

Obituary

Maurice Freedman (1920–75)

On 14 July 1975, at the age of 54, Maurice Freedman died suddenly of a heart attack at his London home. Born in London to a Jewish working-class family, he studied anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He began teaching there in 1951 and was made professor of anthropology in 1965, by which time he was already recognized as the doyen of western anthropologists and sociologists specializing in China. Five years later he was named to succeed E. E. Evans-Pritchard in the chair of social anthropology at Oxford. He was the first China specialist ever accorded that honour.

The first phase of Freedman's remarkable intellectual odyssey began in January 1949, when he undertook two years of field work among the Singapore Chinese. This work led to his classic monograph, *Chinese Family and Marriage in Singapore* (London, 1957), and a series of pioneering essays on Chinese religion and legal anthropology, essays that not only demonstrated the value of studying the overseas Chinese but formulated the issues that have guided most subsequent work in this field.

Freedman initiated a second phase in the early 1950s, when he "began to play with the notion of reconstructing traditional Chinese society . . . with special reference . . . to its institutions of kinship and marriage."¹ At a time when the doors of mainland China were closed, he taught us how "to sit in archives (or at least in libraries) and interview the dead."² The resulting book, *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China* (London, 1958), was armchair anthropology of unprecedented quality. It is now and will long remain the centrepiece of anthropological studies of China.

Yet a third phase of Freedman's career began with a 1963 field study in the New Territories of Hong Kong, to which he brought a sense of problem that was by then finely honed. Having shown that we could learn about mainland Chinese society from the overseas Chinese and from the archives, he now set out to show what we could learn from observation in what he later came to call "residual China," notably

1. "Why China?" *Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* (1969), p. 8.

2. "A Chinese phase in social anthropology," *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (March 1963), p. 5.

Hong Kong and Taiwan. His magnificent *Chinese Lineage and Society: Fukien and Kwangtung* (London, 1966) showed that he had developed to a fine art “the interplay between the anthropologist as field worker and the anthropologist as bookworm.”³

As if this were somehow not enough, by the time of Freedman’s death he was well into a fourth phase. He was studying the intellectual history of Sinological anthropology. As early as 1962, in his Malinowski Memorial Lecture, entitled “A Chinese phase in social anthropology,” he had examined the work of the 1930s and 1940s, and later, by patient work in libraries and archives, he carried the story as far back as 1870. During the last few years he spent much of his time in Leiden and Paris interviewing people who had known his distinguished predecessors, J. J. M. De Groot and Marcel Granet. He left in press with Blackwell a book-length manuscript on Granet,⁴ and among his papers is a completed translation of De Groot’s journal.

Anyone familiar with anthropological studies of China is aware of Freedman’s contributions to our understanding of lineage organization, the family, ancestor worship, geomancy and marriage ritual. But he was not a narrow specialist. His goal was nothing less than a comprehensive understanding of Chinese society. He had little use for attempts to generalize from the meticulous study of small communities, attempts that he called “the anthropological fallacy *par excellence*.”⁵ Instead he urged the anthropologist working in residual China “to anchor his field work in China-at-large and to use that field work as a starting point for speculating about some aspect of China-at-large.”⁶ In one of his last essays he argued boldly that “a Chinese religion exists” and that it is “part of the hierarchization of Chinese society.”⁷

Although he recognized differences of aim and interest between disciplines and between researchers, he was always alert to the ways in which new knowledge alters intellectual perspectives and makes a new synthesis possible. Every new wave of publication prompted him to offer a fresh assessment of the field and a stimulating projection of our future course: he was a master of the “moving synthesis.” It was in this role that he gave definition to the intellectual community of anthropologists and sociologists working on China, and it was in this respect that he was our leader. We wrote our books and papers for him.

Freedman wore the mantle of intellectual leadership with humility. Although he was brusque by temperament, his programmatic statements are the antithesis of dogma and arrogance. There never was, nor could there be, a “last word”; he was quick to embrace new recruits to the

3. “Why China?” pp. 9–10.

4. An introduction to his translation of Granet’s *La religion des Chinois* (Oxford, 1975).

5. “A Chinese phase,” p. 3.

6. “Sinology and the social sciences” (forthcoming), MS. p. 11.

7. “On the sociological study of Chinese Religion,” in Arthur P. Wolf (ed.), *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 20 and 23.

field for the freshness of vision they would bring. Our work gained as much from his gentle prodding and warm encouragement as it did from his powerful analyses. We benefited also from his alertness to the dangers of parochialism. Not only did he bring together European, American and British scholars specializing in China, but he did all he could to link our small body with anthropologists and sociologists working in other areas of the world and with Sinologists in other disciplines. More than any other colleague we have known, he extended our reach.

Fascinated with the ironies, paradoxes and humour of the human condition, Freedman did field work wherever he went, in Asia, on the continent, in the United States, and at home in England. He enjoyed introducing visiting American scholars to the intricacies of British academic life, and we enjoyed his skill in introducing us. He loved wit, good stories and good conversation. Yet the fundamental man was not social but moral. Beneath the vigour and gentleness apparent in his writing, beneath the wit and humour that delighted those who knew him personally, lay a moral passion he kept chiefly to himself. Only the odd passage affords us a glimpse: “We have to further the study of oriental civilisations among us, not only because it is a matter of national security that we have people equipped in Asian languages and cultures, but because our own title to civilisation must be kept alive by our capacity to view the world impartially.”⁸

G. WILLIAM SKINNER and ARTHUR P. WOLF

8. “Chinese phase,” p. 12.