sup> Its popularity grew to the extent that it became a major part of the tributary system. That tea is a useful alternative to alcohol is clear to anyone who has visited China, but how successful it is seems less clear. I have not participated in a banquet in which tea has replaced alcohol and my recollection of visiting several Yi groups in Sichuan is blurred and soaked in alcohol. Men can hardly refuse to drink alcohol if they want to make guanxi while women have an easier time.

Anyway, this is the baked cha as we know it and obviously besides making social relations smooth it has all kinds of medicinal purpose and effect too (different teas, different effects). Whatever the case may be tea is a Chinese commodity that became highly sought after by Western seafaring nations in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century and most prominently by the British after they had defeated the Dutch sea power at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Before that the Dutch had been the most important tea traders and tea is still an important drinking item in Holland. After that Britannia ruled the waves and the tea. Tea was the most important item in the China trade and since the Chinese did not need much from Britain in exchange it was paid for in silver. Sidney Mintz observes that tea, coffee, and chocolate were all introduced in the third quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but that the British contribution was to add sugar to these bitter substances.<sup>20</sup> He suggests that tea absorbed sugar more readily than coffee and that that was the reason that the sugar planters promoted tea. It is indeed striking how much tea came to define British drinking habits; much more than it did continental drinking habits. The Germans, French, and Italians drink much more coffee. Tea in Britain was first expensive and only drunk by the

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<sup>19</sup> Barend ter Haar, 'Thee en cup-a-soup', Inaugural Address, Leiden University, October 2001.

<sup>20</sup> Sidney Mintz, *The Power of Sweetness. The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. London: Penguin, 1986.

elite, but gradually in the eighteenth century the working classes also became hooked. The government levied taxes on tea and this became a major source of income. In Britain tea became a major part of the economy (much less so in China). Tea was 80 percent of the British East India Company's turnover. Mintz shows how dramatic sugar and tea changed the drinking and food habits of the British, but also how crucial these imports from the tropics were in the transformation of Britain's economy. At the same time he shows the rise of an entirely new labor regime, built on slavery, to produce sugar. Consumption and production go hand and hand. One powerful quote about the British East India Company:

*Its early adventures in the Far East brought it to China, whose tea was destined later to furnish the means of governing India. During the heyday of its prosperity John Company maintained a monopoly of the tea trade with China, controlled the supply, limited the quantity imported into England, and thus fixed the price. It constituted not only the world's greatest tea monopoly but also the source of inspiration for the first English propaganda on behalf of a beverage. It was so powerful that it precipitated dietetic revolution in England, changing the British people from a nation of potential coffee drinkers to a nation of tea drinkers, and all within the space of a few years. It was a formidable rival of states and empires, with power to acquire territory, coin money, command fortresses and troops, form alliances, make war and peace, and exercise both civil and criminal jurisdiction.* <sup>21</sup>

The trade imbalance between Britain and China was, obviously, something the British tried to change especially with the exponential growth of the tea trade. The solution was opium that was grown in India after it had become more and more under the control of the British who had defeated the French. The Qing government had forbidden the sale of opium and tried to stop British illegal trade. The 20.283 boxes of opium that the Qing official Lin Zexu had thrown in the ocean in 1839 (the cause of the first opium war) had an estimated value of 9 million dollar. After the opium war you had an increasing import, for example in 1860 60.000 boxes. Already between 1830 and 1860 the value of the opium

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<sup>21</sup> Ukers 1953, All About Tea, cited in Mintz, P. 112



export to China was larger than the value of the import of tea and silk from China <sup>22</sup> In 1797 the British government took over the opium monopoly from John Company.

Famously the Qing did not think that China needed any imports from outside China, as illustrated in the following quote from a letter sent by Qianlong to George III:

“Our heavenly Kingdom has everything that it needs in abundance and there is no lack of any products within its boundaries. Therefore there is no need to import goods from Barbarians in exchange for our goods.”

It is less clear and a subject of considerable debate among economic historians how much the Qing economy needed silver from Britain. Whatever may have been the case the flow of silver came to an end with the growing exchange of opium for tea.

British trade and imperial expansion went hand in hand. The first opium war was planned by the trader William Jardine of the opium importing firm Jardine, Matheson, and Company. He directly advised Palmerston in 1839-1840 how to conduct the war. On the Chinese side trading guilds (Hong) were active, but less able to influence state policies. While in Britain the tax on tea was a considerable part of the state's income, this was very marginal in China. The Daoguang emperor blocked the use of a harbor in Fujian where most of the tea came from, although that would have made costs ten times lower and everything was shipped via Kanton till the first opium war. That war was therefore also used as a means to force the Chinese to open more harbors close to the places of production. At the same time the British wanted to circumvent the Chinese monopoly on growing tea by starting plantations in Assam. The labor conditions were those of indentured labor under penal sanction which Hugh Tinker has called ‘a new system of slavery’ and which after the abolition of slavery came to characterize not only plantations in Assam, but plantations all over the British empire. <sup>23</sup>The Indian populations that one finds today in Mauritius, Fiji, the Guyana's, Trinidad, Kenya, Uganda, South Africa are largely descendants of these indentured laborers. This was totally different from the small

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<sup>22</sup> Peer de Vries, *Zur politische Ökonomie des Tees*, 1979, 43-44.

<sup>23</sup> Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920*, London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.

family businesses that grew tea in China. It is therefore the British imperial system that leads to plantation and conditions of slavery, not the cash crop itself ( Vries, p. 97). In general small farmers remained dominant in China till the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Despite the creation of tea plantations in India and Ceylon the British still needed increasing imports of tea from China and wanted to pay for it with opium from India. Opium was produced in Bengal and Bihar (called Patna Opium) and in West India (called Malwa Opium). Besides raw cotton and later cotton yarn it was the most important export item to China. Since the trade in opium was forbidden by the Qing government both Indian and British private traders played a significant role. The Indian ports were Calcutta and Bombay. The Indian traders were mostly Parsis, Jains and Hindu Marwaris as well as some Baghdadi Jews like David Sassoon and his sons who were to play a significant role in the rise not only of colonial Bombay, but also of Shanghai. The first Bombay traders to go to China were the Jivanjis who adopted the surname Readymoney. Many of the big merchant families of today's Bombay like the Wadias and the Tatas built their fortune in the China trade. In Bombay the Parsi merchant Jamsethjee Jeejeebhoy had a special relation with the aforementioned William Jardine, the architect of the first Opium War. Jamsethjee built a fleet of cargo ships to serve the trade and in 1842 he was knighted for his leadership in business and philanthropy.<sup>24</sup>

As argued before Indians did not know tea but slowly got hooked to it during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and became the world's largest tea producers. Indians did know opium, but I never read anywhere that opium was a big problem in India. When I did my fieldwork there was opium available in government-run shops as was hashish. Mc Kim Marriott has a hilarious account of the Holi (Spring) festival that is Bakhtinian in nature and in which he was given bhang (milk laced with hashish) and consequently was unable to write any field notes.<sup>25</sup> Despite this widespread use of intoxicants I have never encountered a widespread problem with it. The great addiction is alcohol. General consensus has it that it was a

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<sup>24</sup> Amar Farooqui, *Opium City. The Making of Early Victorian Bombay*. Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2005.

<sup>25</sup> McKim Marriott, 'The Feast of Love' in Milton Singer (ed) *Krishna, Myths, Rites and Attitudes*. Honolulu, East-West Center Press, 1966.

problem for Chinese and that it was created by the British to solve their trade imbalance with China. In Frank Dikötter engaging SOAS inaugural lecture he calls China 'Patient Zero' of opium addiction and then goes on to bust the myth of China's opium addiction.<sup>26</sup>

In nineteenth-century England opium and laudanum were used against pain. It was not seen as causing widespread addiction and, in fact, people could use it in regular quantities throughout life without creating addiction. This was also the case in China, as the following quote from Dikötter shows: "Men and women would smoke a pipe or two at festivals and ceremonies several times a year without ever becoming regular users. R.A. Jamieson, a doctor in Shanghai, noted at the end of the nineteenth century that if those who smoked a few pipes on the occasion of a festival such as a marriage were to be counted, few adult males could be excluded, although regular consumers were very rare. A British consul based in Hainan also reported that 'although nearly everyone uses it...one never meets the opium-skeleton so vividly depicted in philanthropic works, rather the reverse-a hardy peasantry, healthy and energetic'." (Dikötter, p. 5).

Dikötter argues that the spread of opium 鴉片 yapian in China from the eighteenth century depended on smoking. Tobacco, found in America, and introduced in China in the late sixteenth century "became the ideal companion of tea, 烟茶, yancha. Opium was initially laced with tobacco, but this combination was dropped later. To smoke pure Patna opium from expensive pipes became a sign of high status and wealth. Smoking was a social experience and opium houses, like tea houses, sites of male sociability. The other reason to use opium was medicinal like in England, against fever and especially diarrhea. If it was so harmless, why did it become the object of narcophobia? For this Dikötter suggests a Foucauldian theory, pointing at the rise of the medical profession which wanted to monopolize opium, and the emergence of anti-imperial nationalism with its discourse of enslavement and physical weakness. In the 1940s, however, the Communist in Yan'an used the opium production and trade to finance its struggle against the Guomindang, but as soon as they gained power in 1949 they stamped it out in three years. Cigarette smoking,

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<sup>26</sup> Frank Dikötter, 'Patient Zero': China and the Myth of the 'Opium Plague'. Inaugural Lecture at SOAS, University of London, 2003.

however, was stimulated. Not by chance therefore China is now the world's leading tobacco producer and consumer.

What to make of the stories of tea and opium? A political economy narrative seems the most convincing and rather obvious. Sidney Mintz is the pioneer of a narrative that focuses on sugar and world capitalism. The commodity shapes the nature of production and consumption and connects worlds that were hitherto unconnected. The meanings given to such a commodity are secondary to the force of Capital. Whatever disputes about details there may be this is a compelling narrative, but it does not satisfy for it gives us no access to how people shape their understanding of these world historical processes. This is precisely Marshall Sahlins' critique of Eric Wolf's 'mode of production' approach in *Europe and the People without History*. Sahlins examines the indeed quite fascinating refusal of the Qing emperors to be impressed or interested in the products of the British, thus only accepting silver in exchange for tea.<sup>27</sup>

As is typical for Sahlins' approach to intercultural encounters he makes much of the Qing understanding of Lord Macartney's visit to the emperor. According to Sahlins the Chinese emperor indeed had everything in his yuanmingyuan 圆明园, gardens of perfect brightness at the old summer palace that was partly destroyed in 1860 during the second Opium War. This was a huge curiosities cabinet like the ones one had in Europe but much bigger. This was the collection of tributes that signified the sovereign power over the world that was enjoyed by the Emperor. In Sahlins' words "By setting China apart while at the same time making it the central source of world order, this theory of civilization lends itself equally to projects of imperial expansion and cultural withdrawal, to hegemonic inclusions or xenophobic exclusions, according to the contingencies of the situation." (Sahlins 427-428) It was not that the Qing were 'self-sufficient', but that they found the barbarians too far away and thus too difficult to control.

What we have here in Sahlins' analysis are different cosmologies that clash. In work done by James Hevia and others, this analysis is complemented by an interpretation of

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<sup>27</sup> Marshall Sahlins, 'Cosmologies of Capitalism.: The Trans-Pacific Sector of 'The World-System'' in Dirks, Eley, and Ortner (eds) *Culture/Power/History*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994.

ritual performance, centering on the question whether Lord Macartney had performed the koutou (kowitz). Hevia focuses on the 'guest ritual' (binli 宾礼) which itself is the basis of power, as in Geertz's power serves pomp, not pomp power.<sup>28</sup> Where Sahlins puts the emphasis on cosmology, Hevia puts the emphasis on ritual (li), but, as both authors would probably agree, these two belong to each other. In Lydia Liu's interpretation of the Treaty of Tianjin after the second Opium War in 1858 the emphasis is on the translation of the word yi 夷, which the British insisted referred to Barbarians, while the Chinese insisted that it only referred to non-Han people.<sup>29</sup> This can help us to see that what we have here are not just incommensurable ontologies, but in fact communications, negotiations, and trading commodities and trading insults. It has all to do with notions of hierarchy and precedence, but these notions are not independent of power relations. On both the Qing and the British side 'honor' and hierarchy play an important role, but they are part of political economy, not separate from it. To me it makes little sense to think that the Qing and the British did not understand each other, but they had very different objectives and interests. The Qing did not want to enter into the Age of Commerce on British terms, but that does not mean that they were not interested in trade. Moreover, at many other levels it was of course not the Beijing or the Westminster court that were central to actual trade, but local traders and local officials and, very importantly, illegal traders. In conclusion one might suggest that following the pathways of commodities is a very useful heuristic device, but it is not sufficient if one wants to understand the changes of political economy. These commodities are embedded in social relations and ideas of sociability. The fact that opium is produced in India but does not define international relations or political economy in the way it seems to have done in China shows already that it is not the commodity itself that provides us with a full explanation. That opium cannot have been the sole reason for 'the opium wars' seems clear from the fact that it is really after the successful establishment

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<sup>28</sup> James Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.

<sup>29</sup> Lydia Liu, *The Clash of Empires. The Invention of China in the Modern World*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004.

of tea plantations in India that the British feel impelled to force the Chinese to open their economy and society.

This excursion into the analysis of two fragments of the world of trade in commodities, tea and opium, should not be taken to imply that commodities and their pathways are the only or even privileged examples of a study of the fragment nor that the world system of capitalism is necessarily where the analysis should lead us. In the rest of the book I shall give a number of examples from a range of topics in which the study of the fragment leads us to ask larger questions without coming to generalizations.

In the first section (chapters 1-3) this book offers a critique of increasingly mainstream generalizing methods and theories in the social sciences, specifically quantitative methodologies in sociology and political science as well as rational choice-theory on the one hand and cognitive evolutionism in psychological anthropology on the other, as well as a critique of un-reflexive uses of the concept of 'civilization' to signify unity or essentialized ontological difference which the other side of the same coin. On the positive side it wants to argue that societies are historically evolving: that one can discern historical pathways in their development, but that these developments are also open to a considerable extent. Anthropology studies specific social configurations that are in specific interaction with outside forces. To understand these interactions anthropology focuses continuous double reflection on one's concepts and on the ways in which the history of interaction has affected the social configurations that one studies. The comparative analysis that is proposed here critically engages and carries forward programs developed by Marcel Mauss and Max Weber. This implies both appreciation and critique of the ways those program have been carried forward by the Maussian Louis Dumont and the Weberian Shmuel Eisenstadt and Charles Taylor. The general themes explored here are those of the relative advantage of the anthropological comparison in relation to forms of sociological 'generalism' and especially approaches based on 'rational choice' theory, the concept of civilization and its comparative consequences, and the comparison of forms of social exclusion.

The second chapter of this book explores the advantage that particular forms of anthropology have for comparative analysis and seeks to ground the study of the fragment theoretically. Anthropology is the only social science that reflects on western ethnocentrism and takes the problem of translation serious. The chapter gives a detailed critique of quantitative analysis of nationalism, of evolutionary cognitive understandings of religion and shows the superiority of a more interpretive anthropology in the study of nationalism and religion. It thus does not only give a critique of some existing approaches, but also a demonstration of preferable perspectives.

Chapter 3 argues that market-theories of religion that are based on the notion of 'rational choice' do not contribute to our understanding of the transcendental value of money and markets in our social life. Such theories depend on a too narrow interpretation of 'rationality', but also neglect the importance of enchantment in financial transactions, consumption patterns, and religious life. The chapter addresses studies of religion in China and South Asia to illustrate its theoretical points.

The second section of this book (Chapters 4-7) provides positive examples of the proposed approach, focusing on the exclusionary use of the notion of civilization. Chapter 4 goes into the problem of civilization and who belongs to it. Like the concept of culture civilization is a complex and highly contested one, since it does not only operate at the level of scholarly discourse, but also at that of common-sense understandings of hierarchy and difference. The focus in this chapter is on the exclusion of Muslim minorities in Europe, India, and China and the civilizational legitimation of that exclusion. It highlights the similarities and differences in these patterns of exclusion.

Chapter 5 goes into another civilizational problem, namely those who live on its mountainous margins, in the border areas of modern nation-states. These peoples have been the typical subject of anthropological research, because of the remote, relatively isolated, location, the small scale of these societies, and their cultural difference from the civilizations that are adjacent to them in the plains. The chapter critiques forms of

romanticizing those who live in the mountain areas that connect India and China, and attempts to give a contextualized picture of anthropological thinking about minorities that live in the mountain areas of India and China.

Chapter 6 goes to the heart of religious worship of images in India and China and especially the recurrent campaigns to destroy them. It examines the variegated histories of iconoclasm in India and China and the problem of sovereignty that is central to them. The chapter moves on to discuss the extent to which modern urban planning can be understood as a form of iconoclasm.

Chapter 7 discusses why Indian middle classes seem to have no compelling interest in improving sanitation for the poor despite the fact that their own health is affected due to the close proximity of the poor. It examines some cultural theories of attitudes towards 'the dirty outside world' and argues that these theories ignore the importance of caste and especially untouchability. It further argues that one cannot expect the poor themselves to improve their condition through participatory development considering their internal fragmentation and the conditions of slavery under which many of them live. It compares the Indian situation with some theories about what happened in Europe with sanitation (and the well-understood self interest in the common good) and in the USA with the abolishment of slavery. It ends with the revolutionary transformation of China in dealing with the life conditions of the poor.