

INTRODUCTION

As is well known, Lewis Henry Morgan contributed substantially to the study of kinship and of social evolution. Today Morgan is still a household name among Chinese anthropologists, thanks to the influence he had on Marx and Engels. It is an irony of history that the ghost of Morgan, a brilliant capitalist, still haunts the academic institutions of Communist China. Morgan's thought has become part of Marxist orthodoxy and thus fundamental for the Communist Party's approach to minorities in China. The Han majority was seen in evolutionary terms as more advanced than the minorities, a theory well suited to earlier civilizational perspectives. Superior in its material civilization (agriculture) the Han had the historical task of leading the minorities to higher development. Fei Xiaotong, one of the fathers of Chinese anthropology, still asserted this theory in the 1980s, and it continues to be one of the pillars of Chinese policy toward nationalities.¹ Fei argues in his Tanner Lectures that an ethnic group, first known as Hua Xia and later as Han, who lived in the Yellow River area in Central China, expanded from this area by absorbing other groups. This became the nucleus of "the Chinese people." The name *Han* came from the Han dynasty, but only after the ethnicity had already been formed. Fei thus proposes a theory of gradual absorption, partly by expansion by the Han and partly by absorption of non-Han peoples who had conquered Han areas but adopted Han names. Fei's explanation of this successful expansion and absorption is the following: "What, then, has made the Hans a nucleus with such centripetal force? The main factor, in my view, has been their agricultural economy. Once a nomadic tribe made its entry into the plains

and found itself in the midst of the careful, orderly society of farmers, most of the nomads would eventually throw themselves all too voluntarily into the embrace of the Hans.” When Fei moves from his historical exposé to contemporary ethnic policy (that he helped to develop) he argues that “the policy is for the better-developed groups to help the underdeveloped ones by furnishing economic and cultural aid.” His entirely apolitical view of the processes involved is best illustrated by the following comment on the last page of his lectures: “The Tibetans, for example, who are used to living and working at high altitudes, can play a major role in the effort to develop the economy on the highlands, while cooperating and exchanging with other ethnic groups for the ultimate purpose of general prosperity.”²

Outside of China, evolutionary comparisons of contemporary societies have become widely discredited, at least in academic discourse, although, as I will show, evolutionary perspectives in relation to cognitive science have again come into vogue. This rejection of evolutionism should, however, not lead to a rejection of comparison. The main purpose of this book is to show the value of anthropological comparisons that are not grounded in evolutionary theory, through essays on topics as varied as iconoclasm, urban poverty, social exclusion, and mountain people. The case material for the comparative essays presented here is taken from work done in India and China. That material is only partly ethnographic. Much of it provides an anthropological lens on historical material. The connection laid between anthropology and history is certainly not new. It has its ancestral roots in the work of the French school, including Marcel Mauss, Marcel Granet, Georges Dumézil, and later Louis Dumont. This is the basis of Marcel Detienne’s passionate plea for comparison between contemporary and past societies and for connecting anthropology and history.³ Such a plea, though with a somewhat different genealogy and execution, is also made in the journal *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, and for India in the work of Bernard Cohn.⁴ It has inspired my comparative work on Britain and India as well as that on India and China. In this book the focus is on the problematic notion of civilization that informs issues like social inequality, ethnicity and nationalism, representation, and religion.

One of the previous Morgan lecturers, Ward Goodenough, who recently passed away and who was in the late eighties my (very senior) colleague at the University of Pennsylvania, delivered the Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures in 1968 on the topic “Description and Comparison in Cultural Anthropology.” Goodenough argued that the description of the basic emic

categories, primarily those of kinship, that one's informants used could be used to reconstruct their culture, as if it was a language. This reconstruction then could be the basis of comparison in the service of generalized knowledge. Description is a means to the end of generalization by way of comparison. This research program came under heavy critique in the 1980s. Generalization from fieldwork seemed no longer feasible, and the main task of anthropology became description. As Ladislav Holy observes, "the word *comparison* itself has completely disappeared from the vocabulary of methodological discourse."⁵ In Holy's view, "the high value ascribed to non-comparative analytical description reflects the redefinition of anthropology as an interpretative humanity concerned with cultural specificity and cultural diversity, rather than as a generalizing science."⁶ What Holy sees as the remaining possibility of a comparative approach in a humanistic interpretative anthropology that emphasizes description of specificity is to search for formal principles of human cognition. This is a move that was fundamental to structuralism, but it has been highly stimulated over the last two decades by advances in cognitive psychology and brain research. Some of those who developed symbolic anthropology under the influence of structuralism, like Dan Sperber and Maurice Bloch, have come more and more under the influence of cognitive science. Others, like Marshal Sahlins, though equally influenced by structuralism, have rejected the sociobiology that underlies much of the combination of anthropology and cognitive science. Again others, like Harvey Whitehouse, have embraced sociobiology by arguing that "anthropology should be to the cognitive sciences what fieldwork is to experimental primatology."⁷ Since Whitehouse seems to represent an extreme case of enthusiasm for cognitive sciences among anthropologists, we may have a look at some of his ideas. In a recent article, Whitehouse and Cohen want to show the importance of anthropology to the study of cognitive evolution by focusing on group synchronous activity (like singing or dancing) in explaining human cooperation. While the idea that anthropology should play a role in the development of a multidisciplinary study of human cognition is correct, the focus on singing and dancing might fall short in explaining human cooperation. The authors propose to reduce the various forms of human cohesion to two types, "the one small-scale uniting face-to-face communities and the other large-scale uniting 'imagined communities,'" and argue that "these divergent patterns of group formation are a consequence of the frequency and emotionality of ritual performances."⁸ This proposal most certainly does not

help in providing an explanation of human cooperation. Using the Human Relations Area Files and coding 644 rituals from seventy-four language groups, Whitehouse and Cohen come to the astonishing conclusion that “groups with high frequency/low-arousal rituals tend to be much larger than groups with low frequency/dysphoric rituals.” What could this possibly mean? One could perhaps say that this finding seems to be confirmed, for instance, by the ethnographic descriptions of the small-scale society of the Marind-Anim, where initiation rituals in New Guinea are anxiety producing and intense and happen only when a group of youngsters comes of age.⁹ And, in contrast, by the fact that the Catholic Mass is happening every Sunday and appears to be less intense, although one does remember that in Europe pogroms often happened after the celebration of Easter (but once a year and thus low frequency, although not entirely dysphoric). But what about Hindu death rituals or Daoist possession cults, or Korean shamanistic performances? In fact, we have such a wide variety of practices that we put in the container category “ritual,” and indeed such a wide variety of societal forms, that the attempt by Whitehouse and Cohen to reduce them to two types that are correlated with two types of societies seems absurd. More than of the precise linguistic descriptions of Ward Goodenough, it reminds one of the sweeping materialist evolutionism of Marvin Harris but this time with a focus on mental processes and emotions (thanks to the cognitive sciences) instead of material conditions.¹⁰ There is a seemingly indomitable desire for generalization in the name of theory that has revived an interest in large data-sets, such as the Human Relations Area Files, that were started by Murdoch in the 1950s but became unconvincing after the rise of Geertzian interpretive anthropology. Geertz’s critique of “common-denominators of culture” is that it should demand “that the universals proposed be substantial ones and not empty categories; (2) that they be specifically grounded in particular, psychological, or sociological processes, not just vaguely associated with ‘underlying realities’; and (3) that they can convincingly be defended as core elements in a definition of humanity in comparison with which the much more numerous cultural particularities are of clearly secondary importance. On all three of these counts it seems to me that the *consentium gentium* approach fails; rather than moving toward the essentials of the human situation, it moves away from them.”¹¹ This critique is still fully valid and does not imply that anthropology is not scientific in its pursuit of detailed particularities. However, it does imply that the rise of the cognitive sciences, largely enabled by new (less intrusive)

observational techniques, while of great importance, cannot be expected to answer many of the important questions that are asked in anthropology (not yet, and maybe never). Both Freud and Lévi-Strauss believed that a science of society and of the mind would ultimately rest on an understanding of the brain, and there are good reasons for believing that, but as of now there is hardly a productive way brain research can be connected to the interpretation of ethnographic materials. Our human nature is shared, but our languages, beliefs, practices are immensely diverse.

On the other hand, there is also no reason to essentialize cultural differences, as is done in the recent assumption of radical ontologies. Philippe Descola, for instance, comes up with a fourfold taxonomy of ontologies, differentiated in their assumptions of physicality (what is believed about bodies) and interiority (feelings and beliefs both inside oneself and in relation to other intentional beings).¹² The problem with this kind of taxonomy is that it captures only part of what is clearly in most societies a debate about relations between humans and things that is constantly changing, and not a characterization of an entire culture's way of thinking. For example, Buddhism's emphasis on ahimsa (not killing, not harming) emerges in the context of a radical critique of Brahman sacrifice but never comes to dominate the debate entirely, so that several ontological options remain available. There is certainly no sense that the participants in such debates cannot understand each other because of the radical differences in their ontologies. In fact, structuralist approaches have never shown much interest in the historical and fragmented debates that characterize society.

Surely there is a coherence in cultural debate, and there are great and sometimes fundamental differences between the kinds of debates that are going on, for example, among the ancient Greeks and the ancient Chinese. As the classicist G. E. R. Lloyd, who tries to compare these two worldviews, helpfully puts it: where the Greeks would have seen things, the Chinese would have seen events.¹³ This quite substantial philosophical difference does not prevent us, however, from understanding both points of view and even choosing between them. At the same time one needs to recognize that Lloyd may overstretch his point, as not all Greeks see "things" instead of "events," since the processual nature of things is also emphasized by some Greeks as in the famous *panta rhei*, everything flows. While these are internal debates in civilizations, it is the characteristic of our common age that we are more than ever interacting with different worldviews in shared spaces. While there is quite a scope for misunderstanding and error, this

does not seem to be an obstacle to many forms of communication, such as travel and trade. Philosophical arguments within civilizations like China or Greece should not be taken to characterize the entirety of these civilizations, since they are often only held by some social actors and always subject to debate.

Surely, the sinologist Edward Slingerland is right in arguing that the early Chinese did not lack concepts of body-mind dualism but wrong in thinking that he has found anything significant.¹⁴ His entire debunking of the way leading sinologists have assumed a radical difference between Western (dualist) and Chinese (holistic) thought by showing evidence that dualism also existed in China is based on the premise that one can reduce complex arguments to simple oppositions. What is understood as “mind” or “body” has been subject to much too complex arguments in both the West and in China to be simply captured under the terms *holism* or *dualism*. It cannot be a surprise to anyone that Chinese make a difference between the living and the dead and that Confucius, cited by Slingerland, thinks that the dead have lost something that is basic (*ben*本). That this implies that Confucius made a sharp distinction between body and mind is an altogether unsupported claim by Slingerland and can only be argued by a deep hermeneutical engagement with the Confucian corpus. Slingerland, however, has opted for a radically different approach, namely to get rid of possible bias in selecting our textual evidence by “a keyword-focused random sampling of passages from the pre-Qin corpus.”¹⁵

To me this describes the problem of abstract generalization in a nutshell. Slingerland seems to think that one can get at the meaning of a textual corpus by selecting one term (in this case, “heart,” 心) and mechanically coding it in its relation to, say, the body. If this would get us at the development of early Chinese thinking it would be great, but in fact it only gets us at a corroboration of Slingerland’s theory of mind, which indicates a universal human propensity that ascribes intentionality to mind-possessing agents and mindless things. In short, the Chinese also have a Mind. This does away with the intricate arguments in philosophical texts in the West and in China about “intentionality” that are unresolved and thus still engage us,¹⁶ not to mention the anthropological complications in interpreting ritual practices in both the West and China.

This book makes the claim that it is fruitful to continue the comparative approach initiated a century ago by Mauss and Weber without striving for unified theories.¹⁷ It resists the growing tendency to define science as

a method of model making based on variables and quantitative samples and to portray ethnography and historical sociology as “unscientific” since they do not strive for generality. Many of these battles have been fought before, but the ascendancy of model making in sociology and of cognitive evolutionism in anthropology make them again inevitable. My own work over the last decades on nationalism and religion raises the issue of “generality” also at another level, since both nationalism and religion are totalizing ideologies.¹⁸ The difficulties are both at the level of the object of study and at the level of method and theoretical representation. For instance, Partha Chatterjee has eloquently shown the contradictory fragments that constitute anticolonial nationalism in Bengal, but his neat division of spiritual and material domains in nationalist imaginations again ends up reifying structural oppositions.¹⁹ In the face of such ideologies, one needs to make an extra effort to capture how removed they are from the much more fragmented and contradictory realities people inhabit. Obviously, this is in itself a general claim and, just as obviously, one constantly makes general claims. This, however, is different from the demand that a case study of, say, a particular region of China should be generalizable to all of China if it is to be of any value. It might be more important to show the region’s specific differences from other parts of China. To give an ethnographic example, the sinologist Kenneth Dean has in a number of important publications on his fieldwork in Putian, a region in Fujian (Southwest China), shown the existence of a regional system of ritual alliances that seems to have connected the region more with Southeast Asia than with Central China.²⁰ This evidence goes against the grain in Chinese studies toward showing a Confucian civilization that unifies all of China. It is not that such regions are entirely separated from the rest of the Mainland, but the point is that they are in conversation with the rest without being assimilated or entirely unified. In one of the rituals that Dean shows in a recent documentary, a Confucian master is incorporated in local ritual instead of local ritual being incorporated in the Confucian worldview.²¹ Often such diversity is only recognized in the case of ethnic minorities, but the Putianese are so-called Han, although they speak a language that is entirely unintelligible for Mandarin-speakers or Minnanhua-speakers who live in adjacent regions. Again, one can see the power of ideologies of unity that are replicated in scholarly work.

Assumptions of civilizational unity are also found in the study of India. The caste system has been often understood as a “system” that integrates

a wide variety of peoples with different languages and practices. Again, a number of historical studies have shown that while there are castes everywhere in India, it is hard to see it as an integrated system that organizes Indian society as a whole.²² There is not such a system, and principles of kinship and value intersect with structures of opportunity and mobility to produce “castes” like Rajputs and Brahmans. Today’s India shows a highly diversified picture in which caste, class, regional identity, and transnational mobility are combined with Hindu nationalism to reproduce inequality in education, health, social services, and, ultimately, politics. Similarly, the idea that Sanskrit civilization provides unity has been argued, for instance by M. N. Srinivas, but has also shown to be highly ideological and “a view from above” that discounts the great differences in Sanskrit traditions that have developed in different parts of India.

My own work has focused on India for a long time but has over the last few years developed a comparative perspective on India and China. This kind of work is “secondary,” in the sense that it tries to make sense of a wide variety of arguments by historians and anthropologists without going into the interpretation of primary sources and fieldwork data, unless one’s own fieldwork or historical research contributes significantly to the problem selected. The growth of specialist knowledge on these societies has grown exponentially since Weber wrote his studies in the early twentieth century, and the Weberian comparative enterprise to discover the unique features of Western historical developments has been replaced by a noncomparative urge to make sense of national societies on their own. The marginalization of comparative analysis is particularly glaring in history, the national discipline par excellence.²³ However, it has also become glaring in anthropology, which was supposed to be comparative from its beginning. As I will argue at some length later in the book, there is no escape from comparison when we deal with “other societies” as historical sociologists or anthropologists, since we are always already translating into Western languages what we find elsewhere, using concepts that are derived from Western historical experience to interpret other societies and other histories. It is therefore necessary to engage one’s implicit comparison and make it more explicit. At another level, comparison should highlight certain aspects of a society that are not given enough attention by specialists and are highlighted by the study of another society. India and China are huge agrarian societies with deep civilizational histories that go through similar transformations in the interaction with modern Western imperialisms. The pathways and

solutions chosen by actors in these societies are very different, and their comparison helps us to understand them better, namely as historical options rather than the inevitable outcomes of their cultures. My work seeks to help develop a historical sociology that applies an anthropological perspective and is based on historical materials as well as fieldwork that raises new questions and highlights differential patterns and their causes.

At this point let me summarize briefly what is in my view the comparative advantage of anthropology in the pursuit of cultural comparisons, which I will seek to demonstrate and illustrate in the rest of the book:

—Anthropology is primarily an engagement with “difference” and “diversity” and focuses on problems of cultural translation. As such it offers a critique of the universalization of Western models and provides thus a basis for a comparative historical sociology. Ethnographical data derived from fieldwork form a big part of anthropology, but the study of other kinds of material, historical, textual, and visual, also benefits from an anthropological perspective.

—A necessarily fragmentary approach to social life, in which the intensive study of a fragment is used to gain a perspective on a larger whole, offers a greater potential for social science than the analysis of large data, undergirded by game theory and rational choice theory. In chapter 2 I will seek to substantiate this claim, and in the rest of the book I will illustrate it with a number of examples. One should not confuse this attention to “the micro” with any form of methodological individualism that assumes that “the macro” emerges from the actions and motivations of individual actors. The study of a fragment cannot be generalized to the level of “society as a whole” or to Weberian “ideal-types.” The construction of the individual as a rational actor in order to be able to make large-scale generalizations is part of a modern ideology of individualism and the very opposite of a comparative approach as proposed here.

—What I will call *generalism*, namely the assumption of the integration of nations and civilizations or the assumption of society as an integrated whole is different from anthropological *holism*, which implies the drawing of larger inferences from the intensive study of fragments of social life. The latter approach derives from Durkheim’s emphasis of studying “social facts,” which he conceived to be different from other

facts, and especially from Mauss's focus on the "total social fact," which is simultaneously legal, economic, religious, and political. Mauss's famous example of such a "total social fact" is "gift-exchange," a phenomenon that he used to elucidate important aspects of social life by comparing a number of very different societies. The other major inspiration is Weber, who tried to understand the specificity of historical developments through comparison.

—Anthropology has always taken the body (its symbolism, its functions, its gender) as a focal point of the study of society. However, from Durkheim onward, the anthropological contribution to the study of embodied practice emphasizes the social and provides a critique of sociobiological determinism by showing how it is full of modern Euro-American prejudice. An anthropological emphasis on "the body" and its disciplining requires an attention to configurations of power that cannot be replaced by psychological experiments or tests.

From a methodological point of view, the intensive study of a slice of human reality in relation to what Durkheim calls "the representation" of that slice allows one to question many assumptions that come out of the preoccupations of Western common sense. For instance, as Webb Keane demonstrates, the conceptualization of the relation between humans and material objects in Sumba, Indonesia, is so radically different from how Calvinist missionaries understand this relation that the conversion process is one of constant miscommunication and translation.²⁴ If that slice can capture immediate attention of a general audience (say, Chinese gamblers in Macao and their notions of "good fortune" and speculation), anthropology approximates investigative journalism in observation and description, but the difference lies in anthropology's conceptual contribution to deeper interpretations of risk and uncertainty as aspects of larger cultural wholes. Some contemporary work, like the sociologist Eric Klinenberg's writing on a heat wave in Chicago or on Hurricane Sandy in New York, is good journalism, but what makes it also good sociology is that it proposes some theoretical understandings of the social responses to climate challenges.²⁵ Comparative sociology comes in when one goes beyond the analysis of American responses to climate challenges and compares it to, say, responses to earthquakes in Turkey, Iran, or China. What I would see as the anthropological contribution is the analysis of grief, pain, and lament as part of a holistic interpretation of what is, variably, seen as the divide between nature and

society and between human agency and “acts of God” in different societies. A good ethnographic example is Eric Mueggler’s work on the ways a Yi community in Southwest China deals with a history of violent state formation, focusing on “rotating headman-ship,” a major political aspect of Yi society. Mueggler is able to show the poetics of local memory that summons up and exorcises the terror of the past.²⁶ Obviously, nobody would claim that this picture would be generalizable to China as a whole or even the Yi as a whole. That is clearly not the purpose of this kind of work, which nevertheless provides the reader with a penetrating account of a local understanding of historical events like the Great Cultural Revolution. What larger problem is addressed through one’s study depends on the fragment one focuses on and the research questions one asks. For example, Jonathan Parry’s excellent ethnography of Hindu death rituals cannot be used to explain the rise of Hindu nationalism, but it gives us an important picture of ideas of death and regeneration of life in India that are comparable with ideas and practices elsewhere.²⁷

Comparison is, in my view, in the first place a question not of the right research design, the correct choice of cases to be compared (the “what” and “how” to compare), although this is obviously important, but of an awareness of the conceptual difficulties in entering “other” life worlds. That “otherness” should not be exaggerated, since everyone is in some way interacting and communicating with everyone else. Moreover, anthropology is highly equipped to engage problems of translation and of bridging different semantic universes. Its contribution is therefore not to utter always the qualifier *but* when social scientists are generalizing, but rather to contribute to radically new and open ways of understanding reality. This is an uphill struggle and against the spirit of the time (*Zeitgeist*), which is deeply convinced of universality and generalizability and the ultimate genetic basis of all and everything. Nevertheless, it is a struggle worth pursuing.

What would be an example of a “fragmentary approach” that allows us to ask questions about a larger whole? It might be helpful for the reader if I give a concrete example. I am inspired here by Sydney Mintz’s brilliant exposé of the story of sugar, which connects a seemingly marginal commodity (a fragment of social reality) to the emergence of world capitalism, including the production of sugar in plantations across the world and the increasing use of sugar in Britain. Given my interest in the comparative analysis of India and China, it would be tea and opium that could provide such an example.

When I came to North India in the early 1970s I drank a lot of tea. Tea was available everywhere. It was cooked with milk and sugar and thus pretty nutritious. In fact, in my fieldwork it was the breakfast that my host served me every morning at 6 a.m. and the only thing I would get till 11 or 12 a.m., when the first meal (of two) was served. Alcohol was not available in the Hindu pilgrimage center where I did my fieldwork.²⁸ More in general, drinking alcohol was a thing for men in secluded booths or at private parties and mostly not social, but to get drunk. It was also seen as a foreign thing. In my first passport I had a license to buy alcohol in the dry (alcohol-free) state of Tamil Nadu, mentioning that I as a foreigner needed alcohol. For the rest, drinking country liquor (and smoking *beedi*) was for the lowest castes, and my Brahman hosts in North India frowned on it. They would see it as habits that belonged to lower natures and would reproduce lower natures. So tea was the drink, and it was safe, because it was cooked. Only once in a while *sharbat* would be served, a sweet rosewater drink, or some fizzy soft drink like Limca. Coca-Cola was banned in the 1970s, as it is again in some Indian states today. Since tea was the only available real universal social drink (coffee was only served in elite coffeehouses for men in cities), I took it for granted that it had been in India forever. Moreover, I was aware that tea was produced in Assam, Darjeeling, and Ceylon, since we drank tea with those names in Holland. I never wondered why Indians mostly used the relatively cheap British tea brand Lipton.

These days of naiveté are over. I now realize that the tea with sugar that I drank at home in Holland had only become popular in the eighteenth century and that the quintessential British ritual of afternoon tea is of similar recent vintage. Tea plantations in India were started by the East India Company in the 1820s to break the monopoly of the Chinese and to produce tea for British consumption. Only in postcolonial India did tea become the widespread drink that I found in the 1970s. Today, 70 percent of India's huge tea production is consumed in India itself; it is hard to imagine India without tea. But it is even harder to imagine that it is such a recent phenomenon.

China's tea is a whole other story. Tea is made from the young leaves of what were originally trees that were for production reasons reduced to shrubs. There are all kinds of speculation about the origins and development of tea ("bitter drink," called *tu* or *ming*). The historian Barend ter Haar argues that in the eighth century tea became a replacement for alcohol in the context of the rise of Buddhism (propagating *bujiu* 不酒, do not drink,

alongside *busha* 捕杀, do not kill) and of the emergence of the imperial exams, where one needed to keep oneself awake.²⁹ Tea's popularity grew to the extent that it became a major part of the tributary system. That tea is a useful alternative to alcohol is clear to anyone who has visited China, but how successful an alternative it is seems less clear. I have not participated in a banquet in which tea has replaced alcohol, although women are allowed to stick to tea, and my recollection of visiting several Yi groups in Sichuan is blurred and soaked in alcohol. Men can hardly refuse to drink alcohol if they want to show themselves to be masculine and trustworthy partners in an exchange, while women have an easier time.

Anyway, this is the baked cha that we know as tea today, and obviously besides smoothening social relations it has all kinds of medicinal purpose and effects (different teas, different effects). Whatever the case may be, tea is a Chinese commodity that became highly sought after by Western seafaring nations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and most prominently by the British after they had defeated Dutch sea power at the end of the eighteenth century. Before that, the Dutch had been the most important tea traders, and tea is still an important drink in Holland. After that, Britannia ruled the waves and the tea. Tea was the most important item in the China trade, and since the Chinese did not need much from Britain in exchange, it was paid for with silver. Sidney Mintz observes that tea, coffee, and chocolate were all introduced in the third quarter of the seventeenth century, but the British contribution was to add sugar to these bitter substances.³⁰ He suggests that tea absorbed sugar more readily than coffee and that was the reason that the sugar planters promoted tea. It is indeed striking how much tea came to define British drinking habits much more than it did Continental ones. The Germans, French, and Italians prefer to drink coffee. Tea in Britain was at first expensive and only drunk by the elite, but gradually in the eighteenth century the working classes, who had beer as their regular beverage and source of nutrition, also became hooked. The government levied taxes on tea, and this became a major source of income. In Britain tea became a substantial part of the economy (much less so in China). Tea was 80 percent of the British East India Company's turnover. Mintz shows how dramatically sugar and tea changed the drinking and food habits of the British, but also how crucial these imports from the tropics were in the transformation of Britain's economy. At the same time he shows the rise of an entirely new labor regime, built on slavery, to produce sugar. Consumption and production go hand and hand. Here is a powerful

quote from William Ukers, a historian of tea and coffee, about the British East India Company:

Its early adventures in the Far East brought it to China, whose tea was destined later to furnish the means of governing India. During the heyday of its prosperity John Company maintained a monopoly of the tea trade with China, controlled the supply, limited the quantity imported into England, and thus fixed the price. It constituted not only the world's greatest tea monopoly but also the source of inspiration for the first English propaganda on behalf of a beverage. It was so powerful that it precipitated dietetic revolution in England, changing the British people from a nation of potential coffee drinkers to a nation of tea drinkers, and all within the space of a few years. It was a formidable rival of states and empires, with power to acquire territory, coin money, command fortresses and troops, form alliances, make war and peace, and exercise both civil and criminal jurisdiction.³¹

The trade imbalance between Britain and China was, obviously, something the British tried to change, especially with the exponential growth of the tea trade. The solution was opium, which was grown in India after it had come more and more under the control of the British, who had defeated the French. The Qing government had forbidden the sale of opium and tried to stop British illegal trade. The 20,283 boxes of opium that the Qing official Lin Zexu ordered to be thrown into the ocean in 1839 (the cause of the First Opium War) had an estimated value of \$9 million. After the opium wars, importation increased, for example, to sixty thousand boxes in 1860. Already between 1830 and 1860 the value of the opium exported to China was larger than the value of the tea and silk imported from China.³² In 1833 the British government took over the opium monopoly from John Company.

Famously, the Qing government did not think that China needed any imports from outside China, as illustrated in the following quotation from a letter sent by Emperor Qianlong to King George III: "Our heavenly Kingdom has everything that it needs in abundance and there is no lack of any products within its boundaries. Therefore there is no need to import goods from Barbarians in exchange for our goods."³³ It is less clear and a subject of considerable debate among economic historians how much the Qing economy needed silver from Britain. Whatever may have been the case, the

flow of silver to China came to an end with the growing exchange of opium for tea.

British trade and imperial expansion went hand in hand. The First Opium War was planned by the trader William Jardine of the opium importing firm Jardine, Matheson, and Company. Jardine directly advised Palmerston in 1839–40 how to conduct the war. On the Chinese side, trading guilds (Hong) were active but less able to influence state policies. While in Britain the tax on tea was a considerable part of the state's income, such tax was very marginal in China. The Daoguang emperor blocked the use of a harbor in Fujian, where most of the tea came from, although that would have made costs ten times lower, and therefore everything was shipped via Kanton until the First Opium War. The purpose of that war was to force the Chinese to open more harbors close to the places of production. At the same time, the British developed plans to circumvent the Chinese monopoly on growing tea by starting plantations in Assam. They used indentured labor under penal sanction, which Hugh Tinker has called "a new system of slavery" and, which after the abolition of slavery, came to characterize not only plantations in Assam but plantations all over the British Empire.³⁴ The Indian populations one finds today in Mauritius, Fiji, the Guyanas, Trinidad, Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa are largely descendants of these indentured laborers. This was totally different from the small family businesses that grew tea in China. It was therefore the British imperial system that led to plantations and the conditions of slavery, not the cash crop itself.³⁵ In general, small farmers remained dominant in China until the twentieth century, as is still observable in the tea-growing area of Anxi in Fujian.

Despite the creation of tea plantations in India and Ceylon, the British still needed increasing imports of tea from China and wanted to pay for it with opium from India. Opium was produced in Bengal and Bihar (called Patna opium) and in West India (called Malwa opium). Besides raw cotton and later cotton yarn, it was the most important export item to China. Since the trade in opium was forbidden by the Qing government, both Indian and British private traders played a significant role. The Indian ports were Calcutta and Bombay. The Indian traders were mostly Parsis, Jains, and Hindu Marwaris, as well as some Baghdadi Jews, like David Sassoon and his sons, who were to play a significant role in the rise not only of colonial Bombay but also of Shanghai. The first Bombay traders to go to China

were the Jivanjis, who adopted the surname Readymoney. Many of the big merchant families of today's Bombay, like the Wadias and the Tatas, built their fortune in the China trade. In Bombay, the Parsi merchant Jamsethjee Jeejeebhoy had a special relation with the aforementioned William Jardine, the architect of the First Opium War. Jamsethjee built a fleet of cargo ships to serve the trade, and in 1842 he was knighted for his leadership in business and philanthropy.³⁶

As argued before, Indians did not drink tea but slowly got hooked on it during the nineteenth century and became the world's largest tea producers. Indians did know opium, but I have never come across any research showing that opium was a big problem in India. When I did my fieldwork, there was opium available in government-run shops, as was hashish. The anthropologist McKim Marriott has a hilarious account of the Holi (spring) festival that is Bakhtinian in nature; he was given *bhang* (milk laced with hashish) and consequently was unable to write any field notes.³⁷ Despite this widespread use of intoxicants, I have never encountered a widespread problem with it. The great addiction is alcohol. General consensus has it that opium addiction was a huge problem for the Chinese and that it was created by the British to solve their trade imbalance with China. However, in Frank Dikötter's engaging inaugural lecture at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, he calls China "Patient Zero" of opium addiction and then goes on to bust the myth of China's opium addiction.³⁸

In nineteenth-century England opium and laudanum were used against pain. It was not seen as causing widespread addiction, and in fact people could use it in regular quantities throughout life without creating addiction. This was also the case in China, as Dikötter argues: "Men and women would smoke a pipe or two at festivals and ceremonies several times a year without ever becoming regular users. R. A. Jamieson, a doctor in Shanghai, noted at the end of the nineteenth century that if those who smoked a few pipes on the occasion of a festival such as a marriage were to be counted, few adult males could be excluded, although regular consumers were very rare. A British consul based in Hainan also reported that "although nearly everyone uses it . . . one never meets the opium-skeleton so vividly depicted in philanthropic works, rather the reverse—a hardy peasantry, healthy and energetic."³⁹

Dikötter argues that the wide spread of opium (鴉片, *yapian*) in China from the eighteenth century depended on smoking. Tobacco, found in America and introduced in China in the late sixteenth century, became the

ideal companion of tea (烟茶, *yancha*). Opium was for a time laced with tobacco, but this combination was dropped later. To smoke pure Patna opium from expensive pipes became a sign of high status and wealth. Smoking was a social experience, and opium houses, like teahouses, were sites of male sociability. The other reason to use opium was medicinal, as in England, against fever and especially diarrhea. If it was so harmless, why did it become the object of narcophobia? For this Dikötter suggests a Foucauldian theory, pointing at the rise of the medical profession, which wanted to monopolize opium, and the emergence of anti-imperial nationalism with its discourse of enslavement and physical weakness. In the 1940s, however, the Communists in Yan'an still used the opium production and trade to finance its struggle against the Kuomintang, but once they gained power in 1949, they stamped it out in three years. Cigarette smoking, however, was stimulated. Not by chance, therefore, China is now the world's leading tobacco producer and consumer. Dikötter's debunking story of narcophobia is entertaining and partly persuasive, but he underestimates the ravaging effects of opiates on some parts of the population.⁴⁰ It is difficult to produce a seamless narrative of the pathways of opium.

What to make of these stories of tea and opium? A political economy narrative seems the most convincing and rather obvious. Sidney Mintz is the pioneer of such a narrative, which focuses on sugar and world capitalism. The commodity shapes the nature of production and consumption and connects worlds that were hitherto unconnected. The meanings given to such a commodity are secondary to the force of capital. Whatever disputes about details there may be, this is a compelling narrative, but it does not satisfy, for it gives us no access to the ways people shaped their understanding of these world historical processes. This is precisely Marshall Sahlins's critique of the "mode of production" approach in Eric Wolf's celebrated *Europe and the People without History*.⁴¹ Sahlins examines the indeed quite fascinating refusal of the Qing emperors to be impressed or interested in the products of the British, thus only accepting silver in exchange for tea.⁴²

As is typical of Sahlins's approach to intercultural encounters, he emphasizes worldviews and thus focuses on the Qing understanding of Lord Macartney's visit to the Chinese emperor. According to Sahlins, the emperor had indeed everything in his *yuanmingyuan* (圆明园, gardens of perfect brightness) at the old summer palace, which was partly destroyed in 1860 during the Second Opium War. This was a huge curiosities cabinet like

the ones princes had in Europe, but much bigger. This was the collection of tributes that signified the sovereign power over the world that was enjoyed by the emperor. As Sahlins sees it, “by setting China apart while at the same time making it the central source of world order, this theory of civilization lends itself equally to projects of imperial expansion and cultural withdrawal, to hegemonic inclusions or xenophobic exclusions, according to the contingencies of the situation.”⁴³ It was not that the Qing were “self-sufficient” but that they found the barbarians too far away and thus too difficult to control.

What we have here in Sahlins’s analysis are different cosmologies that clash. In work done by James Hevia and others, this cosmological analysis is complemented by an interpretation of ritual performance, centering on the question whether Lord Macartney had performed the *koutou* (kowitz). Hevia focuses on the “guest ritual” (宾礼, *binli*), which itself is the basis of power, as in Geertz’s beautiful summation of Balinese politics: “Power serves pomp, not pomp power.”⁴⁴ Where Sahlins puts the emphasis on cosmology, Hevia puts the emphasis on ritual (*li*), but, as both authors would probably agree, these two belong to each other. In the cultural theorist Lydia Liu’s interpretation of the Treaty of Tianjin after the Second Opium War in 1858, the emphasis is on the translation of the word *yi* (夷), which the British insisted referred to barbarians, while the Chinese insisted that it only referred to non-Han people.⁴⁵ This can help us to see that what we have here are not just incommensurable ontologies, but in fact communications, negotiations, and trading commodities, while trading insults. It all has to do with notions of hierarchy and precedence, but these notions are not independent of power relations. On both the Qing and the British sides, “honor” and hierarchy played an important role, but they were part of political economy, not separate from it. To me it makes little sense to think that the Qing and the British did not understand each other. However, it is clear that they had very different objectives and interests. The Qing did not want to enter into the Age of Commerce on British terms, but that does not mean that they were not interested in trade. Moreover, at many levels it was of course not the Beijing or the Westminster courts that were central to actual trade but local traders and local officials and, very importantly, illegal traders. In conclusion, one might suggest that following the pathways of commodities is a very useful heuristic device, but it is not sufficient if one wants to understand the changes of political economy. These commodities are embedded in social relations and ideas of sociability. The fact that

opium is produced in India but does not define international relations or political economy in the way it seems to have done in China shows already that it is not the commodity itself that provides us with a full explanation. That opium cannot have been the sole reason for “the opium wars” seems clear from the fact that it was really after the successful establishment of tea plantations in India that the British felt impelled to force the Chinese to open their economy and society.

This excursion into the interpretation of two fragments of the world of trade in commodities, tea and opium, should not be taken to imply that commodities and their pathways are the only or even privileged examples of a study of the fragment, nor that the world system of capitalism is necessarily “the whole” where the analysis should lead us. In the rest of the book I shall give a number of examples from a range of topics in which the study of the fragment leads us to ask larger questions without coming to generalizations.

In part I (chapters 1 and 2) this book offers a theoretical critique of increasingly mainstream generalizing methods and theories in the social sciences, specifically quantitative methodologies in sociology and political science, as well as rational choice theory on the one hand and cognitive evolutionism in psychological anthropology on the other, as well as a critique of unreflexive uses of the concept of “civilization” to signify unity or essentialized ontological difference, which is the other side of the same coin. On the positive side, this book wants to argue that societies are historically evolving: that one can discern historical pathways in their development, but that these developments are also open to a considerable extent. Anthropology studies specific social configurations that are in specific interaction with outside forces. To understand these interactions anthropology focuses continuous double reflection on one’s concepts and on the ways the history of interaction has affected the social configurations one studies. The comparative analysis that I propose here critically engages and carries forward programs developed by Marcel Mauss and Max Weber. This implies both appreciation and critique of the ways those programs have been carried forward by the Maussian Louis Dumont and the Weberian Shmuel Eisenstadt and Charles Taylor. The general themes I explore here show the relative advantage of anthropological comparison in relation to forms of sociological “generalism,” and especially approaches based on “rational choice” theory, the concept of civilization and its comparative consequences, and the comparison of forms of social exclusion.

Chapter 1 explores the advantage that particular forms of anthropology have for comparative analysis and seeks to ground the study of the fragment theoretically. Anthropology is the only social science that reflects on Western ethnocentrism and takes the problem of translation seriously. The chapter gives a detailed critique of quantitative analysis of nationalism, of evolutionary cognitive understandings of religion, and shows the superiority of a more interpretive anthropology in the study of nationalism and religion. It thus gives not only a critique of some existing approaches but also a demonstration of preferable perspectives.

Chapter 2 argues that market theories of religion that are based on the notion of “rational choice” do not contribute to our understanding of the transcendental value of money and markets in our social life. Such theories not only depend on a too narrow interpretation of “rationality” but also neglect the importance of enchantment in financial transactions, consumption patterns, and religious life. The chapter addresses studies of religion in China and South Asia to illustrate its theoretical points.

Part II (chapters 3 and 4) provides positive examples of the proposed approach, focusing on the exclusionary use of the notion of civilization. Chapter 3 goes into the problem of civilization and who belongs to it. Like culture, civilization is a complex and highly contested concept, since it operates at the level of not only scholarly discourse but also common-sense understandings of hierarchy and difference. The focus in this chapter is on the exclusion of Muslim minorities in Europe, India, and China and the civilizational legitimation of that exclusion. The chapter highlights the similarities and differences in these patterns of exclusion.

Chapter 4 goes to the heart of civilization practice, namely the religious worship of images in India and China and especially the recurrent campaigns to destroy them. It examines the variegated histories of iconoclasm in India and China and the problem of sovereignty that is central to them. The chapter moves on to discuss the extent to which modern urban planning can be understood as a form of iconoclasm.

Part III goes on to develop the comparison of exclusionary practices that are inherent in the notion of civilization. Chapter 5 focuses on those who live in the mountainous margins of civilizational heartlands and, today, in the border areas of modern nation-states. These peoples have been the typical subjects of anthropological research, because of their remote, relatively isolated, location, the small scale of their societies, and their cultural differences from the civilizations that are adjacent to them in the plains. The

chapter critiques forms of romanticization of those who live in the mountain areas that connect India and China and attempts to give a contextualized picture of anthropological thinking about hill people in this area.

Chapter 6 discusses why Indian middle classes seem to have no compelling interest in improving sanitation for the poor, despite the fact that their own health is affected due to their close proximity to the poor. It examines some cultural theories of attitudes toward “the dirty outside world” and argues that these theories ignore the importance of caste and especially untouchability. It further argues that one cannot expect the poor themselves to improve their condition through participatory development, considering their internal fragmentation and the conditions of slavery under which many of them live. It compares the Indian situation with some theories about what happened in Europe with sanitation (and the well-understood self-interest in the common good) and in the United States with the abolishment of slavery. It ends with the revolutionary transformation of China in dealing with the life conditions of the poor.

Finally, the conclusion takes up the problem of methodological nationalism in much of social science and the way out that the comparative method in anthropology offers.