

# Anthropology as the Study of Culture

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**Abstract:** Since the birth of the discipline of anthropology, all interest has been centered in the diverse cultures of human societies. Moreover, anthropologists have always assumed that the real face of the culture that is the subject of their study is as they see it. However, we may not be able to discover the real meaning behind how any culture should really look like. The purpose of this paper is to present the evolution of the discipline of anthropology, as well as to reflect on the characteristics of this discipline.

**Keywords:** Culture; Commonality; Difference; Disciplinary history

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## 1. Human culture and anthropology

If we send a white man and a dark-colored man together to the moon and let them live there for a while. It is undeniable that they must be like close brothers, never feeling that there is a so-called difference between them. Moreover, they would have found each other as close and their interests as similar. But if a group of white and dark-colored men were sent to the moon, what would happen next we dare not guess. This is because two people are always imagining the commonalities between them, and one of the two groups will always be obsessed with finding the differences between the other group. If understood in simple terms, the face of culture determines the destiny of both groups of people. For the current human race, if human beings are obsessed with constructing differences between cultures, those discriminatory and contemptuous stares will always accompany human beings, hindering the communication between each other and the relationship that should be close, and even killing each other. We need to know that we share the Earth together as a community of destiny.

If all causes are attributed to the perception of “culture”, the anthropologist must think in terms of a “community of human destiny”. As an anthropologist who describes cultures in all their diversity, he must imagine his relationship with his subjects. If the anthropologist always uses “primitive” and “civilized” as part of his or her disciplinary discourse, he or she will divide human societies into two at the level of time and space. Moreover, if such categorization distinguishes between two groups of people, it is a sin for these two groups to be present in the same space and time. It is here that the seeds of racism are planted and take root.

## 2. The Birth of Anthropology and the Other

The formation of the discipline of anthropology is above all characterized by an appreciation of and interest in different cultures. However, as mentioned earlier, this interest is based on the duality of the temporal and spatial dimensions. As a result, it becomes difficult for anthropologists to escape from that heterochronism that characterizes them, which leads them to always construct a different cultural profile and population.

In fact, it is not only the above flaws that exist; it is those casual comparisons of cultures from different regions and times that characterized anthropology more prominently at its inception. This characteristic leads to the absence of an independent other in the content of anthropologists' research. Anthropologists can only keep on constructing those human historical processes, and the basis of the framework of such construction makes those interesting cultures into some iconic existences. These characteristics have changed in the discipline of anthropology thanks to functionalism since the 1920s. Malinowski's *Voyagers in the Western Pacific* made anthropologists realize that the Other not only exists, but is an actual being with its own cultural logic. In turn, it somehow put an end to the kind of research that constructed human history. The cultures of the indigenous people, which interest anthropologists, become the real objects of study for anthropologists.

The anthropologist not only tries to understand the culture of the indigenous people, but is also willing to show the excellent life experience of the indigenous people. Malinowski pioneered fieldwork, allowing later anthropologists to go out into the field and get to know their subjects. In anthropologists' fieldwork, the focus is not only on seeing in person, but also on dialog and communication. This ability to communicate became the standard by which anthropological competence was judged. Of course, such a requirement stems from anthropology's desire to truly understand the Other. Moreover, anthropologists note the need to focus on cultural wholeness or the common rules of society in the course of their research.

At the same time, however, along with the emergence of the Other, the antagonism between the anthropologist and the Other became an important issue. In order to understand their subjects, anthropologists not only need to be personally involved in the investigation themselves, but more importantly, being able to truly understand their subjects becomes a most crucial goal. Anthropologists may not need to think too much about what kind of evolutionary process mankind has gone through, but anthropology must think about the real relationship between itself and the Other.

### 3. Cultural Studies and Anthropology

One of the most unsavory pages of the discipline of anthropology is that of providing theoretical justification and empirical methods for colonial domination. But for anthropologists, this never seemed to be the case. On the contrary, anthropologists have always wanted to use their theoretical perspectives to give voice to indigenous societies. Of course, anthropologists have never been able to escape the so-called distinction between “civilized people” and “primitive people” in time and space. Whenever anthropology carries out a study, it is always natural to think in terms of “difference”. In fact, no matter when the discipline of anthropology was first born, or in the later development of the discipline, anthropologists are very difficult to avoid prejudice against the object of study. Perhaps this bias stems from an extended understanding of difference and a selective forgetting of commonality. To put it more accurately, it is a “revolt against the same origin and the same destiny”.

In the face of the complexity of human societies and the diversity of cultures, anthropologists need to continuously recognize and understand human societies. Chinese anthropologist Mr. Rong Guanqiong pointed out that “the history of the development of cultural anthropology over the past hundred years has shown that comparative cultural studies and cross-cultural comparative studies are not only necessary tools for cultural anthropologists to study the cultures of groups of human beings in the process of field research and interviews as well as indoor collection and research”. Anthropologists must be able to form a holistic understanding of a wide variety of cultures across geographical divides, and they must be able to make objective and accurate judgments. As anthropologists engaged in the study of cultures, they are no longer as interested in indigenous people today. Anthropologists are no longer confronted only with the homogeneity and diversity of cultures, but are more importantly reminded to pay attention to the adaptability of cultures. At a time when the picture of human development is changing rapidly, anthropologists need to be reminded that, as scholars of cultural studies, we may not be in a position to evaluate the various beliefs and moral cultures created by human beings. But we still need to actively answer the question of “why”.

Most importantly, when anthropologists endeavor to put their own research perspectives and objects of study in perspective, they need to break out of their own fields of study and disciplinary perspectives, and, in layman's terms, cross disciplinary boundaries. Interdisciplinarity has never been a new word for interdisciplinarity, and there has always been a great deal of emphasis on and active advocacy for the practical implications of the concept. If disciplines have given researchers something to believe in, then interdisciplinarity has to break through that belief. No matter how hard one tries, there is currently an increasing variety of disciplines, and the boundaries of disciplines are being reinforced. If one tries to break out of such disciplines, one often needs to be seen as “other”, even reactionary and incomprehensible. To a certain extent, any discipline has to have its own theories and methods, its own discourse, and this is not to be denied. But the importance of interdisciplinarity still cannot be ignored. In fact, interdisciplinarity does not mean giving up one's own discipline, but precisely allowing that discipline to face a broader future.

For anthropologists, anthropological thinking to understand human culture is the foundation, and on top of that, whether it is economic, political, historical, ecological, or even medical, one needs to stand on anthropological thinking to understand this perspective of looking at human beings, rather than placing anthropology in the background. Therefore, it is extremely important for anthropologists to receive theoretical training in anthropology, but they should not overly set up disciplinary walls. At the same time, interdisciplinarity requires extensive absorption of the thinking and methods of other disciplines, and the way of thinking of other disciplines, in order to reveal that anthropologists can get rid of the previous limitations in their own disciplinary thinking. However, it is also necessary to be careful that this kind of thinking and methodological learning should not be misinterpreted. Therefore, interdisciplinarity in anthropology is not just about absorbing new terminology, but also about building on a broader understanding and reflection in order to realize a more effective and authentic anthropological understanding of culture. Anthropologists as cultural studies are still essentially seeking an ultimate understanding of the past and future of humanity. This understanding, in terms of methodology or thinking, is mainly directed towards how anthropologists deal with their relationship with the object of study and their attitude towards human culture.

### 4. Concluding remarks

For the discipline of anthropology, perhaps the discipline of anthropology in the early days was indeed characterized as described above. It is in this context that anthropology has evolved into a major discipline, along with the cultural changes in human societies, and it is around

this process of development that anthropology is facing new research problems. To some extent, this depends on the fact that our contemporary world is completely different. Along with globalization, those who are indigenous are a thing of the past and humanity is moving towards coherence. In short, the great cultural differences are disappearing, and the idea of commonality is driving human society in an unknown direction. The “community of human destiny” may be the next disciplinary future that we must consider and think about.

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