MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR
SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY
WORKING PAPERS

MAX-PLANCK-GESELLSCHAFT

Working Paper No.6

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ELIAS IN CHINA "CIVILISING PROCESS", KINSHIP AND CUSTOMARY LAW IN THE CHINESE COUNTRYSIDE

Halle / Saale 2000
ISSN 1615-4568

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Elias in China? "Civilising Process", Kinship and Customary Law in the Chinese Countryside[1]

1. Introduction

Of all major theories of state-building and social change, Norbert Elias' theory of "Civilising Processes" and social figurations of power is probably the one most neglected by anthropologists. This is most probably due to the serious criticisms which have been levelled against it, above all the allegations of ethnocentrism and a naïve belief in human progress. Elias' theory of historical changes in Europe links state-building, i.e. the emergence of a monopoly of violence and increasing societal integration, to a heightened self-control and restraint in human behaviour. In his main oeuvre "Der Prozess der Zivilisation" (The Civilising Process) (1976 a/b), he describes how in the course of several centuries behavioural patterns in Europe changed within a certain structure or in a certain direction: from less to more restraint and stable, or "civilised", behaviour. For Elias, state-building was the sociological cause of these changes both in interpersonal relationships and in individual *habitus*: the emergence of certain power constellations in society that enabled the "monopoly mechanism" to take its course, thereby allowing the expansion of "internally pacified spaces". The expansion of pacified spaces made possible further out-differentiation of social functions and the development of long lines of dependencies, which

[1] Originally prepared for the workshop "Law, Knowledge and Power in Post-Colonial and Post-Socialist Anthropology", Moscow 17-20.6.2000, and slightly revised for this publication. Susanne Brandtstädter is a research fellow at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale,
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no individual could control. All this increased pressures on human behaviour to remain stable and predictable over longer periods of time, a coercion that became "internalised", part of a *habitus*, in time.

Most of his critics have taken offence at the fact that Elias makes Europe the showcase of his theory of a civilisation process, with the terms "civilisation" and "civilised behaviour" alone smacking strongly of a value judgement. Even more problematic, with this approach it seems possible to arrange societies on a scale, with Europe as the most civilised at the top. For critics such as Anton Blok, these points render Elias' theory thoroughly ethnocentric (Blok, *communication*, quoted in Wilterdink 1984). Moreover, Elias' theoretical intention was not only to show how change occurred, but the direction of change itself. For the anthropologist Hans-Peter Duerr the whole effort is steeped in a naïve belief in human progress and the idea of a progressing civilisation a "myth" (Duerr 1988).

However, for Elias society is not characterised by "normative" functional integration; there is neither such thing as historical "progress", let alone inevitable progress, nor is the direction of changes caused by an increasingly civilised value-system. Society is made up of social figurations of power, "networks of interdependent human beings with shifting asymmetrical power relations" (Van Benthem van den Bergh 1971: 19), which are also its main motor of change. Power, to him, is a property of social relationships, not equivalent to, for example, the ownership of the means of production. These are power *resources*, as is the control of knowledge -- the control of how people make sense of or orient themselves in the world around them. Power increases in relation to the degree of internal organisation, cohesion and differentiation, and is equivalent to a higher degree of *control* over the social and natural environment. If anything (given the existence of the

"monopoly mechanism"), the historical processes Elias describes are rather akin to blind evolutionism, with the difference to biological evolution that here changes are reversible (Bogner 1989).

In this paper I want to show that Elias' theory of power, knowledge and process enables us to approach neo-traditional revivals and other, seemingly backward-oriented behavioural patterns in post-socialist or post-colonial societies as *positively rather than as negatively* related to state power: as developments *effected by* state power rather than (as has been done more often) "regressions" or "revivals" *beyond the reach* of state power. By focusing on historical processes of structural "emergence", Elias' approach also enables us to see how the "past is present in the present" -- not in terms of "resilient traditionalisms" but in the unintended consequences of past actions that provide as *habitus* and as social figurations of power the frame conditions for present actions.

My ethnographic case in this paper is the return of "local" institutions -- temple corporations and corporate kinship groups -- in post-Maoist China, where in the early 1980s the collective era ended and private markets revived, but where the Communist government had remained in power and continued to control the allocation of key resources in the countryside.

2. "Modernisation paradoxes" in post-Maoist south-eastern China

For a believer in classical modernisation theory, rural South-eastern China would appear a pretty curious place. On the one hand, it is still a part of a (nominally at least) state socialist country. In contrast to Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, the Communist Party has remained firmly in power. The press is tightly controlled and independent political organisations are prohibited; a "civil society" in a Western sense[2] barely exists. In the villages, there is still no private ownership of land and the freedom to choose one's residence remains tightly circumscribed. Local "grass root" cadres have remained at the top of village authority structures: they control the means of violence in their role as village police, and are responsible for household documentation and for implementing government policies such as the one-child-policy. And they control the allocation of land, labour contracts and licences in the village, resources that are indispensable for success in the new "socialist commodity economy". Clearly defined property rights and a functioning legal system, generally regarded as a *must* for a functioning market economy, are absent.

On the other hand, there is a thriving economy and a degree of entrepreneurial activity more reminiscent of the staunchly capitalist "tiger economies" of East and Southeast Asia. In Meidao Village where I did

[2] In the modern Western usage, "civil society" refers to the existence of public organisations that function independently of the state and that mediate between state and society. In political theory, it is generally regarded as a product of market society and a pre-condition for democracy. Its empirical "sense", however, remains questionable, in particular with regard to non-Western countries. For a critical discussion of the concept of civil society see Hann 1996.

fieldwork, by the mid-1990s[3] there was hardly anything to remind one of the collective era. Increasingly, large modern houses replaced the old family homes. Many private shops had opened up in the village, selling everything from soft drinks to household medicine to videotapes. Some families had specialised in bringing in modern gas stoves or refrigerators, others rented out tractors, others again peddled vegetables and incense sticks. Agricultural production was now largely done for a private national or even for the international market, organised in trading networks that included relatives in Taiwan, the Philippines, Singapore and Hong Kong. The villagers' life world had become "globalised": whereas during the collective era a man (*sic*) was supposed to remain within the same production team from his birth to his death, village sons now travelled on Taiwanese fishing trawlers as far as the Fiji Islands and village daughters worked in World Market factories on Mauritius or in Indonesia or Hong Kong. Conversely, international money, coming mostly from relatives living in Southeast Asia, funded rural industries in the coastal areas of Southern Fujian, already known as the "Minnan[4] Golden Triangle".

The economic "take-off" of rural China has come as a surprise to many proponents of neo-classical economics who regard the "shock therapy implantation" of Western legal and economic institutions as the golden way for post-socialist economies (for a discussion see Oi/Walder 1999). From a

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[3] The empirical data on which this paper is based were collected during my PhD dissertation fieldwork in Meidao Village from 1994-1995. I was at the time an associate member of the joint research project "Ethnographic survey and historical comparison of Fujian and Taiwan Provinces" of the Department of Economic History at Xiamen University, PR China, the Institute of Ethnology at the Academia Sinica, Taiwan and the Department of Anthropology, Stanford University, USA. I am also indebted to the post-graduate programme "Comparison of Societies", funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft and the Berlin Senate, and the Förderprogramm Frauenforschung, Berliner Senatsverwaltung für Arbeit, berufliche Bildung und Frauen for supporting my dissertation studies.

[4] "South of the River Min". *Minnan* is the name for a certain geographical region in Fujian Province, for the Chinese language spoken there and for the respective "subethnic" Han Chinese groups living there.

classical modernisation perspective, moreover, both the present political and economic regimes would appear to stand right in the way of a traditional revival that has brought back gods, ghosts and ancestors to the village: a resurrection of kinship and religious institutions that accompanied the economic boom.

3. A traditional revival?

In pre-Revolutionary China, patrilineal kinship groups and territorial religious cults were the most important organisational realities in local society. Fujian and Guangdong in particular were famous for their rich ritual life and their large and very powerful kinship corporations (Chinese: zu), which in some cases comprised several thousand members and owned large amounts of corporate, mostly landed, property. Far more than simply being associations for the joint worship of ancestors, lineages had appeared on the scene as corporate groups with strong economic and political interests, and they became corporate landowners or controlled the access to markets and trade. Moreover, in Late Imperial China lineages provided the organisational framework for much local warfare. Often locked in a life and death struggle over local control, lineage feuding in South Fujian was so endemic that the province was infamous throughout the country for being difficult to govern (see e.g. Lamley 1990).

The Communist Revolution seemed to have ended all that. It destroyed the most important resource of lineage power -- corporate land holdings -- and the old lineage elites were stripped of their power, sometimes even killed, in the many political campaigns to “cleanse the class ranks”. In the Cultural Revolution, temple buildings and lineage halls were razed, and lineage

rituals forbidden. Ideological campaigns emphasised solidarity with the new system and its different units, while old lineage affiliations where branded counterrevolutionary and exploitative. For peasants, all aspects of rural life were now fused within the three-tiered structure of team, brigade and commune.

In the 1980s, however, it was as if the old organisational framework of the rural society simply snapped back into place. With the end of the commune system, lineage and temple organisations suddenly reappeared. Temples and lineage halls were rebuilt and ritual life revived with the help of ritual "experts" who travelled the countryside to teach the new village shamans and Taoist masters the proper performance of religious rituals. Moreover, lineage and temple leaders were re-elected and took over their old tasks, such as representing the group and mediating conflicts, from the local government again. In the multi-surname village where I did fieldwork, by the mid-1990s provided the most important political cleavages. Even competitive violence between rival groups had returned to the countryside (see Perry 1985).

This return of "tradition" in the trinity of rituals, leaders and institutions is also well known from other post-socialist and post-colonial societies; in post-socialist countries they sometimes did not go back that far but simply regrouped after de-collectivisation around the old socialist elites or restored cooperatives from below (as in Transylvania studied by Verdery; see Verdery 1999). Post-socialist and post-colonial countries share a past in which a powerful state, by administrative *fiat* and often brutal force, enforced "alien" legal, economic and political institutions upon the local society, and they share a present in which many of these institutions have been equally abruptly dismantled, leaving local communities suddenly

exposed to market forces. Anthropologists in particular have taken pains to point out that neo-traditional revivals in the post-socialist (-colonial) phase should not be understood as a return of the old in terms of a "cultural lag", but that these revivals are "refashioned out of the old as a response to the exigencies of the present" -- that is, they are functional in the contemporary context (Burawoy and Verdery 1999: 12; see also Elwert 1996a, 1996b). They have also argued that the colonial (socialist) phase often had an impact on the terms of this "revival", sometimes creating three "neo-traditional" institutions where there was just one during pre-colonial times (see Benda-Beckmann 1985).

With regard to the state, however, these revivals have most often been depicted as a regression or a zero-sum opposition resulting from "the collapse of the party states and administered economies [that] broke down macro-structures, thereby creating space for micro-worlds to produce autonomous effects" (Burawoy and Verdery 1999: 2) – that is, appearing where state-institutions have faded away and/or accompanying a market failure which forced peasants back into subsistence farming.

Rural China is obviously a very different case. Here, not only has the state not lost its strength (though it has obviously become less directly intrusive) but it has actually been able to thrive on and benefit from the economic reforms. Moreover, this revival has taken place in exactly those rural regions that have experienced some kind of "economic miracle", such as in Southern Fujian and in Guangdong Province. If not "traditional" or the result of a "regression", how then should we understand these phenomena?

3. The state, the locality and the transnational economy: competitive figurations in South China.

The key words in Elias' approach to society are interdependency, power and process. Human beings are inevitably always interdependent parts of what he terms social figurations of power. They can act only within these interdependencies, which shape both their actions and the goals of their action. The link between social figurations of power and social change is the idea that these figurations are the unintended results of intentional, interdependent human action. From this emerges a social order that no one "has planned" but that has a more constraining and coercive effect on human behaviour than any planning, schemes or intentional actions by individuals. To Elias, social action itself is motivated by and occurs within a competitive context defined by power differentials. Highly competitive situations lead to the emergence of "spontaneous structures" which then shape people's behaviour and, with time, their *habitus*. In particular economic and political interdependencies play a prominent role in this process of structural or figurational emergence, because here competition is most threatening to social existence and therefore most directly felt. Power is *control* over the natural and social environment, and control is also the goal of people's actions. Power, in this sense, is also predictability and stability in human interaction created by a certain figuration (Elias 1976b: 158-159; 204-205).

In this part of my paper, I want to describe the specific competitive figuration that emerged in post-Maoist rural China after the introduction of contract agriculture and the revival of private markets.

For the first time in 30 years, after the reforms households in rural China were again themselves responsible for their choice of economic strategies. Production was again dependent on a commodity economy outside the direct control of the state. Within a few years, market production produced a

familiar side effect: socio-economic stratification and the development of a new rural economic elite. Where before neighbours had been united in poverty, some villagers had turned into successful private businessmen with wide-ranging contacts, while others had remained peasants who scratched together a living from one or two mu (1/15 of a hectare) of contracted land. The unequal distribution of wealth was a major source of "bad blood" in Meidao Village where I did my fieldwork. Villagers continuously discussed who made how much money, how much a certain family had spent on a wedding or a funeral, how large a young bride's dowry was. They related that theft had become frequent even within the village, and that even neighbours now expected money when asked for help. As a young woman told me, the whole village was suffering from the "red eyes disease" (hongyanbing): jealousy.

In the early 1980s, the production teams, brigades and communes were dismantled and replaced by units of formal government. However (as already mentioned above), "grass root cadres" have retained control over the access to key economic resources, namely land, labour contracts and business licences. Moreover, not only have the peasants been released from the "iron cage" of teams and brigades but so have the cadres, which meant less control over the cadres' behaviour both "from above" and "from below". That is, the economic reforms and the end of political campaigns in the countryside have rendered cadres both less dependent on the political support and loyalty of their subordinates and less directly supervised by higher administrative levels. Though the cadres' legitimate control over large areas of peasant life has decreased, in many respects the cadre's ability to arbitrarily use or to "privatise" state power has increased. *De facto*, village cadres often use their remaining control over economic resources and

their superior access to information on markets, jobs and to new production technologies for nepotism, corruption or to forge mutually beneficial alliances with local businessmen (as is also well-known from other empirical studies). Increasingly, village governments act as "socialist landlords" (Oi), whose power in the villages rests on their monopoly of precisely those resources that were the precondition for economic success.

As a result of the increasing "privatisation" of the local state, the relationship between cadres and peasants has changed for the worse. Clientelism had also been an important part of the power of a team leader. Formerly, however, the power of local leaders rested on their ability to grant to certain team members specific advantages, while since the reforms their power has been based on their ability to withhold opportunities from a majority of villagers (who are not their clients). Moreover, in the past the team leader's prestige was dependent on his skill at shielding his team from the excessive demands of an intrusive state. The new leaders, on the contrary, often harm ordinary villagers by blocking their access to economic opportunities, and this behaviour is now illegal. The cycle of reciprocity between village leaders and villagers has been broken (Oi 1989: 214-224). [5]

The end of the commune system has made the social situation of both peasants and cadres more complex. Peasants generally welcome the greater freedom and the far better economic conditions they can now enjoy, and for the rich and strong the retreat of the state from the daily organisation of the economy has implied a multiplication of options. But, as Jean Oi points out, the dismantling of teams might have made the weak and the poor more

[5]Where the most important source of revenue for cadres had remained the state, village cadres sometimes actively co-operated with higher government units against the peasants' most basic interests. An example is provided by cases from Yunnan Province, where village cadres pushed through land expropriation programmes in the face of radical protests by villagers (Guo 2000).

vulnerable to cadre discrimination than before; for them there are now many possible patrons among the village elite, but their behaviour is less predictable and less controllable (Oi 1989: 215). In addition, the elite status of cadres is being challenged. The rise of a new economic elite of village business has made many cadres which do not compete economically other than through corruption or the embezzling of village funds, lose face in the eyes of the most ordinary villagers. A telling sign of this "challenge" has been the development of property in houses, the most important status symbol of the new era. In the early years of reforms the largest and most comfortable houses in Meidao were those built by local cadres. Soon after rural China's economic takeoff, however, their houses started to pale against those built by local entrepreneurs.

While cadres generally have privileged access to the government bureaucracy, the most important resource of village entrepreneurs is their often better access to transnational economic networks. Transnational economic partnerships, needed to open up a joint venture or simply to trade with Overseas Chinese partners, promise the highest incomes, and sometimes also have the additional benefit of obtaining overseas labour contracts for younger family members. Cadres try to cash in on these relationships by forging advantageous alliances with the new village elites. But what promises them economic benefits on the other hand also leads to a serious loss of prestige: villagers regard local cadres as greedy for money and as corrupt, and suspect them of diverting taxes into their own pockets. Behind their backs they are called "local emperors" (tu huangdi).

From the viewpoint of the peasant's life world the effects of economic reforms can be compared to a revolution. To be sure, the political system had formally remained the same, but Beijing and the central government, the

place where socialism is still being "performed", are remote. The messages that emerge from the central government have also changed beyond recognition over the last twenty years, a fact that has contributed to a general political apathy and disdain for the state, at least in its "localised form". On the other hand, the outside world of new markets, commodities and information seems to be finally breaking open the "honeycomb pattern" (Shue) of largely self-sufficient, inward-looking cells that has historically characterised the Chinese countryside (see below). Probably for the first time in history, a majority of peasant families see a real chance to raise their status from "rags to riches". However, in practice their life chances are often blocked by influential others who have better relations (guanxi) to those controlling resources at the nexus between the village and the outside world. But even villagers who own enough social capital to "go through the back door" (houmen) are under constant pressure to maintain their sources of revenue and good relations in the face of competing others. It is in this situation of extreme competition shaped by the state, the locality and the transnational economy that territorial kinship groups and the temple corporation have emerged as new figurations of power on the local level.

4. The lineage as "power container" and instrument of elite control

Similar as to Foucault, to Elias the process of state-building and the development of a monopoly of violence imply increasing control over the social (and natural) environment. Control derives from the degree of internal coordination and cohesion within a social figuration, that is, from a reduction of complexity and an increase in predictability and social stability. The larger a group, the more internally differentiated and integrated, the

more it allows for a concentration of both economic and political power – it becomes a "power container", as another sociologist, Anthony Giddens (1987), has called it. These "power containers" tend to marginalise less integrated groups competing in the same arena, or eventually assimilate them by allowing the "monopoly mechanism", also observed in the capitalist market system, to take place. In this chapter, I will argue that in the highly competitive context of rural China, corporate kinship groups provide exactly the kind of higher integration (in relation to their environment) that draws in resources and allows the accumulation of power. Lineages are the only institutions on the local level that integrate the different power structures and elites that have emerged after de-collectivisation; they order local relations in "place" as well as transcend the local level. Since lineage elites handle these resources, lineages also allow for the stabilisation of elite status and thereby perpetuate existing inequalities between different social strata.

In Meidao Village, the two largest kinship groups started to rebuild their corporate structures in the mid-1980s. Both rebuilt their ancestor halls on their original sites, one of them funded entirely by an overseas relative, both rewrote their genealogies. Elected lineage committees took over the task of managing lineage affairs, such as staging major lineage rituals, maintaining the hall and administering lineage funds. Under the ritual authority of the lineage elder (zuzhang), the committee is made up in equal numbers of representatives of the different lineage branches, the new economic elite of businessmen, the old political elite of cadres and Overseas Chinese relatives. Even the structures of "higher-order-lineages" that spanned far larger areas have been rebuilt, with different localised lineages sending their representatives to joint meetings on a regular basis.

Under the umbrella of the ancestor cult, the lineage form of organisation

thus allows for the concentration of the most important resources in rural China: the economic power and transnational connections of the new businessmen, the political power and bureaucratic connections of the old and new cadres, as well as the ritual authority of lineage elders. It allows the political and economic elites of the lineages to institutionalise their co-operation in the long-term, and even to render it more legitimate by framing it as lineage solidarity.

Moreover, and probably most importantly, the lineage itself organises "outside connections" and supplies the institutional framework for translocal, even transnational, relations while being itself first and foremost a "local institution" which organises social relations among the villagers themselves. Lineages in Meidao village actively try to recruit overseas members by offering them, for a certain fee, to have their ancestor tablet placed in the new lineage hall. Overseas relatives included in the lineage committee, moreover, are made responsible for the well-being of their lineage "back home".

The lineage is the ideal organisation to attract and manage overseas relations and funds, for two reasons. First, it embodies the kinship and community values that are the lowest common denominator of Chinese living in the PRC and overseas -- while in the PRC these values have survived and are even strengthened by the cynicisms of political realities (see below), Overseas Chinese *Diaspora* communities are generally built on the basis of shared (often putative) ties of descent or shared home community. Secondly, Overseas Chinese who want to invest in the countryside would and probably could not hand over money to the village government, i.e. to the local agent of the state. Instead, they hand it over to the lineage committee, which is, on the one hand, a private organisation, but on the other, does have the local

government represented in it in the guise of committee members. For rural elites lineage membership means gaining control over additional resources, both economic and social. Moreover, and no less important, by organising funds and "connections" for the benefit of the whole lineage, elites can regain symbolic capital and thereby counterbalance a serious loss of reputation as representatives of the local state. As agents of the local state, they are hated, but as committee representatives, organising resources for the lineage, the same persons are respected.

In the book "Established and Outsiders" (1965), Elias analysed micro-sociological processes of power, exclusion and inclusion similar to those that concern us here. In the village of "Winston Parva", he found two clearly demarcated groups with obvious status differences, the Established and the Outsider group. He showed that the groups differed very little in occupation, education or whatever sociologists generally use as measurements for status. The main difference between them was power: a power that was implicated in the history of settlement. The "Established" had the longer period of interaction, in which they had not only occupied strategic positions in local associations and monopolised informal channels of communication, but in which they had also developed a strong social cohesion and a sense of superiority. Their power over the "Outsiders", the newcomers, rested on exactly that: group cohesion, mechanisms of internal control, a collective identity and a unified value system. This also gave the group "group charisma" while the Outsiders suffered from a "group stigma", a "knowledge" in Elias' sense that reinforced the existing power differentials. Transferred to the competitive environment of rural China, we can see how corporate kinship groups offer exactly these power resources: (1) An ideology and rituals that depict the lineage as a group of equal brothers,

different only in age and generation, and that help to mute conflicts from within – that is, a mechanism for self-constraint (see also Watson 1985). (2) Stable boundaries or a strongly prescribed and ritualised way of assimilating outsiders". (3) A unified and commonly accepted system of norms and values. (4) An emphasis on "brotherly" solidarity against a "hostile" outside world. (5) A high internal division of labour.

As we have seen, the emergence of lineages benefits the existing power holders first, but it can hardly be interpreted simply as a utilitarian creation of elites. Rather, the fact that lineages are "power containers" strengthens primarily the authority of lineage leaders and of customary law, to which both cadres and commoners were increasingly subordinated.

5. The reduction of social complexity through kinship and customary law

The rebuilding of lineages and religious communities and the revival of ritual life has made the government concerned about a revival of "feudalist tendencies" and "superstition" in the countryside. From the government's point of view, the development has undermined the state's legitimacy and its monopoly of violence, weakened the peasants' identification with the nation and national interests, imperilled the acceptance of national law and legal institutions and, in the end, jeopardised national integrity and threatened to result in social "chaos" (luan) (see Perry 1985). My fieldwork data at first sight seem to support these concerns: people in Meidao told me that the authority of lineage leaders was again such "that people listened more to them than to the cadres". Lineage leaders had taken up their old tasks, such as representing the group and mediating in disputes between both lineage

members and different lineages. In this, they were replacing the government-installed "mediation cadre" (tiaojie weiyuan) to an ever-increasing extent. A revival of "clan law" was most obvious in the case of property in land, which was thought of as being bequeathed upon later generations by the pioneer ancestor; it was therefore not only a focus of group identity but also ideally inalienable "inclusive" group property. I witnessed members of different kinship groups squabble over the use of agricultural fields that had at the time of de-collectivisation been allocated to members of one group, although they lay in the "traditional area" of the other. And I saw how a smaller kinship group contested the state's ownership of a certain plot on which a bomb shelter had been built in the 1950s; they wanted "their" land back to rebuild their ancestor hall on its original site.

What the government regarded as a return of parochial attitudes, however, has from a local perspective been a "civilisation process" in Elias' sense. For most villagers, the problem after de-collectivisation has been arbitrariness. There are national guidelines that outline villagers' legal entitlements and that emphasise distribution equity. However, the fact that many rules are left to the village government to formulate and the fact that there is no independent and (from the peasants' view) functioning legal system to turn to in disputes with local cadres, means that a good deal of room is left for arbitrariness on the part of local power holders and insecurity on the part of ordinary villagers.

That the members of the village government have "privatised" the local state and use their power arbitrarily is also a result of the powerlessness of the territorial units of the state, the administrative village most prominently, in comparison to the lineages: they exhibit far less social cohesion and solidarity, that is, embody far less "power" than do the local institutions. In

other words, the local state's ability to allocate legitimate authority to its leaders is weak and so is its power to enforce self-constraint, i.e. the cadres' "obedience" to its rules. Lineages, on the other hand, "work" for their members by "containing power", legitimising authority and drawing in resources. As a social figuration of high internal cohesion, they create "internally pacified spaces" which put a strong pressure on their members to act in a stable and predictable fashion. As in the case of the "Established" of Winston Parva, superior internal cohesion, member solidarity, unified norms and greater self-discipline secure a better control of resources and that, conversely, reinforces the group's peculiar system of norms – that is, lineage power and the general acceptance of a kinship code of behaviour reinforce each other. Lineages are thereby able to create "moral communities" or "moral economies" in which cadres too show respect to lineage leaders and are subordinated to the lineage code of behaviour. From a local perspective, thus, the re-emergence of lineages has been a process that reduces "social chaos" or complexity, a civilising process in Elias' sense rather than a regression and the return of parochial attitudes (which have never been abolished, see below).

6. The past in the present

The neo-traditional revival of the lineage is *de facto* a "modern" phenomenon, as we have seen, since it is a reaction to the tension created by two "modern" forces – the institutions of the nation-state and the transnational economy. This is generally acknowledged when scholars speak of such revivals in post-socialist and post-colonial societies as functional in the present context. Elias' study of Winston Parva, again, renders it plausible

that people prefer to turn to "old-fashioned" forms of interaction or relationships, as they provide a coherent world view and internal cohesion; that is, these social figurations provide a level of power and control that new forms, without roots, have not or at least have not yet attained. However, this insight leaves two important questions open: first, how did kinship and community forms of organisation survive 30 years of teams, brigades and communes when their formal structures had been smashed and their ritual expression forbidden? Secondly (and relatedly) why, of a multitude of pasts, did villagers in South-eastern China chose to re-fashion the lineage rather than, e.g., the production teams or co-operatives as in some other post-socialist countries?

I will argue in the following that the modern lineage has replaced in structural terms the production teams -- which themselves replaced the pre-Revolutionary lineages. And, secondly, that within this "inversion", "socialist" values and loyalties never managed to replace kinship and community solidarities. Rather, the new rural institutions were "fleshed out" with these "traditional" forms of solidarity. After the economic reforms and the dismantling of the commune system, it was therefore logical that villagers returned to these (only seemingly) pre-Revolutionary forms of organisation.

Vivienne Shue has argued convincingly that the structure of Chinese local society during the Maoist era cannot be understood in terms of the paradigm of totalitarianism -- that is, in terms of the assumption that the state managed to control all aspects of life, incorporating everything into the sphere of the state. Rather, as she points out, the planned economy never succeeded in destroying peasant "localism" in China, because of its very hierarchical nature: because it cut lateral links to other localities and

emphasised the economic autarky of lower units, it unwittingly preserved the cellular structure of inward-looking units of the "pre-revolutionary" countryside; it thereby even reduced the size of peasants' social horizon. As national horizons were expanded, the local community was restricted and peasant localism strengthened (Shue 1988).

Similarly, it is by now well-established in China anthropology that the new "socialist units" (in particular the production teams as units of residence, production and ownership) shared many of the "core features" of the older corporate kinship groups: they perpetuated the territorial boundedness of agnatic groups, the notion of a link between "inclusive" property in land and a group of co-resident men, and the idea that women are only marginal members of these groups and leave them with marriage. Both the "traditional" countryside and the commune system, moreover, were made up of bounded, hierarchically organised units in which elites controlled important resources peasants depended upon. In an essentially hierarchical environment, lineages and production teams were structural equivalents that organised the allocation of resources and social relations in space.

But these structural continuities as such do not explain why peasants chose to "re-fashion" the lineage. Peasants regrouped around lineage and temple leaders because during the collective era, production teams and brigades had aligned themselves and were infused with "local knowledge" -- in Elias' terms, the local "system of orientation" -- and a *habitus* that was grounded in kinship and community values. That is, despite political campaigns against the "four olds" -- old ideas, old culture, old customs, old habits -- it was the kinship and community code of behaviour through which production teams and brigades made sense to the rural population and which allocated legitimate authority to their leaders. As Friedman/Pieckorowicz/Selden point

out, socialist politics even reinforced traditional attachments. Villagers used kinship ties and evoked kinship values in order to manoeuvre within and around dysfunctional, state-implanted structures**.** Especially during such man-made disasters and human tragedies as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, these ties and values "became even more important in the face of the irrationality and perceived immorality of certain state actions" when they helped the peasants' "to survive, maintain dignity and avoid impoverishment" (Friedman/Pieckorowicz/Selden 1991: 268, 270).

In pre-Revolutionary times, when the formal government apparatus had ended at the magistrate's office in the county capital, the state ruled the countryside by capitalising on existing "local" institutions, and binding local leaders to its prestige system (Kuhn 1975). In its dependence on local forms of organisation, the socialist state was maybe not as different as usually thought. The Communist Revolution all but ended the former autonomy of villages and the socialist state intruded massively into village life. However, new institutions like production teams were in a way like "empty shells" that were "fleshed out" from the inside with local knowledge, the practices and values of kinship and community solidarity, which made "the system work" for the average peasant and helped the new units to take root in local society and thereby to become a part of it. While in pre-Revolutionary China governing villages was a case of "indirect rule", state institutions in the collective era "encompassed" and contained local institutions, the former providing the structural framework, the latter the "knowledge" or social orientation, the *habitus*. The revival of lineages after the dismantling of teams can therefore in these terms be understood as a process of "turning-inside-out", when compared to collective times. No longer does the state organise kinship knowledge and loyalties as during the

Maoist period, but by turning local cadres into lineage representatives, subordinating them to the kinship code of behaviour and thereby enforcing self-restraint, kinship loyalties now organise the local state.[6]

7. Conclusion

This paper has been an exercise in comparison and comparability. It has tried to transfer one of the grand theories of society and social change, Norbert Elias' theory of a civilising process, which had been developed to explain long-term macro-sociological changes in Europe, to a completely different cultural, social and historical context: the micro-political realities of rural South-eastern China after Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms. Thereby I have tried to underline the heuristic value of Elias' approach for a political anthropology of institutional emergence. I have shown that Elias' theory enables us to see, by using a different approach to society and the state, the emergence of institutions, whether they are seemingly traditional and anachronistic or not, as correlated positively rather than negatively with the state and the market. Partly this is because Elias' approach does not use such dichotomies as that between society and state, but focuses on shifting balances of power. In Elias' processual approach, society is always "in the making", and change, even if only incremental, *is* the state of society. There is thus no dichotomy or incompatibility between state and society, nor

[6] There is an obvious connection here with Scott's (1998) dichotomy between "thin simplifications" -- standardised, abstract, schematic knowledge imposed by state, which does not "work" on the local level because it is rigid and context insensitive – and practical knowledge which works because of its flexibility and adaptability to different contexts and situations (but which is not legible for the state). However, Scott sees both related in more or less a zero-sum opposition, in that one destroys or is inimical to the other. I am suspicious of this. As I have shown, even in the case the "thinnest simplifications" possible being enforced on local society, the commune system and the planned economy, both types of knowledge meshed with or penetrated each other and thereby also helped to *sustain each other*.

between the modern and the pre-modern; instead, both are implicated within one social figuration of power that is recreated or reshaped within changing competitive contexts. If anything, then state and society are positively correlated for Elias, since state-building, by creating internally pacified spaces, enables society to diversify, to "blossom".

My empirical case, rural Chinese society after the Dengist economic reforms of the early 1980s, has lent itself rather easily to this exercise of "reinventing Elias" in a different cultural, historical and political context. That is because it (or so it seems to me) is so different from other post-socialist or post-colonial contexts (which, *de facto*, make up most of the societies studied by anthropologists). In China, there was no "exchange" of the state as there was "after colonialism" in the "Third World" or "after socialism" in the former "Eastern Bloc". And there has been no economic disaster, no market failure, no dramatic peasant impoverishment and no return to subsistence economy after de-collectivisation. Quite the opposite: the central state remained as strong as ever throughout the "reconstruction phase"; it actually benefited in terms of legitimacy and thrived in terms of revenues from economic liberalisation. Instead of the economic regression experienced by most post-socialist states at least in the first years, from the very start of reforms there have been economic growth rates in rural China that bordered on an economic miracle. The seeming "traditional revivals", moreover, have not taken place in those parts of the country that were lagging behind most in terms of economic development and peasant incomes, but only in those that were most advanced. There was thus obviously no zero-sum opposition between the state, the market and the (quasi) traditional institutional revival, as there seemed to be in other countries.

Elias' theory however, lends itself to differentiating between lower and higher degrees of internal cohesion, between stability and predictability in social interaction or arbitrariness and contingency. It also shows that the more competitive the context, the more likely it is that new structures emerge, a process not necessarily preceded by the destruction of older ones. Furthermore, it renders the frequency of apparent "backward-orientedness" or traditional institutional revivals in post-socialist and post-colonial societies plausible. If the speed of change with which competitive contexts change accelerates vastly (as in the case of transitional economies) then the social or cultural "answers" to this *will very likely appear* to "be lagging behind": because not only the present context but also the "history" of a social figuration – as in Elias' case of the Established in Winston Parva – is what produces a system of coherent knowledge, social cohesion and a sense of superiority, and that is coterminous with power and the ability to exert control.

To call the neo-traditional revival of kinship groups in China a "civilising process" might appear far fetched and too far removed from the original process of state-building and affect control that Elias had in mind. And, as I have already pointed out in the beginning, the term "civilising" alone is likely to make most anthropologists cringe. However, Elias' theory can be used on different levels of abstraction. In maybe its most abstract form, it simply describes a process of institutional emergence with accompanying changes to more restrained and predictable behaviour, which is neither the result of individual intentions nor functional in terms of classical structure-functionalism, but a result of power constellations and competition. As to the charges of ethnocentrism, I think on the contrary that - in this abstract form – Elias' theory is perfectly well suited to being transplanted to another cultural

and historical context, and makes inter-societal comparisons possible while remaining sensitive to particular histories and ways of "making sense" of the world. This is because Elias does not ground his "civilising process" in the appearance of "civilised values", but in power and control exerted over individuals. Personal dispositions, "values" or particular systems of orientation *result* from changes in power constellations and institution building, *not vice versa*.

The radicalism of explaining sociological realities only in terms of sociological realities might make anthropologists, who are generally also interested in *understanding* and taking into account the local people's "point of view", feel uncomfortable. But Elias' theory does not render this invalid. It merely insists that from the macro-perspective of whole societies or larger figurations of power, the emergence of new institutions or types of society cannot be explained by value changes or individual worldviews or intentions. Rather, the creation of new systems of orientation is *the result* of these new figurations of power. The development of coherent and transferable systems of knowledge then *contributes to and reinforces them*. From an anthropological "view from the well" perspective, this might seem as irrelevant as the question of whether the chicken or the egg came first. However I think that as a theoretical perspective it is important also in anthropological micro-contexts, as it might influence anthropological representations and reasoning. For example, anthropologists have argued again and again that traditional revivals are functional in a contemporary context and not the result of a non-functional "cultural lag" or of a particularly inflexible state of the mind (which always sounds apologetic). With Elias' theory this, empirically at least, would not be the question at all. In historical terms, form does not follow knowledge, but knowledge follows

form, which follows power. Thus, using Elias' approach, lineages in China did not revive because they were functional for systemic reproduction or because that is what the Chinese do. Lineages revived because they proved to be the "fittest", that is the most powerful, flexible and resourceful form of organisation in the modern Minnan countryside, and the reason for this was implied in both the past and in the present of this countryside.

8. Literature

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