

Introduction

When a man comes forward with an idea and others approve, that's enough to encourage him to go on; if they disapprove, that's enough to goad him into keeping up the struggle. But a *real* tragedy occurs when he cries out in the realm of the living and there's no response at all – no approval, and no opposition either. It was like finding myself in the midst of a boundless and desolate plain where there were no reference points, nothing to lay one's hand to – an agonizing plight.

– Lu Xun, *Cheering from the Sidelines*

Lu Xun was an intellectual, in the full Chinese sense of the term, and it is therefore fitting that his words begin this ethnographic case study of Chinese intellectuals. It is even more fitting that Lu here describes a situation that most intellectuals, Chinese or not, surely wish to avoid: a tragic vision of intellectual loneliness in which thoughts not subject to discussion and criticism shrivel and wither away. Strangely, there are those who would describe the same situation as a form of 'freedom': the freedom to be left alone. Some might even insist that a person thrives and becomes creative, individual, and autonomous only by being self-governing, self-directed, and self-interested – in short, by being free from any kind of state, familial, or religious 'interference.' I refer to this type of autonomy as 'uncompromising autonomy' to recall that underlying sense of obdurate self-interest.

In this case study, it is not uncompromising autonomy but Lu Xun's vision that must guide our understanding of the core terms 'individual,' 'autonomy,' and 'freedom.' These terms take their meaning from a context in which it is taken as a given that a person cannot be (and would not desire to be) subjected to a separation from society but is instead always immersed in a web of social rules, hierarchies, structures, stereotypes, and norms. This conceptual reorientation of the relationship between self and

society is combined with two fundamental assumptions. The first is that, as social restrictions increase, so do the practical opportunities to combine and reinterpret such restrictions. This assumption thus presents a vision of pragmatic fluidity, individuality, and change. Such fluidity appears sharply curtailed, however, by a second basic assumption: that the systems and hierarchies subject to recombination are (or ought to be) fixed and unchanging. It is this combination of pragmatic fluidity and abstract immutability that gives rise to what I will call 'obedient autonomy': a self-directed control over change that takes effect only through the concerted effort to achieve and maintain a discourse of order and immutability.

The quest for an understanding of obedient autonomy is difficult not simply because translating alterity is an intricate dance of exaggeration and simplification but also because the word *obedient* itself constantly trips up the argument. The word often seems to evoke a frightening vision of collusion, oppression, and coerced submission. What is called to the Euro-American (by which I mainly mean the Anglo-North American and Anglo-European) mind by a book that seeks to present the words *obedient*, *credentials*, and *state bureaucracy* in a positive light? What kind of book attempts to cast people who obey others in the role of autonomous individuals? At first glance, such a book is not simply revisionist but also, and worse, an apologetic justification of 'oppressive' rules and structures.

I hope that a second, more patient glance will forestall any charges of revisionism and conservatism. Let me be clear: the system that I describe unquestionably maintains certain people in positions of privilege and reduces the choices and quality of life of others. And what system does not? Inequality is endemic to all systems, past or present, capitalist or communist. It is too crude to criticize the Chinese system for being unjust (which it is) without asking the more interesting question of why this particular system *persists*. We must ask why Chinese intellectuals – who are, after all, highly educated and have a Marxist predilection to be painfully aware of systemic oppression – do not join together to change or destroy the system.

The answer to this question is both simple and complex. The simple answer acknowledges that there are benefits and incentives encouraging participants to preserve their way of doing things. The Chinese context is (perhaps) different from many others in that these benefits are rarely restricted to crass perquisites such as buckets of money, great privilege, or naked hierarchical superiority. Indeed, we will soon discover that those in hierarchically junior positions have the most compelling reasons to maintain the system and will do so at the expense of their seniors. Self-interest is also involved, but self-interested benefits are derived from cooperative behaviours of mutual benefit rather than acts of 'dog eat dog' competition. The high status of the intellectual class is certainly a factor, but it is a status that can limit intellectuals as often as it can enable them. In short, there are

enough incentives and enough redistributive checks and balances in the system that the vast majority of people benefit sufficiently to be satisfied with it.

The complex answer begins by noting that the very concept of obedient autonomy causes the question of why the oppressed do not overthrow their oppressors to lose meaning. That question is predicated on an image of a world divided a priori into oppressors and oppressed. That diametric opposition lends itself too easily to a conception of society as a place where those in power react harshly to any threat of revolution, where those in disadvantaged positions are either mystified by false consciousness or are like the *bricoleur* who tosses a wrench into the workings of the system, and where a 'hero' is the autonomous individual who defines himself in the struggle against the machine of power.

When the dichotomy of oppressor and oppressed is merged instead into an image of mutual interdependence, the very definitions of concepts such as hierarchy, authority, power, and autonomy must change. Under mutual interdependence, a person's identity and reputation are constituted by the assessments made of him by the people among whom he lives and works. Identity is no longer an individual matter but is located in the eyes of an actual or imagined audience. Any hero of this story cannot want to create individual identity through struggle because his identity arises directly out of the maintenance and strengthening of social relationships. The hero becomes more involved in society, not less; becomes more connected, not separated; becomes someone who acts and effects change by participation, not destruction.

At first glance, such a hero will seem to be conservative, but the task of this book, and of the reader, is to understand how participation in and obedience to the rules can be used for change, redistribution of resources, or enhancement of individual lives. A person forges responses to the demands of society in this system as people must do in any system. That such plans are made according to certain rules does not logically require that the plans be conservative. As we will see, 'rules' may appear to be fixed but in practice are so open to interpretation, manipulation, and juxtaposition that they may limit but rarely control any one person's plan. The other half of the title of this book, 'the achievement of orderly life,' is concerned with exactly these strategies of rule manipulation and juxtaposition available to the obediently autonomous individual.

The term 'obedient autonomy' is used because it appears irreconcilably paradoxical to those steeped in a culture of 'uncompromising autonomy.' It is intended as an irritant, as a reminder to the reader that there are many possible kinds of autonomy that arise out of (and in turn create) substantially different practices and expectations. I do not claim that obedient autonomy is the only type of autonomy available in the Chinese context

any more than uncompromising autonomy is the only kind available in Euro-American thought.

Nevertheless, obedient autonomy is emphasized here simply because it is the favoured mode among the people who allowed me to learn from their lives and experiences. As will be explored further in Chapter 1, Chinese archeologists are a subset of the intellectual class, fascinating by virtue of their positioning relative to discourses of history, science, and communism. To understand archeologists, one must first understand archeology as a discipline and the roles and responsibilities of Chinese intellectuals. Chapter 1 therefore presents the necessary social, political, and historical background to understand why archeologists tend to use strategies of obedient autonomy more often than other intellectuals. In addition, since the notion of obedient autonomy *appears* to violate most if not all tenets of Euro-American theories of morality and agency, an intervention in the form of vocabulary definition is required to set the stage for understanding the values and incentives that drive Chinese archeologists to achieve their orderly and obedient lives. Much of Chapter 1 is therefore caught up in the illustration of words and the traps that they represent for the unwary.

Chapter 2 moves on to what makes archeologists most interesting to the anthropologist: the fact that archeology is an apprenticeship-type discipline in which older archeologists teach newly arrived youngsters the 'tricks' of the trade. Those tricks tend, once again simply because of the requirements of archeology, to be overt expressions of the same strategies of rule and relationship manipulation that make up obedient autonomy. The understanding of obedient autonomy, then, is best begun as if we too were young students learning how to become proper archeologists. Chapter 2 examines the process by which a young person learns to play the role of 'student' in relation to teachers and fellow students and, at the same time, learns to view these roles, and their attendant rules of interaction, as resources useful in the planning of his own career. The chapter thereby examines the logic underlying two issues: why juniors consent to the control of their seniors and why juniors police each other to enforce conformity.

Chapter 3, 'The Rule of Law,' examines the rule of reciprocity and its effects on gift-giving practices and on the choice of gifts to be given. The effects of class on both gift choice and gift giving are examined. This chapter concentrates, on the analysis of two key concepts, 'trustworthiness' and 'compatibility,' and on the description of the relationship between these concepts and two kinds of gifts, 'self-positioning' and 'being positioned.' Data are drawn from both the experiences of students as they continue to learn to be archeologists and the interactions between full archeologists and technical and peasant workers during excavations.

The title of Chapter 4, 'The Separation of Powers,' is a particularly apt description of the three separate command structures that affect archeolo-

gists. Non-Chinese observers of Chinese archeology appear to have missed both the sheer multitude of controls that affect archeology and the fact that there are several different categories of archeologist. Each type tends to engage with the separation between hierarchy and authority differently, but all use it to secure significant benefits. Strategies of obedient autonomy flourish in a context of strict yet multitudinous rules and are useful both in campaigns of competitive aggression and in operations of mutual cooperation.

'Credentials' are a form of stereotype useful in strategies of obedient autonomy. Credentials do not carry the negative reputation held by stereotypes in other social systems, and are enormously useful tools in the maintenance of order in the social world – that is, as long as everyone, or at least the majority, agrees to preserve them. Chapter 5, 'Majority Rule,' uses the credentials of class, schooling, and regional background to illustrate the enormity of the effort required to achieve and preserve order. These examples also allow us to glimpse the many benefits conferred by social order and that impel participants to continue in its preservation.

Despite the best efforts of everyone concerned, the achievement of order can be disrupted by the misapplication or mismanagement of credentials. That orderly life is an achievement requiring vast effort even as it is ever on the verge of failure is nowhere more apparent than in the struggles of archeologists to cross the urban-rural divide and create mutually beneficial relations with the peasants. Chapter 6 examines how the urban-rural divide is perpetuated in traditions of scholarship and everyday life alike to create two 'interest groups,' the composition and goals of which are presumed to be utterly different. The somewhat desperate attempts of urban archeologists to create ties with rural peasants are described in detail. Strategies become dances that attempt to claim similarity where no similarity is expected to exist, to separate hierarchy from authority as a show of respect rather than aggression, or to claim the junior position in hierarchical role relations in an effort to mollify class resentment.

Most strategies of obedient autonomy depend on convincing the audience to accept the claim being made: that the actor has the right to play a particular role and to take certain actions in the capacity of that role. Roles can combine social characteristics to create positions of almost unimaginable power. Chapter 7 examines how age, gender, and the discourses of experience and empiricism combine to support a minority of males, called oligarchs, in their control over publication opportunities, research topics, permits to excavate, or relations with foreign archeologists. The 'minority rights' of oligarchs bestow on them significant control over all aspects of archeology. In direct contrast, women's social characteristics combine to devalue women in the eyes of their teachers and thereby diminish their chances of success in archeology. Interestingly, women have relatively fewer rules and restrictions applied to them and are concomitantly less obediently

autonomous. The relative abilities of oligarchs and women to engage in strategies of obedient autonomy are compared in order to tease out further the beneficial effects of rules and restrictions on agency.

Many a non-Chinese archeologist has read these pages and hastened to tell me how the same things happen in North American and British academic contexts. Teacher-student relations, institutional hierarchies (oh, those deans!), personal animosities, barriers against women, regionalist proclivities, and authoritarian oligarchs are structures and institutions that, one way or another, affect archeologists and their fellow academics all over the world. May it be understood, then, that I make no claims about the 'Chineseness' of the strategies of obedient autonomy. I do claim, however, that the implications, meanings, and goals of such strategies are unique to the Chinese context. As any archeologist knows, two artifacts can appear similar at first glance, but the meanings and implications of each are only understood when each is placed in its sequence, assemblage, site, and settlement contexts. Social and cultural practices cannot be termed analogous merely because of functional or other superficial similarities. It would be a grave misunderstanding to imagine that Chinese strategies of obedient autonomy are experienced in the same way as submission might be experienced in the Euro-American context, are undertaken for similar goals, or are similarly valued.