Towards a Professional Sociology on China

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Abstract
This article identifies two internal tensions that Chinese sociology has constantly encountered since the discipline was reestablished in 1979: public versus professional and indigenization versus internationalization. I argue that professionalization is a necessary and crucial step to achieving unity in the study of social changes in contemporary China and to contributing to general knowledge in the discipline of sociology.

Keywords
China, social change, social science, sociology

Sociology is a social science discipline that employs a variety of methods, both qualitative and quantitative, to empirically investigate human behaviors and social structure, as well as their interactions in shaping social processes. While social thoughts and commentaries can be found in many Chinese classics, sociology, along with other social sciences, is a western import and thus not indigenous to Chinese intellectual traditions. According to Joseph Needham, traditional Chinese scholarship was too humanistic in that the value of knowledge was judged mainly on the basis of whether it could benefit people and bring about rapid improvement to their livelihoods (Dirlik, 2012). Therefore, scientific logic and theoretical investigation were often dismissed in favor of the pattern of what ought to be (i.e. social ethics).
From the very beginning, Chinese sociology was imprinted with the pragmatic and application orientation required to deal with the national crises and social problems that plagued China from the 19th century onward. After Britain defeated the Qing Dynasty in the Opium War in 1842, Chinese literati initially remained confident that their Confucian philosophy would be able to accommodate western technology, but their worldview was deeply shaken after China lost the 1894/95 war with Japan, another latecomer of modernization in Asia. With the ending of the imperial examination system and ensuing collapse of monarchy, China entered a chaotic era with a free market for different ideas and thoughts, and some intellectuals started to look to Western learning to revitalize their country and advocated the application of scientific principles to the study of social phenomena (Wong, 1979). Against this background, academic sociology established a foothold on Chinese soil in the 1920s and flourished afterwards, spreading the belief that scholars should fulfill a mission of using their professional knowledge to create a better society.

Sociology was denounced as a bourgeois science after the Communists took power in 1949 and the discipline had been abolished in Chinese universities and replaced by Marxist social philosophy (historical materialism) since 1952. After nearly three decades, Deng Xiaoping acknowledged in 1979 that sociology in China had long been neglected and called for “catching up” to help the government to address some pressing social issues as part of the economic reform. Thus, the reestablishment of sociology was deeply imprinted with the application orientation (Rossi, 1985). (The first sociology department was established in the College of Liberal Arts, Shanghai University, in April 1980.) To justify the existence of their discipline, Chinese sociologists stressed the notion of “problem consciousness” and actively attempted to use their knowledge to give advice on various critical issues that the country faced in the course of modernization (Lu, 2007). A landmark project in the early 1980s, led by China’s prominent sociologist Fei Xiaotong (1910–2005), was on the development of “small towns,” focusing on the path of urbanization for a country with a huge rural population. The findings of the project had a large impact on government policies on rural industrialization and population migration in China.

Hence, unlike American colleagues who lament about their invisibility in the Ivory Tower and thus have recently called for a public sociology (Burawoy, 2005), Chinese sociologists are much involved in the society they study, mixed with what Michael Burawoy called policy and public sociologies, either through research consultations to the government or through public discussion and articles in the mass media. For instance, two renowned sociologists and social activists in the sociology faculty at Beijing University, Fei Xiaotong and Lei Jieqiong (1905–2011), were both once Vice Chairman/Chairwoman of the National People’s Congress (legislature of the People’s Republic of China) from 1988 to 1998.

These high-profile sociologists and their contact with policy makers certainly helped to boost the growth of sociology in China. In the 1980s there were only a few sociology departments nationwide, with a handful of faculties transferred from
other fields and textbooks translated from English. By 2005, seventy-four programs in China’s universities offered bachelor’s degrees in sociology, eighty-seven offered master’s degrees, sixteen offered doctoral degrees (Lu, 2007), and over 6,000 professional sociologists were employed in both universities and social science academies (Wu, 2009). Because of the tradition of pragmatism, Chinese sociologists have tended to focus on practical problem-solving, either through policy research consultations to the government or through public discussion and articles in the mass media.

In line with such a pragmatic orientation is the discourse on the indigenization of sociology. While sociology imported from the West has had to confront this issue for the discipline to establish a firm foothold in Chinese soil, indigenization (or “China exceptionalism”) is often used as an excuse for rejecting concepts, theories, and methods in (western) sociology when analyzing practical issues associated with China’s social and economic transformation. As a result, the proliferation of empirical research in the 1980s and 1990s had accumulated little sociological knowledge by Western academic standards, because most research lacked clear theoretical guidelines and appropriate research designs.

The sociology of China in the West has also changed dramatically over the past three decades. Whereas previous scholarship on Chinese society was largely associated with area studies that emerged out of the Cold War era, which typically provided dense, detailed descriptions of exotic social life in China and occupied only a marginal position in the disciplinary study. The field has become more discipline-bound and theoretically-oriented since the 1980s (Guthrie, 2000). For instance, Walder’s analyses of institutions that defined economic and social life and Nee’s study of social consequences of the market transition in China aim to address big theoretical questions concerning the discipline. While their research focused substantively on China, their goal was to understand how socialist economies and societies were organized as alternatives to modern capitalism and how they were being transformed since the 1980s, and they assumed that their findings would have great relevance to many countries other than China (Walder, 2011). Moreover, as survey research is fundamental to modern sociology, sociologists on China have been increasingly relying on the data collected through population-based surveys to test their ideas and support their arguments. This methodological shift has made research on China more accessible to professional sociologists, who might not necessarily be China specialists (Bian, 2002: 29).

To be sure, the complexity of China’s transformation processes have not always complied with predictions based on existing theoretical models and concepts in the social sciences as practiced in either the West or the East. Nevertheless, the uniqueness of Chinese society and its effects on the social processes in which sociologists are interested ought to be demonstrated with evidence that meets professional standards. Terminologies that originated in the study of Chinese society in the West, such as danwei (workplace), hukou (household registration), and guanxi (social networks), indeed, have become increasingly known to the
sociological research community. The discipline of sociology can accommodate such national peculiarities for comparative interests and for further theorization (Wu, 2011).

In the age of globalization, sociological research has transcended national and transnational levels of analysis. Equipped with insightful observations, sociologists in China have great potential to go beyond policy research and social commentaries and advance their disciplinary inquiries concerning China’s great transformation, to which the only thing comparable is the social change in 19th century Europe that brought about the birth of sociology (Walder, 2011; Xie, 2011). The success, failure, and problems of China’s ongoing transitions have prompted scholars to revisit many social scientific theories that we have long taken for granted (Whyte, 2009). Towards this goal, Chinese sociology and the sociology of China have much to learn from each other as part of the professionalization of the field. Sociologists, whether they are located in China or somewhere else and whether they specialize in China or not, may discover common research interests that can be addressed by maintaining their professional standards. In this sense, professionalization may help to mitigate the tension between the indigenization and internationalization of sociological research in China.

Recent years have witnessed trends in both professionalization of the discipline and internationalization of sociological research. To the younger generation of scholars, who have been trained specifically in the discipline, sociology is not only a tool for resolving the problems of Chinese society but also a scientific discipline with its own agenda and standards. Through active interactions with international research communities, these scholars are attempting to establish both an academic evaluation system by which to assess the quality of scholarly work and the means to disseminate the knowledge produced. For instance, two premier sociology journals, Shehui Xue Yanjiu (Sociological Studies) and Shehui (Society), hosted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Shanghai University, respectively, have adopted peer-review policies, and publications in these journals, as well as in other international journals included in the social science citation index, are highly valued in the metrics of academic evaluations and promotions. (Shehui (English name, Chinese Journal of Sociology) has been published since 1981 as the discipline’s first journal, and Shehui Xue Yanjiu has been published since 1986.) The Chinese Sociological Association (CSA) has become more institutionalized to promote sociological research and practice in China, as shown by growing membership, research committees of subfields, and regularly held board elections and annual meetings.

The greatest impetus for the professionalization of sociology in China comes from the central government’s initiatives to build programs of academic excellence over the past decade. The “985 Project” identified the best universities in order to enhance the first-rate quality of the country’s academic research, while the “211 Project” sought to strengthen a number of higher learning institutions and disciplinary areas, including sociology, as recipients of infrastructure building in areas such as data collection, course training, and international collaboration.
Among the major survey data collection projects associated with sociology are the Chinese General Social Survey (hereafter CGSS) at Renmin University of China since 2003, the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) at Peking University since 2010, and more recently, the China Labor-force Dynamics Survey (CLDS) at Zhongshan University since 2012, all funded by the “985 Project.” Each of the national representative surveys possesses unique sample designs and questions thus suited to different research interests.

- The CGSS, modeled after the General Social Survey in the United States, is a repeated cross-sectional survey of a nationally representative sample of the adult population aged 18 or above in both rural and urban China, except for Tibet. Jointly launched in 2003 by Hong Kong University of Science and Technology and Renmin University of China, the CGSS is the first ever large-scale survey to systemically collect data to track long term social changes in China, with over 10,000 sampled individuals after 2010. The first phase includes four waves of surveys conducted in 2003, 2005, 2006, and 2008, respectively, whereas annual surveys in the second phase (2010–2019) have been solely funded and implemented by Renmin University of China, with modified sampling designs (Bian and Li, 2012). CGSS is also a member of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) and the East Asia Social Survey (EASS), including questions commonly adopted for international and regional comparative studies.

- The CFPS is a nearly nationwide, comprehensive, longitudinal social survey conducted by Peking University, aiming to serve research needs concerning a large variety of social phenomena in contemporary China. The CFPS covers 25 provinces or their administrative equivalents (municipalities and autonomous regions) in China, excluding Xinjiang, Tibet, Qinghai, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, and Hainan. The population of these provinces represents 94.5 percent of China’s total population and thus can be seen as a more-or-less nationally representative sample. The target population is all family members in households in the 25 provinces. The baseline survey of the CFPS was officially launched in 2010, with 33,600 adults and 8,990 children from 14,960 households being successfully interviewed. Follow-up surveys are conducted biennially towards 2020, and the 2012 and 2014 waves have already been completed (see details in Xie and Hu, 2014).

- The CLDS, conducted by Zhongshan University, is a nationally representative survey (excluding Tibet and Qinghai), focusing on labor force and employment issues, with all labor force members aged 15 or above to be interviewed. A rotation panel survey design was adopted to combine the advantages of both panel and repeated cross-sectional surveys. The first wave survey was completed in 2012, with over 16,000 eligible labor force members from 10,612 households in 302 neighborhood/village committees being successfully interviewed. The survey is to be followed biennially, with one quarter of the communities replaced in each subsequent round except in 2012 (Social Science Survey Center, Zhongshan University, 2013).
These surveys are designed and implemented according to the highest professional standards in terms of sample size, sampling designs, fieldwork, quality control, and documentation (Treiman et al., 2012). Following international practices, the resulting data are made available to all users and will become major public sources for the study of contemporary China. (For access to CGSS data, see http://www.cssod.org/; for access to CFPS data, see http://www.isss.edu.cn/cfps/; and for access to CLDS data, see http://css.sysu.edu.cn/Data.) Various training programs in quantitative methodology have been organized during the summer to assist researchers and graduate students in analyzing data. (There are three such programs in China, including the summer course in “Survey Methodology and Quantitative Analysis” organized by University of Michigan-Peking University Joint Institute in Beijing since 2006; the summer program on “Empirical Social Science Research”, organized by Xi’an Jiaotong University since 2010; and training program in “Applied Social Science Research Methods”, co-organized by Shanghai University (summer) and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (winter in Nansha, Guangzhou) since 2012.) These training programs have attracted many students and junior faculty members in both sociology and other related social sciences. The mega-survey projects and training programs not only have helped to raise the professional standard of sociological research in China and but also benefited the international research community (Hvistendahl, 2009). In addition to the institution-based projects, the National Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Science and the Ministry of Education are the major funding sources that support sociologists in carrying out various individual- and group-based research projects, focusing on aging and health, education, or youth issues.

Sociological research in China could not have survived and prospered without the blessing of the party-state. Indeed, the fall and rise of Chinese sociology has been strongly influenced by politics and the Communist Party’s policy agenda. As the investigation of social subjects would necessarily yield findings not always in line with the party’s ideology, scholars vigilantly attempt to avoid controversial theoretical issues and focus on empirical research through large-scale surveys or case studies to demonstrate their professionalism. Western academic jargon and neutral terms have been more favorably used than Marxist clichés in sociological writings. A typical example is the choice of the term “strata” instead of “class” on the ground that the latter has roots in Marxism that emphasizes conflicts of interest, antagonism, and struggles among social groups. On the other hand, recognizing diverse interest groups in a rapidly changing society and experiencing pressure from aggrieved citizens, laid-off state workers, rural migrant workers, villagers, and middle-class homeowners, the Chinese leadership has also started adopting a pragmatic attitude towards social conflicts and giving more support to professional research on social movements and collective action with the goal of maintaining social stability and improving social governance.

While professionalization can provide Chinese sociologists with a strong basis on which to defend their own disciplinary boundaries against ideological encroachment, by no means would it drive them back to the Ivory Tower. The recent boom
in sociological research is partly owing to the generous resources that the Chinese government has invested and partly to the pressing needs for policy advice to address some of the critical issues that China is now facing. For example, sociology benefited from a policy initiative on the construction of “a harmonious society” under the leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, with priorities being shifted from economic development to the improvement of people’s livelihoods and the promotion of social justice. On 21 February 2005, after a lecture given by two sociologists to the Politburo members of the Chinese Communist Party, Hu Jintao remarked that “the construction of a harmonious society is a very good opportunity for the development of sociology, or we can say that the spring of sociology is coming!” (Lu, 2007). The new leadership under Xi Jinping continues to place the advancement of social reform and the improvement of social governance at the top of their policy agenda. Sociologists are expected to play an even more significant role in advising the government on urbanization, hukou reform and migration, ethnic issues, education, employment, housing, social security, public health, and community construction, among others, as part of China’s future development.

Against this background, Chinese sociologists’ “problem consciousness” is reflected in their research interests being concentrated in certain areas, such as social inequality and mobility, community governance, and migration and its social ramifications. In the area of social inequality and mobility, an influential project, led by Lu Xueyi (1933–2013) at the Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS), showed that after 30 years of economic reforms, Chinese society has differentiated into 10 strata (classes), with state cadres at the top and peasants at the bottom. Special attention is paid to the emergence of a new middle class, especially its members’ values, identities, and political orientations. In the area of community governance, with the decline of work units (danwei), commercialization of housing allocation, and increase in mobile population, sociologists are paying more attention to the neighborhood community as the basic unit of urban social fabric. Finally, in the area of migration, waves of internal rural-to-urban migration have generated a large number of sociological studies on the migrants and their children’s assimilation in urban China since the late 1990s. The policy initiatives to boost urbanization and reform the household registration system are expected to attract more scholarly attention for years to come.

Building upon the research infrastructure mentioned above, sociologists are now in a unique position to study social changes in China. With sharpened professional skills, local insights, and increasing interactions with the international research community, they will likely make important contributions to sociological theories and public understanding of the great transformation occurring in China at this moment in human history, and thereby establish their own disciplinary identity. Such a new identity will be based on the unity between indigenization and internationalization and between professional research and public sociology: while the issues studied may come from Chinese society (though not necessarily uniquely), the findings can reach a global audience with great confidence; while the research is conducted according to rigorous professional standards, the findings that result can
inform policy makers and the general public. Towards this end, the professional-
ization of sociology is a necessary and crucial step.

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**Note**


**References**


