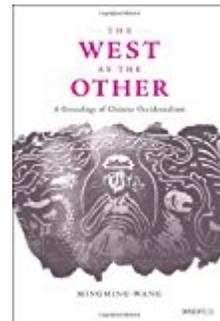




Mingming Wang. *The West as the Other: A Genealogy of Chinese Occidentalism*. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2014. 400 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-962-996-489-4.



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Published on H-Asia (August, 2014)

Commissioned by Sumit Guha

## How Most Anthropological Studies Fail to Include the Breadth of Chinese Civilization

Mingming Wang presents a densely argued, widely ranging critique of anthropology in this monograph. He is a British-trained anthropologist who teaches at Beijing University's graduate program in anthropology. The principle target of his criticism is ethnographic studies of villages and communities typified by works such as Martin C. Yang, *A Chinese Village: Taitou, Shantung Province* (1945). Wang criticizes most directly foreign anthropologists associated with the promotion of such community studies, including Robert Park, Alfred Radcliffe Brown, and Clifford Geertz. He avoids challenging many Chinese anthropologists such as Fei Xiaotong (*Peasant Life in China* [1939]), whose early work was inspired by foreign teachers.

Wang believes this Western social science approach ignores the larger context of Chinese culture, particularly its rich cosmological, mythical, and historical traditions. Instead of praising foreign social scientists, he states, "I feel ever more enthusiastic about the works of the pioneering Chinese historians, ethnologists and mythologists" because he finds in their work "a huge number of inspirations awaiting to be rediscovered" (p.

xi). Both his text and bibliography show careful study of these pioneers' contributions. Wang believes that Western training in anthropology and other social sciences leads typically to stripping out all the broader historical and mythological context. Further, Wang rejects what he calls the "restrictive and nationalizing force" that dominates anthropological and sociological research in the post-1950 era (p. xiv.) Instead, Wang describes himself as an anthropologist of history and identifies his approach with the early twentieth-century French scholar Marcel Granet or more recent anthropologists such as Marshall Sahlins, who bring mythological, cosmological, and historical aspects into their studies.

Wang uses a definition of "the West" at odds with present-day usage that identifies the West with European and North American history and culture. Wang begins with the accounts concerning the early Zhou dynasty King Mu (reigned circa 1001-952 BCE) who traveled west to visit the Kunlun Mountains and to meet with the goddess Xi Wangmu. Wang translates the name of this enigmatic figure from ancient Chinese history as "the King's Mother in the West" (p. 31). His argument, however, is

that she represented a source of understanding that lay outside Chinese myth and cosmology and thus illustrates from early records that Chinese culture did not claim to be either self-sufficient or self-referential. His second, and more obvious example of a positive understanding of “the West” was the borrowing of Buddhism from India. Here he traces the well-known story of monk Faxian (337-circa 422 CE) and other Chinese who traveled to India to bring the Buddhist faith to China. Thus from the fourth century CE onward “the West” becomes a source of religious truth and “a morality that transcended the [Chinese] social hierarchy in a disintegrating kingdom” (p. 151). From there Wang continues to explore growing trade and commercial connections in the Song and later eras with lands west of China. In those centuries contact shifted from the overland Silk Road to ocean-borne relations from China’s southern coastal ports. The destinations still lay west of China, but the terminology used frequently invoked the South as in the term *Nanhai* (South Seas). Even though most of these authors describe peoples in what they called the South Seas, for Wang these writings reveal the shift to the “new West,” by which he means the Islamic world in those centuries (p. 198). Wang contrasts the positive acceptance in China of what he calls the kindness of Buddhism with the relative lack of Chinese interest of Islam. To make that argument he quotes Claude Levi-Strauss’ dismissive judgment that Islam is incapable of “tolerating the existence of others as others” (p. 177).

In the introduction, closing chapters, and postscript Wang takes up an extensive discussion of his views of anthropology’s strengths and weaknesses. The French Sinologue Marcel Granet (1884-1940) and his work, *Chinese Civilization* (1930) and *Categories matrimoniales et relations de proximité dans la Chine ancienne* (1929), receive special attention because of Granet’s stress on how myths, histories, and cosmology provide insights into culture that anthropologists doing isolated village studies ignore. In a footnote, Wang traces the origins of the kind of community studies he dislikes to Arthur Smith, a missionary sociologist who published his influential *Village Life in China: A Study in Sociology* in 1899 (p. 310).

As the subtitle “genealogy of Chinese Occidentalism” suggests, Wang has devoted great effort in tracing the intellectual heritage of both those he endorses and those of whom he disapproves. Highest on his approval list is Marcel Granet, who was a student of Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), a founding figure in both anthropology and sociology. Wang also praises Marcel Mauss, (1872-1950), Granet’s fellow student and later a close col-

league. Mauss authored a defense of Granet’s work in an essay, “Religious polarity and division of macrosomos: A remark on Granet” (1930). Mingming Wang values these kinds of studies that introduce cosmology and emphasize the widely shared, but only partially understood cultural tropes by which people everywhere use to order their beliefs.

Wang also applauds non-Western anthropologists of the present day whose studies he says are “aimed to erase the factors of imperialism that are inevitably contained in what they learned” from their Western educations (p. 320). He is highly critical of Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955), author of the model ethnographic study *The Andaman Islanders* (1922) and later a lecturer and teacher in Beijing who had a considerable influence on the first generation of university-trained anthropologists in China. In Wang’s view Radcliffe-Brown failed to understand the larger mythological and cultural context of the Adaman Islanders.

Wang’s monograph will have special relevance to Chinese and foreign anthropologists who wish to understand the currents of anthropological thought in China during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Wang’s interpretations have several deficiencies, however. He rarely criticizes the work of his Chinese predecessors, even those most devoted to community studies. He directs most of his displeasure to their foreign anthropologist and sociologist teachers. He also fails to discuss several other strands in the development of the social sciences in China. Most notable is the lack of attention to Soviet and Marxist approaches. The only Russian anthropologist discussed at length is S. N. Shirokogoroff, a White Russian émigré whose work focused on the native peoples of Manchuria. The work of Japanese anthropologists who conducted extensive survey and ethnographic work in China is largely ignored.

In those chapters dealing with the shifting meanings of “the West” in Chinese history, Wang takes on a number of important writers, including Edward Said. Wang sees Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) as labeling all interpretations of the Orient with a simple negative view based on Said’s understanding of European and American interpretations of the modern Middle East. Wang’s argument rejects Said’s view in favor of a shifting meaning of categories such as “the Orient” or “the Occident” through time based on the different influences emanating from changing locations over time.

Wang also offers many short and fresh interpretations of various facets of Chinese history. His discussion

of the tea-horse trade during the Song dynasty, as well as his interpretation of the North China goddess, Bixia yuanjun, whose title he translates as “Prime Monarch of the Azure Cloud” (pp. 267-268) are both enlightening and quite different from the standard English-language accounts of Paul Smith, *Taxing Heaven’s Storehouse: Horses, Bureaucrats and the Destruction of the Sichuan Tea Trade industry* (1991) or Sue Naquin, *Peking: Temples and City Life, 1400-1900* (2000).

This is a book that will attract attention from those interested in the current state of anthropological studies in China. Yet, even those readers may find daunting Wang’s arguments because they cover such a broad sweep of three thousand years of Chinese history, from 1000 BCE to the twenty-first century. He is exceptionally well read in historical and anthropological studies. Moreover, Wang’s prose is deliberately ornate in the style popular among some postmodernists. He takes consider-

able pleasure in flights of verbal complexity. For example, Wang ends chapter 3 thus: “[King Mu] himself becomes another other. He becomes a re-authorized Son of Heaven, a politic beyond political, an ideal world enlightened in the narratives of the land of Xi Wangmu—the West in the East, through a Biography that becomes a Geography” (p. 85). In his concluding chapter, Wang provides a summary of his thesis with a straightforward statement: “At a great number of historical moments in the world activities of virtuous kings, sages, monks and modern ‘literati’ the other was respected as superior,” and then continues, “These moments considered retrospectively in our own age, have become a synchronic unit of diachronic diversity, a Tradition of traditions, which, as I hope, will re-emerge in renewed guises to make different effects” (pp. 275-276). The book is replete with many examples of these flourishes. Thus much of this work requires a second reading to capture Wang’s meaning.

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**Citation:** David Buck. Review of Wang, Mingming, *The West as the Other: A Genealogy of Chinese Occidentalism*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. August, 2014.

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