

## Interview

# How can anthropology become directly involved in Eurasian studies?<sup>1</sup>

ZHANG Fan and WANG Mingming

On March 29th, 2017, at 6 pm, Wang Mingming, Professor of Anthropology at Peking University, delivered a speech titled *Some turns in a 'journey to the West': Cosmological proliferation in an anthropology of Eurasia<sup>2</sup>*, as part of the series of the Radcliffe-Brown Memorial Lecture in Social Anthropology at the British Academy. The Radcliffe-Brown Memorial Lecture was established in 1972 by the British Academy for the Humanities and Social Sciences and the Association of Social Anthropologists, with the aim of inviting outstanding anthropologists to deliver speeches, leading and promoting the development of the world's anthropology by inquiring into and discussing the big issues in the discipline. This was the first time that a non-Western anthropologist was invited as a speaker. In his speech, professor Wang Mingming discussed the research achievements of anthropology in different core ethnographic regions, suggesting the need to connect the anthropological theory of civilisation with the study of the interactions between Eurasian civilisations starting from the interactive relationships between cosmologies, as well as the need to borrow again from the relationship theory developed in the past in the studies on the so-called primitive ethnic groups of the "Southern Hemisphere", in order to get a better grasp on the dynamic features of the interactions between Eurasian civilisations, and to understand the significance

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: This interview was conducted in Chinese — 专访 | 王铭铭：人类学如何直接介入欧亚研究,张帆、王铭铭, 三联学术通讯 2017-04-10 [Special interview: How can anthropology become directly involved in Eurasian studies? HANG Fan (张帆) and WANG Mingming (王铭铭). Originally published on 10 April 2017, *Sanlian Academic Bulletin*]. Many thanks for the authors' recommendation and permission. Special thanks to Costanza Pernigotti, the then Assistant Editor of *JCCP*, who translated it into English.

<sup>2</sup> See: *Journal of the British Academy*, 5, 201–250. DOI <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/005.201> Posted 9 October 2017. ©The British Academy 2017 [https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/1021/08\\_Wang\\_-\\_Some\\_turns\\_in\\_a\\_journey\\_to\\_the\\_West\\_0.pdf](https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/1021/08_Wang_-_Some_turns_in_a_journey_to_the_West_0.pdf).

of “cultural complexity”, creating an anthropology “of considering others in one’s place”.

We are publishing the transcript of an exclusive interview we had with Wang Mingming after the speech, as well as an abstract of his speech.

Wang Mingming is an Anthropologist and Professor at Peking University. His academic interests include the space-times of urban rituals, rural communities, historical anthropology, theory of object-subject relations, ethnology, Chinese Occidentalism, comparative mythology, and social theory. His published works include *Grassroots Charisma* (with Stephan Feuchtwang, 2002), *The Historic Predicament of the Sinification of a Western Science* (*Xixue “Zhongguohua” de lishi kunjing*, 2005), *Mind and Matter Travel* (*Xin yu yu you*, 2006), *The Intermediaries: “Zang-Yi Corridor” and the Reformation of Anthropology* (*Zhongjian juan: Zang-Yi zoulang yu renleixue de zai gousi*, 2008), *Empire and Local Worlds: A Chinese Model for Long-Term Historical Anthropology* (*Diguo yu defang shijie*, 2009), *Biography and Anthropology* (*Renshengshi yu releixue*, 2010), *Beyond the “New Warring States”: The Theories on Chinese Nationality of Wu Wenzao and Fei Xiaotong* (*Chaoyue “xin zhanguo”: Wu Wenzao, Fei Xiaotong de Zhonghua minzu lilun*, 2012), and *The West as the Other: A Genealogy of Chinese Occidentalism* (English edition, 2014).

### **How anthropology can become directly involved in Eurasian studies**

Interviewer: Zhang Fan (Doctoral Candidate at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Germany)

Interviewee: Wang Mingming (Professor of Anthropology at Peking University)

**Zang:** Professor Wang, first of all, congratulations on your becoming the invited speaker of the 2017 Radcliffe-Brown Lecture! Of course, for you going abroad to deliver lectures is nothing new. However, this time you were invited by the British Academy to give this speech, which is a rather extraordinary occurrence, because this is one of the highest honors in the world for anthropology. Is your transition from a Westward pursuit of knowledge in the past to the present “Westward propagation” an indication of some kind of transformation of the discipline on a global scale?

**Wang:** I was rather surprised to receive the invitation letter from the person in charge of the lecture series at the British Academy. As an anthropological researcher, I was familiar with the Radcliffe-Brown Memorial Lectures. I knew that the forum was created in 1972 by the Association of Social Anthropologists and the British Academy to commemorate A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, one of the founders of modern anthropology, and that many of those who delivered these lectures were representative figures of the Western academic world who made important contributions to the development of the discipline. Among them, there were anthropologists of the generation before mine, whom I all hold in high esteem, such

as Raymond Firth and Max Gluckman, Edmund Leach and Jack Goody from the UK, Louis Dumont and Don Sperber from France, Stanley Tambiah and Marshall Shalins from the USA, and so on. If we look at the new generation in recent years, we find outstanding anthropologists like Tim Ingold and Philippe Descola in this list. I have learnt so much from the works of these different generations of anthropologists, and I would have never imagined that one day I would have the opportunity be part of the same cohort. For a scholar dedicated to the anthropological cause, this is undoubtedly a special honor. As for whether this lecture of mine signifies a “Westward propagation”, as you have called it, in my view we should not use these words. In order to “propagate a doctrine”, you must first have a “doctrine”. And as an “anthropological circle”, can we really “achieve a doctrine” after a short period of twenty or thirty years? The probabilities are very small in my opinion. What does this unusual decision by the British Academy imply? Does it show that we have reached an unprecedented position in the global structure of our discipline? Only time will tell.

**Zhang:** If I understand this correctly, in your lecture you at once strive to search for an anthropological path for Eurasian civilisational studies, and endeavor to thread together Eurasian and non-Eurasian cosmological studies. You have criticized the dualistic worldviews that are popular in the anthropological world, including self and other, East and West, North and South, centre and periphery, civilized and primitive, and so on. In order to downplay these dualistic worldviews, in your speech you have combined the topics of Western and primitive societies, ancient Greece and China, Eurasia and “the South”. Furthermore, you have also compared the views of Hegel and Lévi-Strauss on the divide between the “uncivilized cultures” of the American continent and Eurasian civilisations, pointing out that these two thinkers reached the same dualistic worldview starting from diametrically opposed standpoints.

**Wang:** Yes, during my speech I jumped around from place to place, without following the so-called “ethnographic” rules, and in doing so, I wanted to expose the problems existing in the “complex of primitivism” that existed in anthropology in the past. In my opinion, this kind of “complex” derived from an inappropriate “view of the other”, which is frequently closely associated with the problematic argument of epistemological colonialism which supposes that the “idea of the other” can only be found in the homeland of anthropology – the West.

**Zhang:** I believe that you have already explained these ideas *The West as the Other*, is this correct?

**Wang:** In *The West as the Other* I have borrowed from the “Occidentalism” in ancient China to illustrate the Eastern counterparts of the notion of the other. In fact, this lecture expanded on some of the viewpoints from the book, but compared to *The West as the Other*, the speech emphasised the reciprocity between civilisations and the fuzziness of borders.

**Zhang:** In your lecture, you also touched upon the “ontological turn”, which is currently popular in Western anthropological circles, criticizing its proposition of “multiple ontologies”, because you believe that this theory only apparently solves the problem of a dualistic worldview, but as a matter of fact, it plays a role in strengthening the very same dualistic worldview. When criticizing the idea of “multiple ontologies”, you continue to go back to interaction and mixing, and what you call “the dialectics of coexistence and separation”. This point was also explained in depth in the book *Cultural Complexity*, which you have edited. The concept you use is seemingly close to another idea that is being often used in the anthropological world in the past few years, namely “hybridity”, which however you do not seem to acknowledge.

**Wang:** I should explain that in my speech I have indeed criticized the way in which French anthropologist Descola divides the world into four “ontologies”, but while I am not satisfied with these “multiple ontologies”, I am also dissatisfied with Brazilian Viveiros de Castro’s monistic animism, which is diametrically opposite to it. In the “ontological turn”, the contradiction between one and many has reappeared, and it seems likely that it is so difficult for Western learning to deal with the shortcomings of the “pattern of pluralistic integration” by holding a more prosaic mindset. I have always believed that the wording used by Fei Xiaotong, the forefather of Chinese anthropology, “unity of diversity”, shows a kind of courage in facing the diversity intrinsic in the whole of social facts, which is a particularly rare wisdom in our civilisation, called “the dialectics of coexistence and separation”, and this is not at all an exaggeration. Yes, the matter I am talking about is indeed close to “hybridity”, but it is not the same. I feel that “hybridity” happens at a micro level, and it hardly provides an adequate conceptual foundation for the relationship between one and many we described at a theoretical level.

**Zhang:** In your previous works you have provided detailed discussions about civilisations, supra-societal systems and cosmologies, which you have collected in your recent book *The Supra-Societal Systems* (2015). In this lecture, however, you have further defined a cosmology as “not only models of relations between beings broadly defined (humans, things, and divinities), but also includes relations between models whose composite structures comprise varied lifeways and traditions interacting through time”. Is this something new?

**Wang:** The anthropological world has made great contributions to cosmological studies in recent years. However, if we look at the works recently published, our colleagues seem to put more emphasis on the analysis of the models of the specific relationship between humans and non-humans living on this planet. The investigation of the relationship between different relationship models has been carried out by structural anthropologists, and I believe that we still need to start from these high-level structuralist treatises, in order to gain a new understanding of what we would like to grasp. This task is particularly important for Eurasian civilisation studies. Since the 18th century Eurasian civilisations have been divided into the