What is the status of the moral person in 21st century China? Arthur Kleinman, M.D. addressed this question for a near-capacity audience in a lecture based partly on his forthcoming book of the same name, co-written with six of his former students.

As a renowned anthropologist and psychiatrist conducting research in Taiwan and China since 1968, Dr. Kleinman has been struck by the massive changes in China over the last few decades, primarily the meteoric rise of the middle class and the development of a deep chasm between the rich and the poor.

For Kleinman, Chinese economic reforms have also changed Chinese moral experience: if the tenet of the “era of radical Maoism” was that individuals owed their lives to the State/Party, the new “era of economic reforms” is built on the notion that the State/Party owes individuals a good life.

Some troubling changes
Some of these changes, however, have been troubling. Materialist and cynical sentiments, as well as nationalist and Han chauvinistic tendencies, are on the rise. A near caste-like distinction between rural and urban peoples has developed. “Vertical, ancestral ties have been replaced by horizontal, conjugal ties.” And changing sexual practices have brought about rising rates in sexually transmitted diseases. Kleinman noted that China’s one-child policy effectively “delinked sexual desire from reproduction at the juncture of the individual body and the population.” Although this policy had the intended effect of lowering the birthrate, it had the “unintended consequence of encouraging expression and pursuit of sexual desire.”

In China, “vertical, ancestral ties have been replaced by horizontal, conjugal ties.” —Arthur Kleinman, M.D.

At the same time, healthier social mores have come to the fore: advancements in the status of women, improved public ethics, increasing global connections, and greater altruism. “There’s a boom in the activity of NGOs [Non-governmental organizations], albeit the Chinese NGOs are really known as GONGOs, that is, government-oriented, non-governmental organizations.”

One incident of particular interest to Kleinman was that the city of Shenzhen ran counter to the dictates of the Communist Party of China (CPC)
and instituted a blood supply supported by voluntary donations vs. the prevailing use of coercion and payment to professional blood donors (which lead to a tragic HIV/AIDS epidemic). Additionally, the televised scenes of ordinary Chinese simply enjoying themselves during the Beijing Olympics produced a situation “largely without precedent in modern Chinese history,” replacing the ancient folk wisdom of having eternally to endure hard times, which manifested itself over the 20th century by innumerable Chinese deaths during the warlord era, a war with Japan, and the Cultural Revolution.

**A constantly “divided self”**

In deciding to assemble this book with his former students, Kleinman was struck by the lack of depth in most of the current literature. Analyses of China by scholars and observers in the West have focused mostly on surface elements: government policies, social institutions, and market activities in response to economical, political, and security developments. Kleinman and his co-authors believe, however, that psychiatry and anthropology “produce a different picture of Chinese society,” so they prefer to examine the “perceptual, emotional, and moral landscape.” They take special note of the rise of individualism in Chinese society. Instead of assuming “a single subjectivity or kind of selfhood,” however, the authors operate from a model of a constantly “divided self,” a self that maintains the bifurcations of past vs. present, public vs. private, moral vs. immoral, and the individual vs. the collective. Kleinman traces this concept of the divided self to William James, Freud and depth psychology, and continental philosophy.

Earlier in the day, Dr. Kleinman was the honored guest at an open forum on caregiving, with Kalman Applbaum (Anthropology, UWM) and Claire Wendland, M.D. (Anthropology, UW-Madison) responding to two papers Kleinman had published recently in the British medical journal, *The Lancet*. Both of Kleinman’s essays were precipitated by a tragic turn of events when his wife and longtime collaborator, Joan Kleinman, was diagnosed with a rare form of Alzheimer’s, shifting his typical role of doctor and researcher to caregiver for his wife. Discussions among Kleinman, Applbaum, and Wendland highlighted the importance of incorporating caregiving into the medical setting and fighting against the overarching bureaucratic nature of the medical system through “strategies of interference” and “strategies of intervention.” After both the open forum and his lecture, Dr. Kleinman proved himself to be very generous with his time, answering at length specific questions from both students and faculty in areas of medical anthropology.