

## Sociology in China, sociology of China

QI, Xiaoying

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## **Sociology in China, Sociology of China: Editor's Introduction**

Xiaoying Qi

Hong Kong Baptist University and Macquarie University

This special issue of the *Journal of Sociology* is devoted to the dual themes of sociological research in China and the sociology of a number of key features of contemporary Chinese society.

Sociology has had a difficult history in China. As a pedagogic discourse sociology was introduced into China by American missionary teachers in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The purpose of teaching sociology in Christian colleges to Chinese students was to support the evangelistic activities of the teachers: 'Since Chinese traditional values and social arrangements were the major obstacles to [the missionary teacher's] attempt to convert the Chinese to Christianity, they had no hesitation in adopting the sociological perspective to dissect Chinese culture "objectively" in order to loosen its hold on the population' (Wong 1979: 13). By the 1930s the number of Chinese sociologists who were dissatisfied with such Western transplants and interested in sociology as an instrument of social reform rather than religious conversion was sufficient to support the formation of a Chinese Sociological Society. From this time Chinese sociologists attempted to develop theories formed through their investigation of Chinese communities; the sinification of sociology proceeded through field studies often linked to a program of social reform (Chiang 2001). The growing interest of Chinese teachers and researchers in sociology not only encouraged the sinification of the discipline but also generated an appetite for translations of foreign texts, especially of the Chicago school and British functionalist anthropology. This tension between indigenizing efforts and the appeal of foreign approaches continues to characterize Chinese sociology today, as indicated in a number of the papers in this issue.

Not only Chinese sociology but Chinese society has experienced profound tensions and enormous change in recent times. It was China's defeat in the Opium Wars of the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that not only led to the missionary invasion that introduced sociology to China but which effectively generated the growing Chinese demands for political and social change. These demands culminated in China's revolutionary transformation with the overthrow of the Qing dynasty and the installation of a Republic of China in 1912, and with the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. While Chinese sociology found its voice during the Republican era, with the advent of communist China it was placed in competition with Marxism-Leninism as the politically ruling 'science of society'. In 1952 all departments of sociology in China were abolished and the sociologist in them forced to turn to other pursuits, including the study of minorities, labour, or education, in which an applied focus was necessary and any theoretical development strictly enunciated in terms of the official party creed. Chinese society has experienced a number of transformations resulting from the many political upheavals that has characterized its recent history, from the foundation of the Republic, to the ensuing period of war-lordism and civil war, to Maoist collectivization from the early 1950s to the late 1970s and up to the current period of market reform begun in 1978 and continuing today.

The opening of China to market forces through the 1978 Deng Xiaoping reforms coincidentally led to the re-establishment of sociology in Chinese universities. By 1980 the Sociology Institute

of the Chinese Academy of Social Science was founded in Beijing and a number of major universities, including Tsinghua, Peking, Fudan and Zhongshan, established sociology departments (Li *et al* 1987). Within ten years sociology institutes and sociology departments began to flourish throughout China. The growth of sociology in China from the 1980s was the result of two quite different forces. First, the Chinese party-state needed reliable information on the situation in rural China in which there was massive under-employment and unemployment that had become visible with the end of collectivization. In urban China as well there was need for reliable information on the ways in which economic policy and political campaigns had affected the family structure through such practices as female empowerment resulting from employment and the expulsion of large numbers of young people to rural areas. At the same time, the training of the new generation of Chinese sociologists was ironically left to American intellectual forces and institutions.

With the decimation of sinicised sociology in China through the 1952 closure of sociology departments a new generation of Chinese sociologists was formed in 1981 with the advent of a year-long training course for which 42 senior college students were selected from across the country, known as the 'Nankai class' after the university where it was held. With the effort of the veteran Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong, who we shall see more of below, a number of US-trained sociologists at the Chinese University of Hong Kong together with Ching Kun Yang, from the University of Pittsburgh, and Peter Blau and Nan Lin, both at the time at the State University of New York in Albany, provided an intensive course in American college sociology at Nankai (Cheng and So 1983: 487-89). The vast majority of these students went on to study sociology in American universities and today form the core of Chinese sociologists working in America and China, where they occupy senior positions. Since that time the US has trained the cream of Chinese sociologists. In the 5-year period from 1980 the numbers of Chinese students in American universities more than doubled, from 4,300 to 9,913; in the following 3 years the numbers tripled (Orleans 1988: 88). By 2013 a quarter of all foreign students in US universities were Chinese, numbering 235,597. While it is not possible to extract numbers of students studying sociology from these figures the significance of American sociology and American-trained sociologists on the continuing development of post-1980s Chinese sociology cannot be overestimated.

A number of the papers in this special issue touch on the continuing influence of American and European sociology on Chinese sociology, and consider some of the local responses to this phenomenon. In considering these influences, many of the papers below indicate important aspects of contemporary Chinese social developments and reveal a great deal about the particular form of Chinese sociology today. Some of the theories that have recently been applied to understand the patterns of Chinese social life, and especially the changes in them since the beginnings of marketization, have their origins in explaining experiences in Europe and America. The theory of individualization developed by Ulrich Beck (Beck and Grande 2010) to explain neoliberal practices in the West has been applied to China, most notably by Yunxiang Yan (2010), in attempting to account for a number of features of contemporary Chinese society concerning family structure, internal migration and struggles for rights.

By considering the particular details of family structure and the role of family decisions in business, earnings strategies – including migration – as well as the nature of rights struggles in

China today, Jack Barbalet, in 'Chinese Individualization, Revisited', makes an important contribution by showing that the theory of individualization fails to grasp the nature of Chinese social institutions and the practices of individuals in Chinese families. More completely, Barbalet shows that the category of the individual functions more as a cultural trope than a meaningful analytic term of social theory, and that a reification of the individual in various forms of modernization theory has had the negative consequence of directing attention from the more significant modifications in relations between individuals, which Barbalet addresses.

The theme of labour rights is taken up in the second paper below, 'China's Road to the Construction of Labor Rights' by Feng Chen. Through a careful comparative institutional analysis Chen shows that labour relations and the patterns of working class mobilization primarily reflect state-building processes and their level of consolidation. Chen shows that in contrast to both Western and authoritarian developing societies the highly developed labour institutions in the People's Republic predate China's post-1978 introduction of capitalist relations and in that sense pre-empted organized labour mobilization. Chen shows how the Chinese state engages a dual strategy of promoting individual rights in the arena of labour relations while undermining the collective rights of labour organization by recognizing only the official state-sanctioned union movement as legitimate. For this reason strikes in China, and labour mobilization in general, remain unorganized, sporadic and constantly under threat from state forces.

Aspects of the individualization thesis are challenged further in the following two papers which examine developments in the Chinese family. Xiaoying Qi's contribution, 'Family Bond and Family Obligation: Continuity and Transformation', examines the results of an empirical investigation of family relations in contemporary China. The paper shows that family bonds and obligations remain strong during the period of marketization, even though the grounds on which they are maintained have undergone change during this period. Qi argues that the individualization thesis fails to address the ways in which filial obligation is reinterpreted and renegotiated not only by the present generation of young adults but also by their aged parents. The findings examined by Qi show that family relations in contemporary China are less concerned with the authority of the senior generation and more directed to emotional and financial support from adult children for parents, and from parents to children both adult and dependent. In the following paper by Odalia Wong, 'The Changing Relationship of Women with their Natal Families', Wong picks up an important theme in understanding the Chinese family and the changes it has undergone during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Traditionally, the responsibility of married women had been to support their in-laws and not their parents. One major aspect of the revolution undergone in Chinese family relations is the transformation of the role of daughters, examined by Wong through an extensive literature review. As women have become more independent of their traditional roles, through economic reform, urbanization, and migration, so their relations with their natal families have also changed. Wong charts the changing relationship of women to their natal families, both before and after marriage, in contemporary China.

The following paper, by Day Wong, while not unconcerned with family relations returns the focus to the nature and role of sociology in China by considering its place in the construction of sexual subjects. In 'Sexology and the Making of Sexual Subjects in Contemporary China' Wong provides an account of the way in which the Chinese state attempts to produce ideal citizens in

their domestic sphere, and the complicity of social science in the process. Wong identifies two strands of Chinese sociology, a biomedical and a subjective constructionist strand. In the context of state-sponsored citizenship development the former strand promotes sexual activity as a means to enhance marital harmony and thereby promote social stability. Chinese sexology attempts to establish behavioural norms in which sexual knowledge ensures a quality sex-life through such things as a 'proper frequency' of sexual engagement. Failure to meet these norms may lead to medical intervention. Wong shows how this approach to the sexual regulation of marriage has given rise to an alternative sociological approach to intimacy in China, which emphasizes subjective interpretations of self-practices and divergent sexual engagements. This paper provides an insight to changing aspects of family relations that compliments the preceding two papers.

The massive expansion of education in China, and especially the expansion of higher education since the 1990s, has drawn a great deal of sociological attention. The focus of the research conducted over the past decade has been concerned with educational inequality in China. Chinese universities are stratified with key universities enjoying more resources and status than non-key universities. Given the competition for places in key universities, Chinese parents play a significant role in preparing their children for entrance examinations. And yet much research points to the significance of stratification of schools in maintaining educational inequality in China. In a pioneering study that examines these qualitative differences as determinates of educational inequality, 'Transition to Higher Education in Contemporary China: A Study of High School Graduates in Urban Nanjing', Gina Lai, Jing Song, Odalia Wong and Xiaotian Feng report the findings of a major panel study. Lai and her associates show that family impact on educational aspiration tends to be mediated by high school ranking. The findings of this study indicate that China's mass education encourages meritocratic elitism through which occurs an intergenerational transfer of social advantage in which school stratification plays a mediating role.

The final two papers in this special issue examine different aspects of the development of sociological theory in China, one considering internal forces and the other external factors. The paper by Xiangqun Chang, 'Reciprocity (*lishang-wanglai*): a Chinese Model of Social Relationships and Reciprocity – State and Villagers' Interaction, 1936-2014', reports on an investigation of Kaixiangong village in Southeast China. Kaixiangong village has a special place in the history of Chinese sociology because it is where Fei Xiaotong conducted fieldwork for his major study, *Peasant Life in China*, originally written as a PhD thesis in English (Fei 1939). Fei, who was mentioned above in the context of the reintroduction of sociology into China after 1978, is mainly remembered today for 'construct[ing] a non-Western theoretical foundation for a sociology of Chinese society' (Hamilton and Wang 1992: 4). Chang's paper follows the lead of Fei not only in the choice of her research site but also in the development of a sociology of relationships based on a theorization of Chinese conceptualizations. In examining actions directed to the acquisition and distribution of social and material resources in Kaixiangong Chang presents three sets of findings. First, she shows how villagers' relationships are formed and maintained in terms of reciprocal and creative distributive practices. The second thing Chang shows is the changing nature of the relationship between the village and the state, illustrating the flexibility and creativity of relations even in the political sphere under party-state rule. Finally,

Chang present a theory of reciprocal influence and accommodation grounded in enduring cultural models that informs social relationships.

The last paper in this special issue, but by no means the least, examines the late introduction of a leading Western classical sociologist into the Chinese cultural area. In 'The Introduction and Reception of Max Weber's Sociology in Taiwan and China' Po-Fang Tsai shows how the context into which a theorist's work is introduced and not only the content of that theory shape its reception. By contrasting the reception of Weber in mainland China and Taiwan, and by distinguishing between the reception of his work prior to 1949 and from the 1980s Tsai advances both our understanding of cultural transfer and the different needs of 'textual communities'. Tsai also indicates something of the serendipitous route travelled by foreign texts, and the accidental links through international education of Chinese students and their foreign teachers, a matter touched upon in the opening sections of this introduction.

The different papers making up this special issue of the *Journal of Sociology* on 'Sociology in China, Sociology of China', engaging a range of methodologies and treating a number of distinct subjects, come together as a demonstration of the vitality of sociology in China and of a broader sociology of China. Since the Chinese nation entered the circuits of global capitalism in the 1980s Chinese society has attracted the attention of sociologists everywhere. It is almost impossible not to find discussion of an aspect of Chinese social structure, institution or behavior in current issues of sociology journals today published in English. This special issue not only contributes to this growing trend but will hopefully encourage further reflection and writing.

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