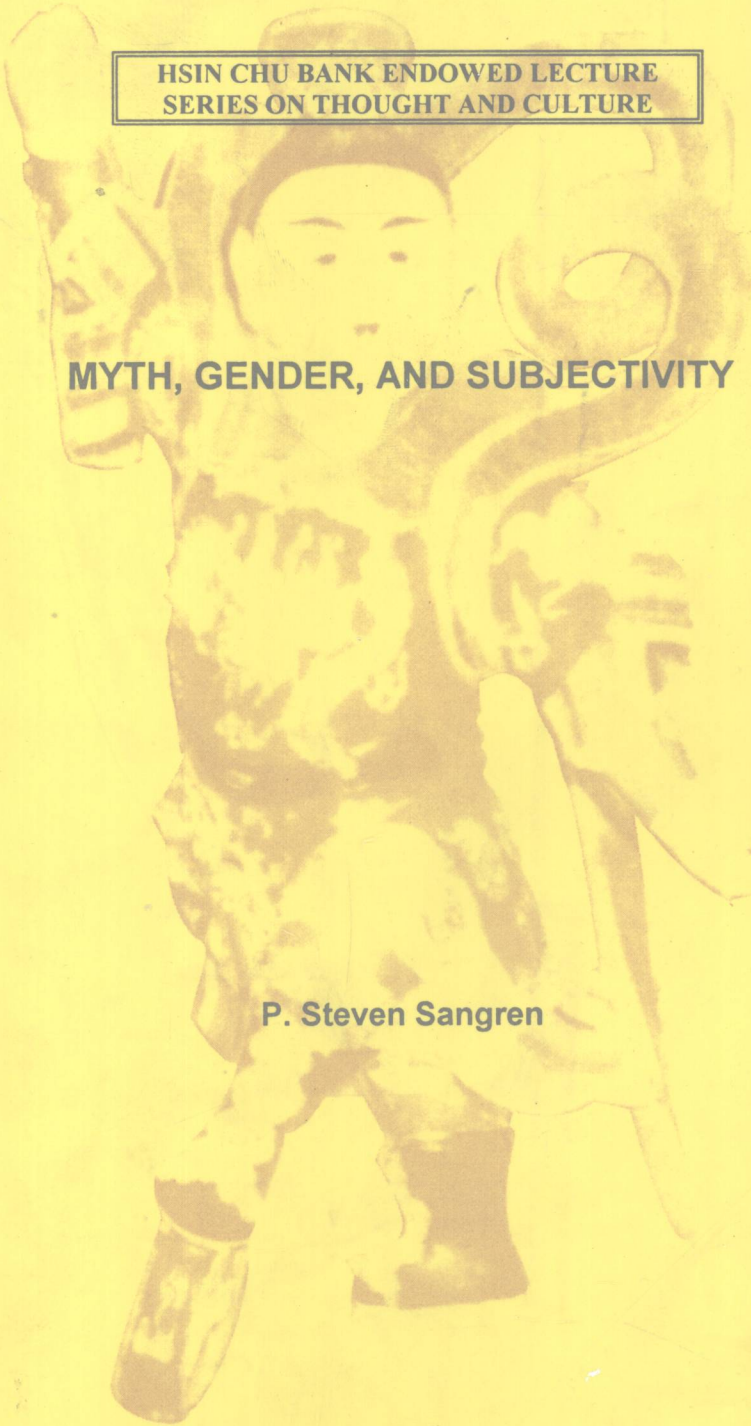
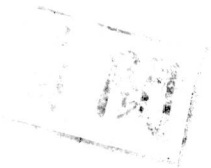
HSIN CHU BANK ENDOWED LECTURE
SERIES ON THOUGHT AND CULTURE



# MYTH, GENDER, AND SUBJECTIVITY

P. Steven Sangren



# MYTH, GENDER, AND SUBJECTIVITY

P. Steven Sangren
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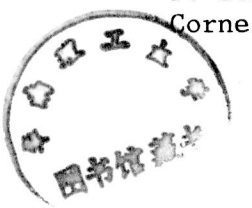

Published and printed by the Program for Research of Intellectual-Cultural History, College of Humanities and Social Sciences , National Tsing Hua University, Hsin-chu , Taiwan , R.O.C.


Hsin Chu Bank Endowed Lecture
Series on Thought and Culture

## INTRODUCTION TO THE HSIN CHU BANK ENDOWED LECTURE SERIES ON THOUGHT AND CULTURE

"Quality, development, social responsibility": these three are the unswerving bases of the operating policy of the Hsin Chu Bank. "Our Hsin Chu Bank belongs to everyone" has consistently been our attitude towards service to our clients. "What we take from society, we use in society": that is the concrete method we employ to give back to society its due. Thus, aside from using all the resources at our command to carry out our financial operations and lead the way in stimulating economic prosperity in our region, we also hope to recompense the region with all the capacity our position will allow.

In the recent years the government has been energetically promoting cultural resurgence; the town of Hsin-chu too has a plan to create a city of culture and science. We believe that the development of culture is in itself important; we also believe that its development has positive, direct significance for political, social and economic growth. That is why the strengthening of cultural development, the enrichment of the content of culture, the elevation of the quality of cultural life are things that should be immediately attended to.

Although the importance and urgency of cultural development cannot be put into doubt, it is decidedly a complicated thing to realize, a thing that cannot be achieved at one try. The creation of lectureships, the invitation of internationally recognized scholars to come and give series of lectures, and then the publication of those lectures in collections all constitute a feasible

and fundamental method for achieving that end. We hope that the "Hsin Chu Bank Endowed Lecture Series on Thought and Culture" will contribute to scholarly research and provide reference works of value for the development of culture. Finally, I would like in particular to thank Dr. Chang Yung-tang 張永堂 of National Tsing Hua University for having suggested these lectureships that have provided the opportunity for us to put forth our meager strength in the development of culture.

**Hsin Chu Bank**
**Chan Shao-hwa 詹紹華,**
**Chairman of the Board**
**10 April 1995**

# GENERAL INTRODUCTION

**Chen Chi-yun**
**Director**
**Program for Research of Intellectual-Cultural History**
**National Tsing Hua University ( Taiwan )**

"Intellectual-Cultural History" (*Ssu-hsiang wen-hua shih* 思想文化史) is a new and somewhat controversial term. Its meaning and scope as a historical sub-field remain ill-defined. In the Chinese academic world, there are several important Institutes or Programs for Research of Intellectual-Cultural History, including our Program at the National Tsing Hua University in Taiwan and a full-grown Institute, the Ssu-hsiang wen-hua shih yen-chiu so, at the Tsing Hua University at Peking (Beijing). But there seems to be very little serious theoretical discussion or clarification of the nature and scope of such a field .

To us, the seemingly composite term, *Ssu-hsiang wen-hua* (literally, thought-culture) is used as a better Chinese rendering of the English term "Intellectual History" than its conventional Chinese rendering as simply *Ssu-hsiang shih* (literally, history of thought). The trouble with the *Ssu-hsiang shih* label is that in Chinese academic usage it is almost indistinguishable from "History of Philosophy" with which it is often used interchangeably.

The English term "Intellectual History", is different from such terms like "History of Philosophy", "History of Thought",

"History of Ideals" (less so of "History of Mentality") in the sense that "philosophy", "thought", "ideals", etc. are nouns, each designating a special target-object (hence a sub-field) for historical investigation, whereas "intellectual" is not a noun designating such a target-object as a sub-field --"Intellectual History" is not the history of "intellect" or "intellectual". Because of this, it has been suggested that "Intellectual History" is a study of the history of "intellectual culture", thus equating it in linguistic construct and referential meaning to "History of Philosophy", etc.

Although the suggestion that "Intellectual History" is the "historical study of intellectual culture" would suit the Chinese term *Ssu-hsiang wen- hua* perfectly, it tends to narrow down the meaning and scope of "Intellectual History" and thus distort its original function and intent. The word "intellectual", as an adjective, is meant to modify and hence designate a special kind of historical investigation, rather than a special target-object of historical investigation. In this sense, the target-object of Intellectual History is the entire field of "history" or "culture", and not merely "intellectual culture". If the traditional concern of "history", in both the East and the West, was that of "political history", then "intellectual history" and more importantly "cultural history" represent new efforts to orientate history to a new concern, to a new kind of study.

In the recent past, the trouble of "Intellectual History" lies mainly in its ambiguous working relationship with "cultural history". And the trouble of this relationship in turn lies in the controversial working relationship between "cultural history" and "social history". Given the hegemonic role of positive science

(both natural and social) in our modern culture, the interpretation of human history and culture has long tended to focus on their material and socio-economic basis, to the neglect of their more subtle components, such as human feelings, hopes, and reasons. This tendency is particularly strong in twentieth century China, both in Marxist mainland China and in non-Marxist Taiwan.

The tide seems to have turned in recent years, especially at the Western intellectual and academic scene. In western as well as eastern Europe, in German "Philosophic Anthropology", in French "New Cultural History", in American "Intellectual History", and in a variety of post-modernist trends (Neo-Marxist, New Historicism, New Culture-Critique, etc.), the tendency is against or at least moving away from the monolithic, hegemonic dominance of "positivist science" as the embodiment of "modernism", and toward pluralism of different strains. In this sense, Intellectual History or better Intellectual-Cultural History will make its contribution in calling attention to the subtle human spirit, mind, reasons, and ideas in the study of history and culture . The less conventional composite title--"Intellectual-Cultural", though somewhat unwieldy, may thus add to a literal sense of pluralism.

While the above-stated represents our ideal as well as our justification in using the term "Intellectual-Cultural History" to name our new program, in present practice we are actually even more pluralistic and broadly inclusive than our stated ideal. Currently the Program encourages and supports a variety of research-oriented activities, more or less closely related to our interests in understanding Chinese thought and culture in a global

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# PREFACE: RECOGNITIONS INTERDISCIPLINARY AND INTERCULTURAL

I was very flattered last summer (1994) when Professor Wang Ch'iu-kuei invited me to present a series of lectures sponsored by the Institutes of History of Intellectual Culture, of History, of Sociology and Anthropology, National Tsing Hua University, funded by the Hsin Chu Bank. As an academic whose interests do not fit altogether comfortably within conventional disciplinary boundaries, or even within the trends that define current interdisciplinary studies, I welcome an opportunity to attempt to interest others in my work. I accepted the invitation with some trepidation, however, because my most recent unpublished work is somewhat distant from what I imagined might interest a Tsing Hua audience. Specifying the causes of this trepidation may be useful in framing the lectures themselves.

Recent years have seen a growing interest among scholars trained in historiography and sinology in topics like "performance," "ritual," "popular culture" -- topics that during my own graduate training in the 1970s were mainly the domain of cultural anthropology. One sees clear evidence of this growth of interest both in Taiwan and in the United States, and Tsing Hua University is clearly one of the most important centers of development in this regard. The effects of this growth of interest are obviously welcome; sinological anthropologists now have a much larger community of potential respondents for our work, and our own studies benefit immeasurably from the research of scholars trained in historical and sinological methods.

The contribution of anthropology to this cooperative interdisciplinary enterprise is generally conceived to be its provision of data obtained from fieldwork, on the one hand, and, more problematically, of "theory" in the analysis and interpretation of data. I bracket "theory" in quotation marks because I am discomfited by the implication that one can distinguish "theoretical" from, for example, "empirical" work in any clear fashion, on the one hand, and by the unfortunate penchant (perhaps most acutely apparent in American anthropological circles) to place higher value on "theory" than on substantive research, on the other. These circumstances combine to increase my trepidation with regard to what I might be able to offer to a lecture series at Tsing Hua for the following reasons: 1) First, the practicalities of academic employment in the United States have prevented me from embarking on

longterm fieldwork projects recently; consequently, I have relatively little new fieldwork data; 2) Second, much of my recent work can only be characterized as "theoretical," even polemical, in nature; and 3) Third, the nature of my theoretical interests has inspired me to employ materials -- legends and myths -- whose study and explication has traditionally entailed levels of philological expertise and sinological training that I do not possess. In sum, my recent work addresses theoretical issues that, at present, are somewhat distant from those that occupy most sinological scholars (including anthropologists), and the stories that I interpret have conventionally been the subjects of sinological analyses whose premises and objectives differ significantly from my own.

Finally, it should be noted that lecturing on Chinese culture at a Taiwanese university is a very challenging prospect for any Western scholar. One loses the advantages of language and institutional position that insulate we Westerners in our own universities. Proposing generalizations about Chinese social life and culture directly to Chinese students and scholars, especially if the arguments are unconventional ones, exposes one's weakness to an audience that, in many obvious ways, is endowed of vastly greater expertise, agility, and experience with the materials than are we. Yet despite these risks, and the philosophical issues that surround them, I am convinced that more Western sinological scholars ought to attempt to address their work to Chinese audiences.

Preparing and presenting these lectures has inspired me to reconsider at some fundamental levels what the endeavor of anthropology is and ought to be. American anthropologists and scholars in other disciplines engaged in cultural studies are much preoccupied these days with issues surrounding ethnographic authority, reflexivity (that is, a kind of heightened self-consciousness of anthropology's representative practices), and engagements with variously defined others. Most such discussion has centered on the complexities, both moral and intellectual, of the fieldwork situation or on the textual construction of authority. My own experience, however, is that fieldwork and writing ethnography have been less challenging of premises than has been the experience of attempting to make intelligible and convincing one's work to an audience of Chinese scholars.

Although I do not intend to reflect upon such issues at any length here,

it may be appropriate to frame the general circumstances in terms drawn from my subsequent analysis. The key term is recognition. "Recognition" here need not imply agreement with regard to the logic or conclusions of specific arguments or communications, but it does imply agreement with regard to the legitimacy of the general universe of discourse within which we communicate. I shall argue that a desire for recognition of one's subjectivity (alternatively, one's personhood or agency) animates Chinese mythic narratives of maturation and self-production. I attribute broadly similar desires to scholars' activities of writing, lecturing, and publishing -- one always hopes that one's work will gain one a some measure of recognition.

In a purely Western setting, the explicit and implicit criteria that generate such recognition, although complex and sometimes self-contradictory, are part and parcel of the habitus (to borrow Bourdieu's (1977) characterization) of academic life. Moreover, these criteria are essentially similar whether one studies Chinese culture or Western Renaissance art. One of the qualities of habitus (an inadequate term, but perhaps the best we have) is its habitual, taken-for-granted nature.

In contrast to the familiar experience provided in academic settings in the United States, an American lecturing for an audience of Chinese scholars becomes acutely aware that the criteria and means by which one hopes to elicit this recognition differ significantly. To cite a superficial, but perhaps instructive example, sinology in both Taiwan and the West, is deeply infused with the laudable tradition of evidential (kaozheng) scholarship. The hierarchy of criteria for judging good scholarship within the kaozheng tradition, broadly defined, differs significantly from that currently prevalent in American cultural anthropology. In principle, there ought not be irreconcilable contradictions between, for example, the kaozheng emphasis on evidence and the high value placed on conceptual originality in American cultural anthropology. However, I doubt that I need cite specific examples to convince you, on the one hand, that in practice the conceptual value of some virtuoso performances of sinological brilliance escapes many anthropologists, and that, on the other hand, the (to employ a polite gloss) creatively interpretive efforts of some anthropological analyses seem to sinological audiences diminished precisely by a paucity of evidence.

Again, broadly speaking, the disciplinary values that distinguish

anthropology and sinology in the West replicate, to some degree, those that distinguish Western anthropology from that practiced in Taiwan. (In this regard, one should avoid an unfortunate penchant in recent scholarship to too broadly characterize differences in terms that contrast, for example, "Western" Cartesian, individualist, or positivist values with presumably "Oriental" values like an emphasis on social relations.) In other words, in the context of these lectures there are, minimally, two relevant frontiers of recognition -- the values that distinguish anthropology from history and philology, on the one hand, and those that differentiate Taiwanese and American academic life and culture, on the other. No listing of features in straightforward contrastive terms is adequate to characterizing these interpenetrating frontiers, but a first step toward enhanced understanding might take the form of recognizing, in explicit terms, the simultaneous validity of different values.

With the foregoing observations in mind, I would like to confess at the outset that the forthcoming arguments assume considerable license in interpretation and provide less in the way of concrete evidence -- particularly evidence drawn from fieldwork -- than I would like to be able to provide. I believe that the value of the interpretations warrants such license, but I also recognize the value and, ultimately, the necessity of submitting these ideas to more thoroughgoing sinological and sociological test. Allow me also to emphasize that the particular reading I give to, for example, filial piety, is motivated by values very different from those that animate philosophers and scholars from other disciplines in which elaboration on the topic is vastly more developed.

I hope that my analysis emphasizes sufficiently that I do not deem anthropological values to be more legitimate than those that sustain other approaches. And I also hope that my attempts to recognize (again, for example) the contributions of philosophy succeed in evoking some measure of reciprocal recognition. Ideally, the desire for recognition entails recognition of a reciprocal desire from one's respondents (on this point, Confucian and poststructuralist philosophy would seem to agree). Similarly, it is my hope that, whether or not readers and those who attended my lectures are convinced by my analyses, my attempt to address a Chinese audience in inadequate Mandarin will be recognized as itself an act of recognition -- in

Tu Wei-ming's reading of Confucianism, as a step in an on-going project aimed at increasing understanding -- both cross-cultural and interdisciplinary. (In this regard, I regret that both time and the limits of my abilities have prevented me from rendering the present text in Chinese.)

## LECTURE I: THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF THE PERSON

### A. Introduction

These lectures address two apparently quite distant arenas of scholarship. The first concerns a nexus of general issues that can be glossed as the "social production of the person"; the second is a more focused analysis of gender and subjectivity centering on interpretation of mythic narrative -- in particular, on a close reading of the story of Nuozha from Fengshen Yanyi. Yet despite the manifest differences in the topics of inquiry, they are conceptually linked. My discussion and critique of academic approaches to the social nature of personhood has directly motivated my analysis of relevant Chinese legends and myths. Conversely, my attempts to comprehend these stories has inspired me to think critically about various theoretical and conceptual issues.

I shall not, however, task the reader's credulity by insisting that the two levels of discussion combine to form a balanced whole. The general discussion raises conceptual issues that, although providing essential conceptual context for the subsequent discussion, exceed in scope the demonstrative or exemplary ambitions of the specific analysis. By the same token, the issues addressed in later analyses also move in some directions unanticipated in the theoretical overview. In short, my reach in both respects exceeds my grasp; there is a great deal of grist for additional future thinking and research throughout. The interpretations developed in the later lectures aspire to move in productive directions implied by the critiques developed in earlier ones, but I leave it to readers to evaluate the extent of progress.

I would like to begin by summarizing and anticipating some of the main themes, both conceptual and substantive. As an anthropologist, I am interested in how analysis of mythic narrative can enlighten us on the role of culture in the constitution of the self or person. This interest raises two related conceptual problems: First, what, for reasons I shall elaborate presently, I prefer to term the social production of the person; and, second,

the nature of production of mythic narrative and the interpretation of myth. Study of cultures of person and self, on the one hand, and analysis of myth, on the other, are both fundamental to deepening understanding of social life, and both are the subjects of extensive academic literatures and contending views. However, both myth and cultures of personhood are also notoriously difficult to study scientifically.

Many social theorists and philosophers, ranging from Freud to Levi-Strauss, have taken up Oedipus, and yet it would be difficult to assert that any single interpretation of the story, much less its implications, has prevailed. By the same token, speculation on the meaning, or lack thereof, of our senses of self seems unlikely to coalesce into a firmly grounded, unified, empirically based doctrine even in the West. And such speculation is obviously not limited to Western philosophy.

The more scientifically or empirically minded scholar can respond in either of two ways: 1) he or she can prudently limit research to a careful documentation of what can actually be verified about a narrative in a text or the historical record, or 2) he or she can relax the criteria of verifiability and, in a more speculative spirit, attempt to imagine the social and psychological circumstances that account for a narrative's content or meaning. The comforts of the first strategy may be misleading, however; if we limit ourselves to what we can know with certainty, we may fail to understand how limited the range of what we know really is. Obviously, I would defend at least some measure of principled speculation, particularly when one enters the murky world of myth interpretation.

In the longrun, even deeply flawed accounts (Freud's interpretation of Oedipus suggests itself as an obvious and relevant example) can have significant value, stimulating the reflective and critical responses of others, and provoking new analytical insights. One must bear in mind that academic production occurs in an intersubjective world; in such a world, expanding the range of phenomena we aspire to comprehend assumes some role for <u>both</u> principled speculation about that which is still beyond our grasp to verify <u>and</u> the principled reaction of critics (a kind of recognition) to the logical and empirical flaws produced by such speculation. But by "principled speculation" I mean interpretation supported by as much evidence as one can marshal. Wild flights of fantasy do not deserve to be taken seriously. In my

subsequent analyses of Chinese mythologies, I aspire to develop as much support for my interpretations as I am able, but these interpretations are offered in what must be forthrightly acknowledged as an exploratory spirit.

B. Main Themes

1. **The social production of the person.** The anthropological point of my analysis is a contribution to understanding of the relationship between culture and the individual. I argue for a shift from the dominant emphasis on cultures of the person in what I term poststructuralist and interpretivist treatments to a greater emphasis on production, of both persons and the social circumstances in which they find themselves. I would like to emphasize from the outset that I take "social production of the person" to include a) how various social roles are produced as an immanent aspect of social reproduction (for example, how "fathers" or "sons" are roles defined by domestic cycles), b) how culturally specific ideas about persons -- ethnopsychology -- are also implicated in these same socially productive activities, and c) the existential or emotional consequences or effects of these processes in individual experience. My reading thus has a polemical intention that is oriented somewhat against the premises and jargon that define most academic discussion on these topics.[1]

2. **Gender.** Gender identity is intrinsic to personhood. Here I take my inspiration from feminist critiques, particularly in anthropology. Male anthropologists until the last decade or so tended to take gender roles more or less for granted, seeing no particular need to explain, in particular, inequalities. The feminist critique of this complacency has inspired a great

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[1] In particular, hermeneutic approaches like Geertz's (1973) focus almost exclusively on ethnopsychology, excluding questions about how ethnopsychologies themselves come into being in social activities. Geertz also glosses over individual experiences, implying that people unproblematically assume the roles imagined for them in ideologies of personhood. Wikan (1989, 1990) criticizes Geertz for ignoring experience, but nonetheless takes some aspects of an ethnopsychological order (belief in witches, for example) as an irreducible (unexplainable?) ground for her ethnographic account. Poole (1982) seems to me to address more successfully the dissonances between personhood in cultural and ideological terms and individual experiences produced in the activities that institutionalize such ideologies. Neither experience nor ideology can be taken as the whole of what constitutes a culture of personhood. Moreover, as I shall seek to demonstrate, the dissonances themselves may be especially revealing.