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The main goal of this paper is to address a methodological and epistemological question which could be entitled "Chinese studies and the study of the present". More specifically, I would like to use the opportunity of this conference to discuss the value of Grounded Theory (GT) and Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) for contemporary sinology. To do so, I will first outline two theoretical and methodological issues faced today by sinologists in the West, and then discuss whether GT’s and ANT’s fundamentals can relate to them and how.

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Doing Chinese Studies at the Crossroads of Grounded Theory 
and Actor-Network-Theory

Abstract

The main goal of this paper is to address a methodological and epistemological question which could be entitled “Chinese studies and the study of the present”. More specifically, I would like to use the opportunity of this conference to discuss the value of Grounded Theory (GT) and Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) for contemporary sinology. To do so, I will first outline two theoretical and methodological issues faced today by sinologists in the West, and then discuss whether GT’s and ANT’s fundamentals can relate to them and how.

Keywords

Chinese studies; Sinology; Grounded theory; Actor-network-theory; Methodology

Introduction

Today, when many countries are looking at China’s impressive socioeconomic changes, wondering what the future holds, sinology (the « study of China ») is facing a new challenge. Traditionally based in the Faculties of Arts, focusing on « ancient China » and « Chinese culture » sinologists need to find new theoretical foundations in order to continue their work side by side with the tremendous ongoing changes in the dialogue between China and the West.

In this paper, I would like to briefly discuss the sketch of a method for contemporary Chinese studies based on Grounded Theory (GT) and Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), used in an interdisciplinary and complementary way.

Although GT and ANT have been developed under very different conditions, do not really quote each other, and look quite different at first sight, they also have many common viewpoints which can be traced through links and references to the Chicago School (e.g. Strauss & Corbin, 1998: 9; Latour, 2005: 101, 243). Both share the word “theory”, although they are not theories in the proper sense of the term but more something that could be called “methodological approaches”. GT is “(...) a style of doing qualitative analysis” (Strauss,1987: 5), and ANT tells us “(...) how to study things (...). [But] it says nothing about the shape of what is being described with it.” (Latour, 2005: 142).

As a twenty minute presentation is definitely not the place for a summary of the comparative history of the respective developments of GT and ANT, and as most participants of this session are probably not familiar with Chinese studies or sinology, I would like to start with two anecdotes of situations that happened to me a couple of years ago, and which bring into light two kinds of methodological difficulties faced by the discipline at the moment.
What Is Important?

At the end of the year 2000, as a young teaching assistant just hired by the Unit of Chinese studies of the Faculty of Arts in the University of Geneva, I was struggling to find a good topic for my future Ph.D. dissertation. My check-list looked something like this: 1) My advisor gave me complete freedom as long as I could convince him and the Professors’ College that my choice made sense. 2) I was mostly interested in art-related things. 3) I had no interest in ancient China, so I would do something about contemporary China. 4) According to several professors, and the kind of courses our Unit was providing at the time, my job later would be to teach and do research on Chinese literature. The conclusion was obvious: I would do my Ph.D on Chinese contemporary literature.

I eventually fixed my choice on Wang Shuo 王朔, a famous Beijing writer who had sold millions of books in the beginning of the nineties, and whose satiric style I enjoyed very much. Wang Shuo was still active; born in 1958, he seem to be only at the middle of a successful career. He was very productive. Besides writing lots of novels, he was also doing scripts for the movie industry and television. Since I also had a personal interest in new medias and popular culture, he was a perfect choice.

To my surprise, when I started to tell my colleagues I would write a dissertation about Wang Shuo, I noticed several people didn’t share my enthusiasm. As I finally understood after a couple of weeks, many were wondering if Wang Shuo was important enough for a Ph.D. thesis. This question was often raised with the following argument: what if after, say, ten years, no one in China cared about Wang Shuo’s books anymore? That could easily happen to a popular writer, whose audience wasn’t exactly the intellectual elite. Then, as a consequence, no one would be interested in my dissertation. In the worst of scenarios, if I hadn’t found a secure position by then, this choice could even bring my career in academy to an end.

Although the argument may sound ridiculous, it indeed did make sense at the time and, in a way, it still does today. Most sinologists are known among peers according to their past research topics. Someone is a “specialist of the Laozi”, or “the person who wrote that book on Chinese intellectuals in the eighteenth century”. Being “the person who did his Ph.D. dissertation on that writer that no one talks about anymore today” is far from a good start if you are looking toward a professorship.

The point I am interested in here is this question of the “importance” of the research topic. In sinology today, in most cases, the importance of the topic has already been determined by history. It is not me who decides that the Laozi is an important book, that Confucius is central to understanding Chinese thought, or that the Opium Wars had a deep influence on the relationship between China and the West in the nineteenth century, but the hundreds of millions of people who, long before me, have experienced these events, have read or written about it, discussed and selected things related to them.

In other words, when the historical process selects some objects (texts, photographs, records of events) and neglects others (often making them disappear for ever), it leaves us with the remaining portion of things among which I, as a sinologist, am supposed to choose my appropriate research topic. For anyone working on the present, none of this is available because the selection process is still on its way.

Before I go back to this question, I will present the second anecdote.
You Said Chinese?

Eventually, for many reasons, I gave up with Wang Shuo and decided to do my Ph.D. on human-machine interaction in the context of electronic music in Beijing. In January 2005, after thirteen months of field work in China, I was asked to present the data I had collected in a seminar for Ph.D. students at our university. The seminar was a joint meeting for all graduate, postgraduate, and teachers in Asian studies, mostly attended by people from the Faculty of Arts.

I was very proud of the information I had managed to collect, and inflicted a two-hour detailed presentation of electronic musicians in Beijing on my colleagues and teachers. Since I had borrowed a digital camera and a digital recorder, I was able to show them pictures of the objects, people and places I had visited, and to make them hear the music the artists were making. After four years of work at the Faculty, I knew all thirty or so people in the room; because of friendship, and maybe also because my topic was quite unusual, I remember most of my colleagues were very much interested in seeing and hearing what I had been doing.

The presentation went fine, and, with the help of the many pictures displayed on the screen, the audience was pretty much captivated. However, when I eventually reached the end, everybody burst out into comments. The first one, quite representative of the general feeling, was given by one of the professors: “I am very worried for this thesis. Where is China? I didn’t see China in this presentation.”

True, there was something unusual (for sinologists) about the musicians I had presented, in the fact that two of them were producing German minimal techno. In other words, they were not doing something “Chinese”. Also, most of the devices they were using (computers, synthesizers, or software) came from Western countries or Japan. The discussion which followed my presentation that day continued during lunch and coffee, and lasted about three to four hours. I remember my colleagues were indeed interested in the observations I had presented, but while ideas were flowing like water, everybody—including myself—was feeling a little bit confused.

A couple days later, the professor who had first raised the “where is China” issue invited me for lunch, and told me he had some thoughts about the other day. He concluded that his remark didn’t make sense. He said it was an on-the-spot reaction, not aimed at me, and that he wasn’t worried about my work. Well, I was. I could feel there was a real problem somewhere.

At that time, since I had already read several books about grounded theory, I decided to use the powerful tool of comparison to help me organize my thoughts. I sat down at my desk, and compared my research with a colleague who was working on ancient Chinese calligraphy. I tried to imagine a calligraph from the Song dynasty, sitting in front of a sheet of rice paper, brush in the right hand, the inkwell full of black ink next to him. Then I started to list.

“The guy is Chinese. He was born in China, he lives and works in China. The paper was made of rice, the rice was cultivated in China. The ink and the inkwell are traditional Chinese tools, nothing to worry about here. The brush is made of bamboo—Chinese bamboo--, the hair of the brush is made of wolf’s hair, the wolf was killed in China by Chinese people. 100% Chinese. Everything is under control.”

“Now me. The musician is Chinese. He was born in China, he never went abroad. Fine. His English is bad, he comes from a Chinese village, all the family members are Chinese, he studied Chinese traditional arts in China as a kid. He works in Beijing, Beijing is the capital of China. So far, everything is ok. And now he uses... a Macintosh.
At this point, I remember sitting in front of my own laptop, a Mac too. As it happens to me sometimes, I spontaneously talked to it, to complain: “You are the problem. You are not Chinese.” Hey, wait. Not Chinese? I turned it over, looked at the back panel. Design by Apple in California. Assembled in Taiwan.

At this point, I understood the question of what is “Chinese” and what is not, what is relevant to sinology or Chinese studies and what is not, is a very tricky one. In these two cases, a ancient calligraphy or a Macintosh computer, both material objects born inside the geographical boundaries of mainland China, one is very obviously seen as an object of study for China specialists, where the second one is not. Or at least, not for the moment.

This is where Grounded Theory and Actor-Network-Theory can be brought into play.

Grounded Theory

Since this session of the conference focuses on Grounded Theory, I shall assume that most participants have already a good knowledge of its ins and outs. On the basis of the two stories above, I believe the very idea of using an inductive research process can already get sinology out of trouble.

By blindly following the famous strategic advice of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and, at first, literally ignore the literature of theory and facts on the area under study (Glaser & Strauss, 1975: 37), sinologists can have good start. In other words, it is not the job of Western China specialists to decide what is Chinese and what is not, or what is “important” to Chinese culture and what is not. First, we choose a topic, --I would say anything related in a way or another to China is fine. Then, in a second step, through the research process, the questions of “Chineseness”, “importance”, will be discussed not before the research starts but inside the research process, and then included in the final report. While these remarks may appear extremely normal (close to boring) in a social sciences context, they imply that sinology, whenever dealing with China’s present, would have to organise itself in a completely new way.

At this stage of the discussion, I must say that the question of whether or not to use grounded theory’s powerful methodological tools developed since the 1970s remains unclear to me. This is the main point I would like to discuss after the presentation with the participants of the session. A social scientist and a sinologist’s job sometimes share similar objects of research, but in most cases their respective activities remain separate. One of the main differences between the two is, I believe, that a social scientist’s data consists mostly of data collected by dealing with human beings. Questionnaires or interviews, direct observations are the basic materials social scientists use to perform qualitative or quantitative researches. Sinology, most of the time, deals with material objects. Different kinds of writings, paintings, pictures, works of art, movies, are our usual partners on the way of deepening our understanding of China and Chinese culture.

This is where Actor-Network-Theory, with its famous statement regarding nonhumans, can be of some help.

Actor-Network-Theory

The Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) is an approach that was developed at the beginning of the eighties by scholars in the field of science and technology studies. As
stated above, it is well-known for its interest in the agency of nonhumans (e.g. scallops, or a door-closer. Callon, 1986, Latour, 1988), and provides a kind of new social theory. One of ANT’s insights that interests me here is its consideration for what is sometimes called “heterogenous networks”.

To take the example of this session’s presentation, one could trace the successive steps where my thoughts become movements of my fingers on the keyboard, then digitalized data in a computer, slides in a keynote presentation, then an analog signal projected onto a screen, eventually turning into some kind of information, understood (or not understood) by an audience (Latour, 2005: 201).

As this simple example demonstrates, one can consider a flow of, let’s call it “information” (ANT is still somehow in its infancy, which makes it difficult to use secured terminology) that moves from a human being (me), to an object (my computer), to another object (the projector), and then to another human being (the audience). While the story doesn’t tell us anything about what is going on at the various levels of interaction, we can note that in this perspective all differences between humans and nonhumans are flattened. No difference between me, thinking and typing, and my computer, transmitting and transforming digital data. No difference either between the computer communicating with the projector, and the audience looking at the screen. Everyone and everything is looked at on the same level, researchers consider flows of “information” going for one place to another, changing shapes and contents, but at the same time keeping some kind of consistency.

According to Latour, one of social scientists’ main jobs is then to describe these flows (Latour, 2005):

“The simple fact of recording anything on paper is already an immense transformation that require as much skill and just as much artifice as painting a landscape or setting up some elaborate biochemical reaction. No scholar should find humiliating the task of sticking to description. This is, on the contrary, the highest and rarest achievement. (...) If a description remains in need of an explanation, it means that it is a bad description.” (p. 136-7)

Without following ANT’s internal discussion (Latour’s introduction to ANT, in the paragraph quoted above, is only at its first half), if one goes back to the story of the Chinese electronic musician presented earlier, things look suddenly very different. No worries if German techno music goes on the Internet, is listened to in Beijing by a local artist, who purchased a Macintosh computer designed in the USA and assembled in Taiwan, while the whole thing is being observed and archived by a French-speaking researcher from Switzerland. All these movements from a country to another, a cultural context to another, previously very disturbing, become parts of the flows that have to be taken into account.

Conclusion

While I have not tried in this paper to discuss or compare the writings of the founders of GT and ANT, I hope to have given the reader an insight of how the two approaches can be used in a complementary way to help us when dealing with issues related to the question of studying foreign cultures in the present.

By working in a inductive way, following the methodological tools of Grounded Theory, asking questions and making comparisons, sinologists can slowly gather a better understanding of what they are observing without proceeding to a preliminary selection that would make them consider some objects as relevant, and others as negligible. By putting aside not only previously existing literature on the area under study, but also one’s consideration of what humans and nonhumans, or Chinese
studies vs social sciences should be, researchers may be able to deal in a more effective way with the impressive culture-mixing process that is currently going on between China and the West.

Bibliography


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