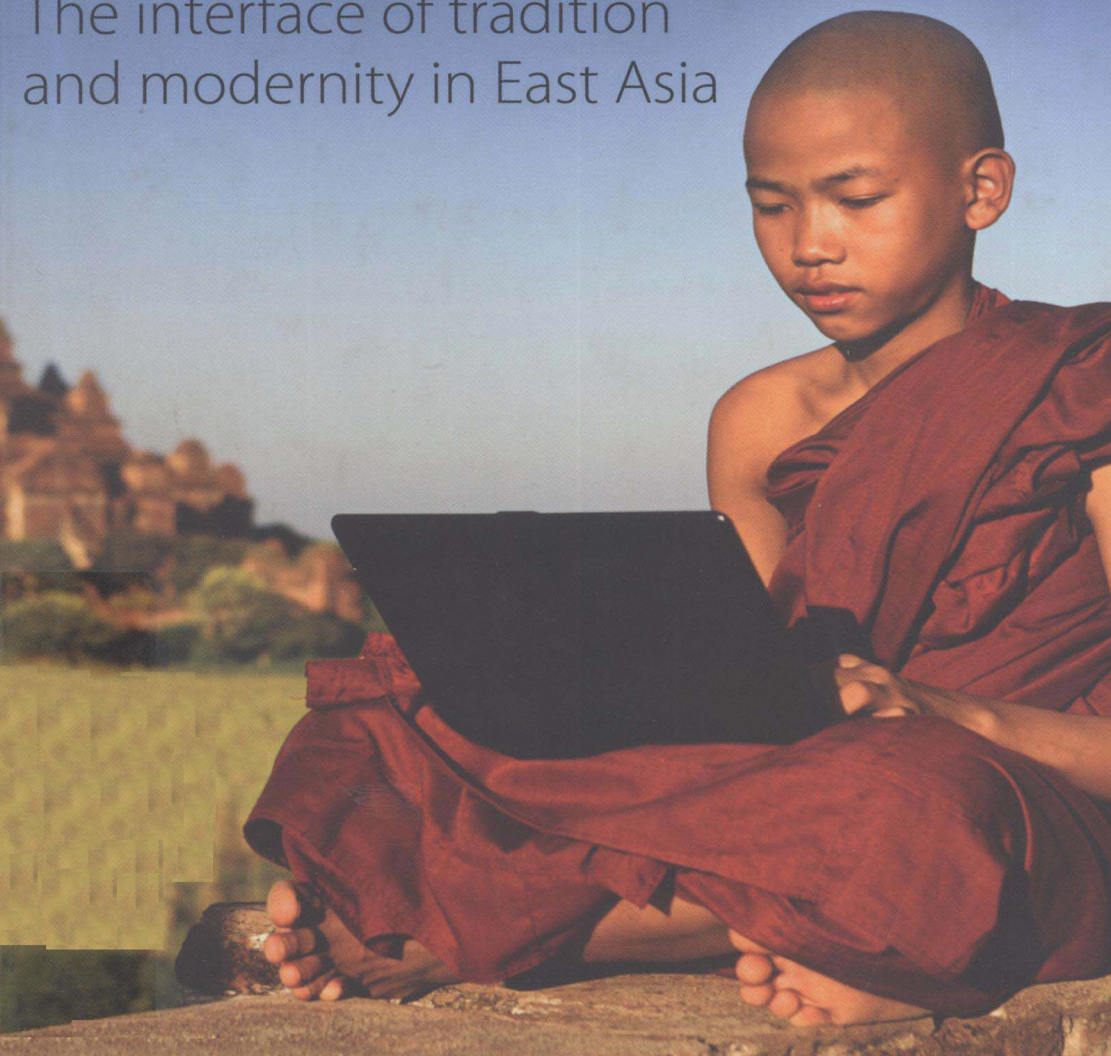


Modalities of change

The interface of tradition
and modernity in East Asia



EDITED BY

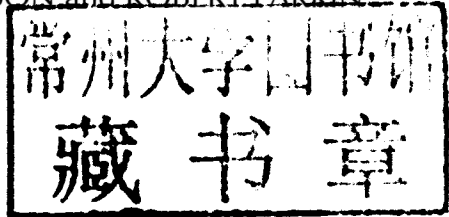
JAMES WILKERSON AND ROBERT PARKIN

MODALITIES OF CHANGE

THE INTERFACE OF TRADITION AND
MODERNITY IN EAST ASIA

Edited by

JAMES WILKERSON and ROBERT PARKIN



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PREFACE

With one exception, the chapters in this volume originated from a series of presentations given at Tsing Hua University, Hsinchu, Taiwan, in the summer of 2006 (Eveline Bingaman's chapter was written subsequently). While no theme was suggested at the outset, it quickly emerged that most of the papers dealt with the interface between tradition and modernity, mostly in the Chinese cultural sphere, as well as in Vietnam. In fact, the papers also mostly dealt with minorities in all the main states represented, namely the People's Republic of China, Taiwan and Vietnam. While this is not a book about minorities specifically, it is the case that these chapters tell how groups that are minorities in relation to the Chinese politico-cultural sphere in which they exist are confronted by and are confronting a modernity that, if it does not come ultimately from this sphere, at least is channelled through it. The historical colonization of minorities by Chinese can be compared to European colonization, especially of originally under-populated areas like North America, Australasia and Siberia; in both cases, the colonization has become established and has changed into permanent settled life, which has changed local indigenous minorities too. This can be contrasted with European colonization of Asia and Africa, where indigenous populations were sufficiently large to bring an end to that colonization eventually and attain independence. Groups like the Qiang, Miao, Paiwan, Amis, Thao and Nung, dealt with in this volume, are essentially 'fourth-world' peoples every bit as much as tribes in the Amazon or in India. The cultivation of minority 'traditions' by Beijing and Taipei has been balanced by modernity introduced to such minorities by or through central political control. However, this is not to say that these minorities lack agency: some of the impetus for change is internal, and they are able to select some 'modernizing' influences from outside while rejecting others. Perhaps it is especially in this rejection that their own 'traditions' are emphasized, often in revamped form. In any event, such considerations provide the background to the present collection of papers, which have all been revised for publication here.

The editors would like to thank all the contributors for their work and their patience in responding to their various requests for revisions, Sue Jollow for language editing across the entire revision process, and Eveline Bingaman for language editing in the last round of revisions. The editors also thank the Center for Humanities and Social Sciences and the Institute of Anthropology, National Tsing Hua University, and the College of Hakka Studies, National Chiao Tung University, for the funding that made the seminar possible, and Berghahn Books for agreeing to publish the work. Parkin would also like to

thank Wilkerson for the latter's invitation to visit Tsing Hua as a Writer in Residence in the summer of 2006, as well as Tsing Hua University for funding a most enjoyable and fruitful trip. He would also like to thank Futuru Tsai for taking him on a visit to the Amis to witness their dancing. Wilkerson would like to thank Parkin for kindly agreeing to participate and to work with all involved with patience and persistence. Both Robert Parkin and James Wilkerson thank Eveline Bingaman for collaborating in the compilation of the index.

Finally, the editors and contributors would like to dedicate this volume to the memory of one of their number, Li-Ju Hong, who sadly and tragically died while it was in preparation. She was especially kind and helpful to Parkin during his 2006 visit. She is dearly missed by all who took part. This volume is dedicated to her memory.

James Wilkerson and Robert Parkin
Hsinchu and Oxford, July 2012

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INTRODUCTION

MODALITIES OF CHANGE: THE INTERFACE OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN EAST ASIA

James Wilkerson and Robert Parkin

Anthropology and Social Change

Change is a factor in the experience of any society. This has always been the case, at least in recorded history, despite the tendency to think that there is something special about the modern age – for example, that change is now more rapid, more far reaching, more violent. However, it is not something social or cultural anthropologists have always been comfortable in dealing with. This was most marked in the British school of functionalism of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown because of their dismissal of the speculative history they saw in evolutionism (though Malinowski in particular was well aware of the impact of colonialism on the colonized). There is a contrast here with Durkheimian functionalism, which had remained partly evolutionist, and most of this group's works incorporated at least some, often rather bare reflections on how the West was different from the rest (good examples are Robert Hertz's works on death and right-handedness, 1960). Indeed, some famous texts from this milieu are clearly structured in evolutionary terms, such as Mauss's works on the gift (1954) and the person (1985), and his joint work with Durkheim on classification (1963), though differently from the evolutionism of the British school (cf. Parkin 2001, Ch. 13). However, identifying and charting change is one thing, accounting for it another, and neither functionalist nor structuralist anthropology were particularly good at the latter theoretically, despite occasionally being willing to recognize the fact of change itself, to describe it and even to predict it, as both Malinowski and Lévi-Strauss foretold the disappearance of the primitive, and therefore of anthropology's subject, as they saw it.

Yet this is not just a matter of the blindness produced by theoretical fixations or an inherent inability of such anthropologists to account for change: rather, it is because of the often-concealed structuralism that informs even work that is

not explicitly structuralist. Nineteenth-century evolutionism itself, although ostensibly history, was in reality often closer to structure because of the fairly rigid stages, usually but not always of progress, through which the whole of humankind was supposed to move eventually; this touched Marxism as much as the non-revolutionary evolutionism of the British nineteenth-century school. For the theoretical structuralist as much as the British functionalist, change does not matter much because it cannot explain much, since at root we all share the same characteristics and propensities: in the case of structuralism, for example, we all allegedly share a tendency to think in terms of binary oppositions, or to stage rituals according to the same basic pattern, or to distinguish those we may or should marry from those we may not. Although Lévi-Strauss distinguished between hot and cold societies, that is, societies that respectively do and do not see their histories as different from themselves, this too could be seen as a structural difference as much as a historical one. In any case, his preferred form of narrative was always myth, where his structuralist method could be put to full use. Fundamentally, though, structuralism in whatever form raises the question of what precisely we mean by change. Under its influence (and in general terms, that predates Lévi-Strauss), anthropologists have often focused more on stressing the continuities over time in social forms, cultural practices, identities, and so on, than on identifying mechanisms of change, reflecting the fact that they are not, in the last resort, historians. This often remains true, however much individual anthropologists may cooperate with historians, examine archives themselves, or collect oral histories and life stories. Even in such studies, the fact of change is often of less interest than how the past and the present are articulated within a single model or process. Seeking to go further – as often is the case in Europe, where the past is well documented – always threatens to reduce anthropology to a form of social history. But then again, this is more or less what Evans-Pritchard advocated in claiming – in opposition to Radcliffe-Brown, but under the probable influence of Marett, his earlier teacher – that anthropology was a form of historiography, not of science.

However, other trends in anthropology have dealt extensively with change, initially especially among colonized or once-colonized peoples as a result of the impact of colonialism. This started with the anti-evolutionist Malinowski himself, though his disquisitions on this matter were always coloured by his generally successful attempts to obtain research funding from the Rockefeller Foundation. Another key early figure was his student, Lucy Mair (e.g. 1969), who wrote extensively on change in Africa, especially in the period of independence. Many of her essays interrogate the likelihood of tradition surviving post-colonial modernization trends and programmes. The Manchester School led by Max Gluckman, and the policy-oriented Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in what is now Zambia with which many of its members were associated, both distinguished themselves from orthodox functionalism by their greater concern with social process and with the vast changes that were taking place in African societies right under their noses as a result of the colonial experience. There were similar trends in other parts of the world like

the Americas, leading to Bohannon declaring already in 1967 that ‘One of the largest literatures in all anthropology is that devoted to acculturation and culture change’ (1967: xi). However, Bastide, in a slightly later work ([1971] 1973), saw this as an American intellectual and political obsession, as well as being a process that merely produced acculturated elites who would inevitably turn against the colonialism that had spawned them sooner or later, becoming ‘encysted’ within their domestic societies in the pursuit of their own interests rather than those of the formerly colonized population at large. This is the so-called ‘Marginal Man’ phenomenon, a good example being Abner Cohen’s work (1971, 1974) on acculturated creoles, the descendents of repatriated slaves, in Sierra Leone in the years before independence, whose Anglicized upbringing and origins, as well as their use of freemasonry as a form of organization, allowed them to distance themselves from the African ‘tribal’ population as handmaidens of the British colonialists. Bastide advocated instead a Marxist, anti-Cartesian approach to change focusing on the socioeconomic development of whole populations rather than the merely cultural assimilation of elites. However, Bastide also called ‘development sociology [*sic*] ... merely the latest expression of evolutionary theory’ (1973: 158), since there is the same sense of certain peoples in the world having to ‘catch up’ with progress, sustained by the frequent blindness of the development worker to the adaptiveness of the supposedly ‘maladaptive’ practices of the developed (a particularly striking example is Fairhead and Leach 1997, on forest conservation in West Africa; also, for example, Nanda 1994 on the Bonda ‘tribe’ in Orissa, India). For many social anthropologists, accordingly, development has become just another social situation in which the dynamics between the developers and the developed can be studied, and not a prescription for ‘progress’ – itself a deeply problematic term.

Social change is perhaps easier to deal with intellectually in Europe and other parts of the world with a literate tradition, ample historical records and a strong sense of history. Certainly there is no shortage of such studies, especially in Eastern Europe, which, having been classified as politically oppressed (and therefore as backward in its way), now risks being defined as endlessly struggling through a difficult economic transition that has privatized and de-industrialized state production, de-collectivized agriculture, slimmed down the welfare state, and produced unemployment or casualization on a large scale. This weighs especially heavily on the former industrial proletariat (Dunn 2001; Kideckel 2002), as well as on women (Pine 2001, 2002), who seem more affected by these changes than men in the region. However, as Kristmundsdottir (1999) has shown, this can also affect a West European society like Iceland, where the recent feminization of professions like teaching, ostensibly permitting women to enter the world of work in unprecedented numbers (including in politics), has actually caused them to fall in both prestige and salary levels.

A focus on tradition and modernity and their interrelations brings its own conceptual and definitional problems. We should not forget that tradition is

not just 'there', but apt to be invented (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1988). In a sense this is always true, given the lability, even fragility of culture, which has come to be seen as an ongoing process rather than an over-reified 'thing', as well as the fact that it is produced and reproduced by living people in living societies. However, tradition is often felt to be invented backwards, as it were, in order to serve present-day agendas (discourses of nationalism are a good example of this). As for modernity, we need only recall Bruno Latour (1993) questioning whether anyone has ever really been modern. In any case, even if we accept that the modern does have meaning, it can be difficult if not impossible to draw the line between tradition and modernity: where does the latter really start? Yet there has also been a reaction against attempts to deconstruct change and history completely as concepts in anthropology and other social sciences, or to see culture, identity and social forms as created in a vacuum with regard to the past. One example here is John Peel (1989), who opposes some aspects of Abner Cohen's work on West African ethnic and religious identities as representing what Peel calls 'presentism'. Another is the Anthony Smith (1986) notion of perennialism, or the recognition that, although no identity is either primordial or essential, a number of identities have been around for an awfully long time, like the Greeks, Jews, Persians, Chinese and Japanese. People's own perspectives on history are now more important in anthropology than history itself, and there has therefore been a tendency to evaluate how much continuity with the past is claimed in, for example, nationalist discourses, since these are not merely ideological fabrications, and some continuities always exist. Even in extreme cases, basic categories of thought, norms and values tend to survive the most far-reaching disruptions in people's lives (e.g. colonialism, the Holocaust), but in more settled times too, change may well modify rather than undermine key beliefs.

One excellent example of this is Edwin Ardener's article, 'Witchcraft, Economics and the Continuity of Belief' (1970), in which he shows how, among the Bakweri of Cameroon, modernity was at first resisted because witchcraft beliefs ruled out demonstrations of wealth from agriculture or trade, though these were later embraced under the twin pressures of the colonial government and the more 'acculturated' Bakweri who had lived away from the area and acquired different attitudes to wealth. But although these new activities generated significant profits, these were used not for modern consumerism, but to buy more effective witchcraft medicine. Any work on modernity in anthropology is compelled to take 'tradition' into account, however that may be interpreted, and whoever does the interpreting. All work on witchcraft now seems to have to confront the impact of modernity on it while also showing the extent to which modernity has to compromise with traditional beliefs and modes of contestation marking the structural fissures in a community, with ostensibly modern courts often having to make allowance for such beliefs, and even sometimes acting as if they reflect reality (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Geschiere 1994; Green 2005; Strathern 1982). While, for example, Tanzania has retained colonial-era laws against witchcraft accusations

(Green 2005), in the Central African Republic it is witchcraft itself that is outlawed (*Unreported World*, Channel Four, 2011).

Change in East Asia

East Asia is clearly a region that has known massive economic and social change in recent decades. Choosing a particular key date may be arbitrary when it comes to tracking social processes, but national unity and socialist revolution in China and Vietnam, as well as the alternatives of capitalism and quasi-democratic reform in Japan and Taiwan (though top-down rather than bottom-up processes, unlike largely in the West), have clearly done much and are still doing much to shape the way the region is today. These changes have altered social forms to some extent, such as the disruption to family organization through rural–urban migration, but less so cultural norms and values, whether in relation to kinship or to ritual and religion (where the latter is permitted by the state). As the chapters in this collection all show to a greater or lesser extent, even here, in this period, tradition has sharp elbows that continue to poke through the fabric of modernity.

Indeed, in articulating the past and the present, tradition and modernity, however defined, these chapters all adopt a sharp ethnographic focus by building on earlier, but still quite recent work on economic and social change in the region (e.g. Garnant et al. 1996; Goodman 1997; Ikels 1996; Milwertz 1997; Oi 1999 – all works by non-anthropologists. Feuchtwang 2002 and Latham 2002 are two recent anthropological studies). Much of this change has, of course, been rapid, although the whole period since the collapse of the Chinese Empire in 1911 has seen far-reaching changes in China, from the rise of the nationalist republic, through the Japanese invasion and communist revolution, to the Cultural Revolution and the reaction to it, which eventually ushered in the contemporary and rather paradoxical period of capitalist economic growth promoted by a communist party that still dominates politically. The recent economic crisis of 2008 and after is expected to enhance China's standing in the world rather than diminish it, for even though the global recession has affected China too, the world is looking to China to lead it out of recession, America is hoping it will continue to fund its national debt, and the IMF is grateful that it has agreed to bolster its credit lines. The last fifteen or so years in China especially, with its phenomenally rapid economic growth being followed by the current steep recession, reminds one of Hann's edited volume, *When History Accelerates* (1994), which grew out of the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in which China did not take part (at least as far as party dominance is concerned). Nor should we forget the other states represented here, namely Vietnam and Taiwan. The former can be described as a mainland China in miniature for its *doi moi* reformism, which has also led to quite rapid, though similarly fluctuating, economic change. The latter, by contrast, is long used to being a capitalist outpost in the Chinese cultural and

geographical sphere. For Taiwan, indeed, change has been more gradual, though no less fluctuating in terms of economic cycles, with democracy and civil society emerging belatedly out of Kuomintang dominance.

One aspect that appears to characterize economic development in this region, as in neighbouring South-East Asia, is state sponsorship. Whether key economic ministries in Japan or South Korea, the communist party in mainland China and Vietnam, or the highly disciplined, even authoritarian statist regimes in Singapore and Malaysia, the Adam Smith principle of the state setting the conditions for growth but not intervening directly in economic activity and letting a mercantilist civil society do the work itself – basically a bottom-up approach – tends to be replaced here by top-down direction combined with the market-driven flexibility characteristic of capitalist systems. This in itself allows the contemporary People's Republic of China to appear as just another state in the region, rather than emphasizing its distinctiveness because of its continued rule by a communist party. Added to this relative uniformity is a continuing if often patchy claim in many of these countries that the state will look after the basic needs of the whole population so long as the latter pursues economic activity, rather than expecting people to stand on their own feet as much as possible as in the West (America consistently, Europe post-Thatcher). Ong has described this implicit bargain between state and people very effectively for Singapore (1999), where it is perhaps most marked, but it can also be found elsewhere in the region, if not everywhere. Ong rightly derides attempts by some writers, exemplified by Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' hypothesis (1996), that modern Asian states are perpetuating precolonial forms of oppression (or at best an excessive but still traditional communitarianism) because of allegedly irreconcilable cultural contrasts with genuine Western liberalism. Instead Ong sees them as new polities concerned as much with comprehensive welfare as with political oppression: not even the more authoritarian states such as Malaysia and Singapore are police states in the usual sense of the term, and the focus is increasingly placed on building a modern but Asian middle class to maintain achievements to date and build on them. This in itself suggests permitting enough freedom of thought to encourage innovation and lateral thinking in the interests of the overall society and economy, even where democracy *per se* may be a low priority. The main exception here, Japan, clearly owes its democracy to the American postwar occupation, and even this democracy has been characterized by the dominance of a single party since 1945, combined with continued veneration of the emperor. In brief, Ong sees in modern Asian states a series of alternative modernities – alternative especially to the West, but also to each other – rather than the continuity of Asian politico-cultural forms from colonialism to postcolonialism in a different guise, as writers like Huntington would have it.

A comparison with Eastern Europe – similarly a region of rapid economic, political and social change – is instructive. Katherine Verdery (1996) has cautioned against the possibility that post-socialist societies in the region will simply become clones of the western half of the continent. Again we may be

faced with alternative modernities here, not least as this was socialism's own view of itself. For Thelen (2011), however, the real issue in Eastern Europe is the failure of anthropology to capitalize on the perfect opportunity the region presented to study social change as it happened. The emphasis on the 'social' is critical here: change was seen as primarily economic, the stress being on the privatization or dismantling of socialist economic systems, practices and institutions, and changing property rights, especially in land through de-collectivization; much less attention was paid to political changes (the emergence of multi-party democracy) or to social changes per se, which, in the work of figures such as Pine and Kideckel (discussed above), are seen almost as epiphenomenal on sudden economic disadvantage for women and the industrial proletariat respectively. Thelen links this tendency to the influence of Kornai's neo-institutionalist theories of socialism (1992), in which she sees close parallels with rational choice theory (for Kornai, institutions are interpreted as being formed by the choices and interrelations of the actors within them, not as reified abstractions locatable nowhere). While there is some sense to Thelen's criticisms, she does not mention work on post-socialist ethnic violence, which asks whether such violence is new, was foreshadowed under socialism itself or represents a revival of pre-socialist 'primordialist' hatreds. Nor does she cite Bornemann's work on identity and its loss (1993) – an odd omission, given that both he and she worked in East Germany, where that loss is felt exceptionally keenly – nor work on religious revival in Eastern Europe (e.g. Hann 2010). Clearly there are also continuities between the socialist past and the post-socialist present, for example, in the use of networks to obtain jobs and other resources, or the blurring of public and private, of the official and the personal, in respect of precisely such networks, as well as land rights (Thelen *ibid.*; Dunn 2001). Once again one feels that structuralism and even functionalism are being introduced through the back door: people behave the same, whatever their exact political and economic circumstances or sociocultural forms and practices, and the danger of over-dichotomizing Eastern and Western Europe, socialism and capitalism, socialism and post-socialism, is ever present.

The experience of East Asia may be different from that of Eastern Europe, not least because states in the former region have generally not undergone the same sort of far-reaching changes in the political system and institutions. The articles by Feuchtwang (2002) and Latham (2002) cited earlier, both from a book on post-socialism, the former on the fossilization of the Chinese Communist Party, the latter on the significance of the new consumerism, give some indication of the differences here. Both authors take as their baseline the obvious fact that China represents the irony of a politically authoritarian and monopolistic socialist party not merely permitting but encouraging a capitalist economy, an entrepreneurial spirit and, in effect – if not so deliberately as in Malaysia and Singapore – the emergence of a middle class, a bourgeoisie, in fact, despite this social group being the canonical socialist class enemy. In Feuchtwang's words (2002: 196), 'reform and economic growth required repudiation of socialism, but the continuity of the Communist Party required

its retention'. Feuchtwang then asks whether this makes the Communist Party in China a 'remnant' or 'fossil' – perhaps a 'survival' – since it exists as a factor of power in the country but has lost its moral compass and much of its legitimacy, as the cracks in its monopoly have steadily opened up. Like Steinmüller more recently (2011), Feuchtwang points to the irony, extending to cynicism, that marks popular attitudes to the party and its functionaries – which is not to say that it or they have lost their legitimacy completely. Both Feuchtwang and Latham see the party as having abandoned class struggle in favour of nationalist patriotism in which the country is encouraged to make progress, overtake the West and achieve prosperity, although ideologically this may also be represented as the Chinese and capitalist road to socialism. For Latham, who rejects crudely materialistic arguments that the new consumerism is a 'social palliative' that makes party rule tolerable, it is precisely the party's focus on transition that gives it legitimacy today because it claims ultimate control over it. If that transition were to stop, it would signal the party having lost control and undermine its legitimacy as a necessary institution. As Feuchtwang points out, this also means that the party retains an evolutionist view of transition and progress drawn ultimately from its Marxist roots. Another irony identified by Feuchtwang is the position Mao has attained as a spiritual icon, with amulets and the like, offering protection much like a traditional ancestor, despite the Communist Party's rejection of 'superstition' as part of its evolutionary trajectory.

Yet the party also retains its dominance in other ways, not all of them blatantly repressive. While, as Latham also shows, there are cases where party men have been involved in the rehabilitation of traditional ancestor halls, temples and genealogies on their own initiative (which still may give the party legitimacy locally), Feuchtwang draws attention to the party's often successful attempts to incorporate, at one level or another, whatever civil society organizations manage to emerge, as it struggles to retain its monopoly of power. Latham himself remarks on the Chinese consumers' association being state-directed, as well as the party's rejection of consumer choice where the media are concerned, seen most recently in attempts to control the internet. For Feuchtwang, on the other hand, many critiques of the party, even in Tiananmen Square in 1989, begin within a party tradition of revolutionary renewal in which bottom-up initiatives always have a chance of success.

What, then, of differences between China and Eastern Europe – can we even speak of post-socialism in the former case? One obvious difference is that the break in Eastern Europe was more complete and far reaching: although many regional communist parties were reinvented as parliamentary socialists, they had to reconstitute themselves and compete as such in democratic elections; this did not happen in China, where the party and its monopolistic organization continued despite the change from Mao to Deng (whose market-oriented reforms, incidentally, anticipated those in Eastern Europe by more than a decade). For Feuchtwang, while the experience of socialism in Eastern Europe was of its gradual attenuation and loss of legitimacy until a crisis was