

Moral Transformation in Post-Mao China

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Four Sections of the Presentation

- I. Unpacking the public perception of moral crisis
- II. Changing ethical discourses: the shift from duty and self-sacrifice to rights and self-development
- III. Changing moral practices: immorality, new morality, and contested morality
- IV. Moral landscape as part and parcel of the individualization process: a summary of six elements

I. Unpacking the Public Perception of Moral Crisis

The public perception of moral crisis since the 1980s

- The sanxin weiji
- The panic of commercialization and marketization (but how quick to get over with it in the early 1990s!)
- The impact of sex industry in the 1990s on the individual, family and society
- The perceived overall crisis or moral slide in the first decade of 21st century, culminating with the xiao yueyue case in Oct 13, 2011.
- The soul-searching public discourse on the xiao yueyue case and the new low point in the public assessment of moral landscape in China.
- How bad it actually is? How is it possible to have a moral crisis that lasts for more than 30 years?
- The difference between perception and practice...

Three ways to perceive moral crisis

- W. Baker , American's Crisis of Values: Reality and Perception (Princeton University Press 2005).
- Idealization of the past as a critique of the present;
- Comparison with the superior Other
- Dualism of ethics and the cultural war
- All three approaches can be seen in the contemporary perception of moral crisis in Chinese society, with some modifications.
- The key question remains: moral crisis from whose perspective?
- The case study of ethical crisis in rural Chian (Shen Duanfeng 2007)

II. Value Change and Ethical Shift

1. Two historical events in 1978

(1) The debate on the criterion of truth, May-Nov., 1978

- Political fight between Deng Xiaoping and Hua Guofeng;
- The new dogma “practice as the **SOLE** criterion of truth” and its long time implications.

1. Two historical events in 1978 (continued)

(2) Modernization as the Holy Grail

- The Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), December 1978;
- The “four modernizations”: agriculture, industry, national defense, science and technology;
- The ultra significance of modernization in developing countries;
- Setting the course of materialism and pragmatism in 1978.

2. The Debate on the Pan Xiao Letter in 1980

- (1) The Chinese feature of open debate: “unifying thoughts” (or 百家争鸣, 独尊一家);
- (2) The publication of Pan Xiao’s letter and the debate (hundreds of journals and newspapers were involved; one journal received 60,000 responses in six months and published 111 of them);
- (3) The communist ethics: “impartiality and selflessness,” “seeking no advantage for oneself, pursuing benefits only for others,” and “be a good soldier of Chairman Mao”—as personified by the role model Lei Feng;
- (4) Conclusion: selfishness as part of human nature.

Lei Feng, Chairman Mao's good soldier



Learn from Lei Feng,
be Chairman Mao's good soldiers



Cui Jian, first performed “I have nothing” in May
1986



The shift from duties to rights in ethical discourses

1. The revelation: Cui Jian's song "I have nothing" (1986)
"You always laugh at me for having nothing; having nothing, but I want to give you my pursuit and freedom...";
2. "We live by seeking, searching for self, not because we have really lost ourselves, but because we have never really possessed our true self. It is true, then, we have nothing"—comment by Liu Qing (1988).

Self-development as the new focus of individualistic ethics

- “In a factory with one thousand or ten thousand people, to have the boss discover you is very hard. You must discover yourself. You must develop yourself.” –Ms. Tian Peiyan, 17-years-old rural migrant in Shenzhen city.

quoted by Leslie T. Chang in her book

Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China
(2008: 174).

Self-development by way of self-expression: the super voice contest in 2005



III. Changing Moral Practices

A footnote on moral practices

- Moral practice vs. ethical discourse
- Ordinary moral practice vs. extraordinary moral practice
- The understudy of immorality in anthropology

1. Immoral practices

(1) The extortion of Good Samaritan

see Yunxiang Yan “Good Samaritan’s New Trouble in China,” *Social Anthropology* 17(1): 9-24.

A young Good Samaritan being extorted, Zhenjiang city, 2008



1. Immoral practices (continued)

(2) Production and circulation of fake and contaminated foods;

- The Jinjiang case of fake medicine in 1985—one of the earliest;
- The contaminated baby formula in 2008—one of the latest that killed six babies and caused 300,000 sick with kidney problems;
- Organized immorality, corrupt officials, and the collapse of rule by virtue.

Zheng Xiaoyu, former head of China's FDA, being sentenced to death penalty in 2007



National panic caused by the contaminated milk product in 2008



Fake chicken egg



The moral reasoning of immorality

- Producers of colloidal food additive out of leather waste: “So what? They are strangers. In this region no one would eat foods with colloidal additives because we all know the secret.”
- Government officer commenting on morality: “The highest morality under heaven is to make my poor hometown rich.”
- After faith in the truth is replaced by sense of the truth and after the ethics of being good is replaced by the ethics of feeling good, where to find the new moral authority?

2. Contested moral practices

- The filial daughter from Xiajia village who did wrong things for right purpose;
- The outdated virtue of *laoshi* (老实 obedient, honest, frankness, simple-mindedness) in Xiajia village;
- The virtue study group in Beijing;
- The challenge of spiritual quest and be good (向善)—a Catholic group in Xiajia village

A family church in Xiajia village, 2003



3. New Morality

- Individual philanthropy
 - Traditional private charity before and after 1949;
 - The first turning point: donations for flood victims;
 - The second turning point: individualized donations for quake victims in Sichuan;
 - Mr. Zhao: “I want to show that it is me who is donating. It’s not connected to anybody else. I am donating in my name.”
 - What is new? A more generalized notion of compassion based on individual choice, and an effort to resist the collective ethics of duties.

The case of Mr. Cong Fei (1969-2006)

- Cong Fei's donation of nearly 3 million yuan to support 178 rural students; but he lived on unstable income as a local singer;
- Cong donated all he had and left no wealth to his pregnant wife, why?
- The pressure of a new role model, the loss of the moral self, and the party-state's effort to incorporate the individual into the collective;
- Cong's final words: "The ladder was just too high for me to climb."

Cong Fei became a party member shortly before his death in 2006



IV. Individualization and Moral Changes

The individualization of Chinese society

- The two-fold social transformation: the rise of the individual and the individualization of social structure;
- The focus is the changing individual-society-state relationship, instead of individuality;
- The historical significance of individualization in Chinese society (c.f., Charles Taylor's "the great disembedding.")
- What are the moral changes brought out by individualization and what is role of the changing moral landscape in the ongoing process of individualization?

Changing moral landscape as part and parcel of the individualization Process

1. Privatization, labor market, and the ethical shift from duties to rights;
2. Mobility, disembedding, and the crisis of sociality in the transition from a society of acquaintances to a society of strangers;
3. Rights awareness and rights movements;
4. State-managed individualization and the problem of re-embedding;
5. Individualization without individualism and its consequences;
6. The global factor seen at two levels;

Lei Feng was pushed aside after Teresa Teng arrived—an individualistic choice that indicates the ethical shift



Thank you!