

## Achievement Without Coherence: The Rise of Chinese Sociology

**Abstract** In the formation of Chinese sociology prior to 1949, American influences were significant but gradually diminishing in the process of state-building. In the 1920s, overseas Chinese students were returning from America and elsewhere to found sociological associations and journals. Thanks to their linkages with the universities, foundations and voluntary associations, Republican sociologists made steady progress in the collection and analysis of social survey data. But the growth of Chinese sociology began to fluctuate with the expansion of higher education in the 1930s. Despite the standardization of curriculum and codification of knowledge, theoretical synthesis was increasingly decoupled from empirical studies. Impressive works in community studies were produced, but the sociological discipline as a whole failed to articulate a stable basis of knowledge production.

**Keywords** American influences • Community studies  
Higher education system • Social survey • State-building

Along with other social sciences, sociology was introduced in China at the turn of the twentieth century, when the Qing dynasty was encountering relentless military attacks and imperialist offensives from the West. The Chinese cultural and political elites were painstakingly searching for a viable way to transform China into a modern nation comparable in wealth and power to the “civilized” states of Europe, America, and

Japan. It was under this world-historical context that Western sociology came to be identified as the intellectual basis of a total reconstruction of the social and political order in China. From 1898 to 1903, Yan Fu translated and introduced Herbert Spencer's *The Study of Sociology* to the Chinese literati. While the classics of Western liberalism, including for instance Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*, and John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, constituted the main corpus of Yan's translation, he gave these works a nationalist reading in the form of footnotes and commentaries. By highlighting collective rather than individual freedom, Yan's overall purpose was to alert his compatriots to the universal forces of competition and evolution, and hence the necessity and urgency of social, political, and cultural reforms (Schwartz 1964).

From the outset, the inception of Western sociology was entangled with the political movements and ideological divides in China. Reformist intellectuals invoked sociology in articulating their visions of "society" (*qun*) as the moral and collective foundation of constitutional monarchy. Sociology was literally rendered as "the study of group" (*qun xue*), which found a similar expression and hence a source of legitimacy in the Confucian canon. Kang Youwei, the leader of the reform movement, included *qun xue* in the curriculum of his private academy in 1891. Tan Sitong, who belonged to the radical wing of the reformist intellectuals, used the word "sociology" (*shehui xue*) in his philosophical and political treatise *An Exposition of Benevolence* in 1896, though the term seemed to be his personal invention rather than being adopted from the West (Sun 1948 [2010]: 9–10). Liang Qichao wrote a polemical essay on *qun* and planned to follow up with a compendium on the same subject. As intellectual and political activists, these proto-sociologists did not so much observe than construct the object of society and the domain of sociology. Above all, their ideas were put into practice in the so-called "study societies" (*xuehui*), which were joined by like-minded intellectuals and officials and regarded as a microcosm of society per se (Chen 2017).

Under the New Policy (*xinzheng*) of the Qing government in the early years of the twentieth century, an increasing number of Chinese students were pursuing overseas studies (Reynolds 1993). Owing to physical and cultural proximity, Japan was one of the favorite destinations for the Chinese students. The number of Chinese students in Japan had been rapidly proliferating from 100 in 1899 to 8000–9000 in 1905–1906 (Harrel 1992: 2). Under the influence of Japanese teachers and revolutionaries, the Chinese students were exposed to radical social

thoughts such as anarchism and Marxism. They also learned about the modern social sciences, particularly international law out of their concern about the unequal treaties imposed on China. Sociology was also of major interest, which was reimported from Japan to China with the return of Chinese students. The previous reformist notion of *qun xue* was soon superseded by *shehui xue*, a Japanese translation adopted and popularized by the Chinese revolutionary Zhang Taiyan. Apart from finishing the first complete Chinese translation of Herbert Spencer's *The Study of Sociology* in 1902, Zhang also translated an introductory text by the Japanese sociologist Nobuta Kishimoto in 1900 (Sun 1948 [2010]: 13–15, 300). Since then, various Japanese works came to be translated. The works of American sociologists such as Lester Ward and Franklin Giddings also appeared in China through secondary translation.

Despite its growing popularity among the radical Chinese intellectuals, sociology was not formally taught in the university until 1906, when the first sociology courses were offered at the St. John's University in Shanghai (Dai 1993: 1; Ma 1998: 1). Foreign textbooks were used without modification in accordance with the local circumstances in China. The Imperial Academy, which was the predecessor of Peking University, listed sociology in its curriculum, but whether and how it was delivered remained unascertainable. Thanks to the ideologically charged climate, and the intellectual heritage of classicism in late Qing, there had been few original or systematic attempts to produce scientific knowledge about Chinese society. What radical scholars like Liu Shipei offered were mostly textual and philological studies of Chinese history under the evolutionary framework of Social Darwinism (Yao 2006). Sociology in the revolutionary period was nothing more than a Spencerian philosophy of history stuffed with Chinese historical materials.

## AMERICAN INFLUENCES AND THE RISE OF CHINESE SOCIOLOGICAL COMMUNITY

In the decade after the 1911 revolution, the development of Chinese sociology had borne the strong stamp of American institutions. Most universities offering sociology courses were funded or run by American missionaries, to the extent that some characterized early Chinese sociology as “American missionary sociology” (Wong 1979: 11). In that period, the missionary universities in China were governed by the laws

of Virginia, according to which they were granted the rights to design their own curriculums. This arrangement offered the major impetus for American missionaries to establish universities in China (*ibid.*: 13). In 1913, the first sociology department was set up at the Hujiang College (Shanghai College) by the American Methodist Episcopalians. As of 1925, there were altogether 10 missionary universities that offered sociology teaching. Among them, the most prestigious sociology department and graduate school were hosted by the Yanjing University (Yenching University). Since its founding in 1922, Yanjing sociology had offered up to 31 courses, far outnumbering that of other missionary universities (King and Wang 1978: 38; Wong 1979). Local Chinese universities such as Peking University and Qinghua University (Tsinghua University) started to teach sociology as late as 1916 and 1917 respectively (Dirlik 2012: 3; King and Wang 1978: 38). In 1921, Xiamen University established the first Chinese-run sociology department (more precisely a joint department of history and sociology) in China (Ma 1998: 45; Li 2012: 69).

Apart from religious purposes, the educational activities of American missionary universities aimed at a better understanding of Chinese society and on that basis the implementation of social and moral reform. To these ends, most of the teaching and research were delivered by American missionaries cum sociology professors. An example was Fr. George N. Putnam, who was assigned by the American Maryknoll Mission to be sociology professor at Lingnan University in Guangzhou. In Yanjing, John Stewart Burgess taught not only sociology but also Christian ethics in the theology school. Burgess also collaborated actively with other Christian institutions such as the Y.M.C.A. and the China Association of Christian Higher Education. While Yanjing and other missionary universities deliberately refrained from explicit religious inculcation, a moral and practical emphasis was implanted in sociological teaching and research in Republican China.

Apart from missionaries, some major universities in America also contributed to the early development of sociology in China. Two notable examples were the Princeton-Yenching Foundation and the Harvard-Yenching Institute. Founded in 1906, Princeton-in-Peking bore the purpose of delivering social services and studying urban conditions in China. It was later moved to Yanjing and renamed the Princeton-Yenching Foundation, which was devoted to studies in political science and sociology. On top of this regular platform, every year Princeton sent out two

sociologists to Yanjing and helped it set up the sociology department. In a similar vein, Harvard and Yanjing co-founded the Harvard-Yenching Institute in 1928, with the objective of promoting studies of Chinese culture and facilitating inter-cultural exchanges (Wong 1979).

Another crucial support for early Chinese sociology came from the Institute of Pacific Relations (IPR), which was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. The institute was a non-governmental organization established in the USA in 1925, which endeavored to promote democracy through studying the societies of the Pacific peoples, including America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, China, and Japan (Chiang 2001: 226). In China, the IPR constituted one of the most important sources of overseas financial support for social science development. Among the 8 countries it sponsored, China received the greatest amount of research expenditure, specifically 164,913 US dollars out of a total sum of 316,953 (ibid.: 227). To further enhance the growth of social sciences in China, the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Fund started to offer block grants to Yanjing University and Nankai University in 1928 and 1932 respectively (Wong 1979: 15). Between 1913 and 1934, China was the largest non-American recipient country (USD 37,481,104) of the Rockefeller Funds (Chiang 2001: 230). In 1934, the funding mode changed to project-based grants, thereby offering an incentive for individual Chinese sociologists and social scientists to bid research projects. Research funding was also available from the Nationalist government, but it was modest compared to American and international sponsorships (Wong 1979: 34).

While American institutions assumed a predominant role in the early development of Chinese sociology, the first generation of Chinese sociologists were being trained up overseas. As these young scholars were returning to China, a gradual shift took place in the composition of the sociological community from the 1920s onward. The teaching staffs in sociology had been mostly American, as the discipline was mainly taught at the missionary universities. J.A. Dealey, D.H. Kulp II and H.S. Bucklin of the Hujiang College, Rev. Wesley M. Smith of the Soochow University, G. Dittmer of the Qinghua University and John Steward Burgess of the Yanjing University were some notable examples. An exception was Kang Baozhong, a local Chinese scholar trained in Japan and became a sociology professor at the Peking University in 1916. But the situation was reversed in the 1940s, when Chinese sociologists became the majority and only a handful of overseas sociologists

were left. Based upon a survey by Sun Benwen in 1947, there were 131 local Chinese and 12 Americans among the 143 professors of sociology in China (Sun 1948 [2010]: 317–320).

What was noteworthy here was the American educational background of returning Chinese sociologists. According to the same survey in 1947, 71 out of 131 Chinese sociologists (54.2%) were trained in America, compared to 13 in France, 10 in Japan, 9 in Britain, 4 in Germany and 1 in Belgium. Among the top 11 universities in China, 40 out of 70 Chinese sociologists (57.1%) were educated in America, with only 13 professors having no overseas degree. In Yanjing, all teaching staffs were holders of American degree (Hsiao 1990: 137–138). Finally, in his survey of the educational background of 15 leading Chinese sociologists of that period, Wong (1979: 34) found that 10 of them received their doctoral or master degree in America, above all Columbia, whereas the remaining 5 got their doctoral degrees from the London School of Economics and Political Science in Britain. All these figures suggested that Chinese sociology was still highly influenced by America despite the emergence of an indigenous sociological community (Chen 2009).

## SOCIAL SURVEY AND THE INSTITUTIONAL BASIS OF CHINESE SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

With an incipient Chinese academic community, successive attempts were made to build up the intellectual and institutional foundation of Chinese sociology from the 1920s onward. A relatively neglected figure in this regard was Yu Tianxiu (Yu Tinn-Hugh), who obtained his doctoral degree in sociology at Clark University in 1920. Upon his return to China in 1921, Yu founded the Chinese Sociological Society and edited the *Shehuixue Zazhi* (Chinese Journal of Sociology), the first specialized journal of sociology in China. Published by the Shanghai Commercial Press, its objectives were to introduce sociological knowledge and offer critical commentaries on family, population and other social problems. These objectives bore the influence of the May Fourth movement of 1919, which was led by the professors and students in Peking University with the aim of reconfiguring traditional Chinese culture with “science” and “democracy” (Cheng and So 1983: 473). Yet there were still few contributions from professional sociologists to the Chinese Sociological Society and its journal. In composing a bibliography of recent sociological works, the *Chinese Journal of Sociology* (1922 1(1): 123–131) had to

include a large number of popular essays from *New Youth*, a literary magazine closely related to the newly founded Chinese Communist Party.

The limited development of Chinese sociology at this stage was rooted in the still scattered character of the indigenous sociological community and hence the absence of a critical mass. Sociologists of the day, including Yu himself and the eugenicist cum sociologist Pan Guangdan, lacked a stable position at the universities in Beijing and Shanghai. As a rule, they had to take up teaching jobs in other universities and departments. Neither Beijing nor Shanghai were yet congenial ground for sociology. For while Peking University was dominated by the philological tradition of late Qing scholars and their modern disciples, the University of Shanghai was populated by the advocates of socialism and Marxian sociology (Yeh 1990). From this perspective, the difficulties encountered by *Chinese Journal of Sociology* and the Chinese Sociological Society resulted mainly from the institutional underdevelopment of the university system, and an intellectual climate dominated by the critical studies of Chinese classics and a surging socialist current.

Though Yu Tianxiu was cautious in avoiding the possible confusion of sociology with socialism, his writings and public speeches at times adopted the Marxian language of exploitation and imperialism. Yu's style was increasingly objectionable to the Nationalist Party as it began to purge the Communists. It almost led to the official banning of the Chinese Sociological Society. With limited membership and financial resources, in 1927 Yu passed the baton of leadership of the Society to Xu Shilian (Leonard S. Hsu), who was the first Chinese chairman of the sociology department at Yanjing. The association and its journal were then renamed the Yanjing Sociological Society and *Shehuixuejie* (Sociological World).

Xu Shilian's predecessor in Yanjing was John Stewart Burgess, who as we have noted was an American missionary cum social scientist. In 1921, Burgess and his collaborator Sydney D. Gamble published *Peking: A Social Survey* (in English), which was the report of a large-scale survey of Beijing households and their social life. With a comprehensive coverage on population, government, health, education, commerce, entertainment, prostitution, poverty, prison condition, and Christian activities, the method and scope of the survey were modeled upon Charles Booth's study of the working class in London (Wong 1979: 13). In fact, Burgess was the first American scholar to conduct a social survey in China, which had gradually become the hallmark of Chinese sociology and the

intellectual tradition Xu inherited when he took over the departmental leadership at Yanjing (Arkush 1981: 27; Trescott 2007: 261). Most of the early social surveys were designed by professors and carried out by Chinese students under their supervision. Before the 1921 household survey, in 1912 Burgess and his students conducted a survey on 302 rickshaw men in Beijing under the commission of a Christian organization, the Society for Social Improvement in Peking (Wong 1979: 13). The reform impulse was also evident in the 1921 household survey, which was intended to offer advice for the social welfare program in Beijing and also to support Christian social workers (Gransow 2003: 503).

From the mid-1920s onward, the task of conducting social surveys had been shifting from American to Chinese sociologists, who nevertheless put the same emphasis on direct observation of social life and practical recommendation on family, welfare, population, and other social problems. The largest and best known survey research of the period was the Ding County Investigation conducted by Li Jinghan (Franklin C.H. Lee) in 1933. The survey produced a huge dataset covering 3.78 million respondents and a whole range of topics pertinent to their rural life, including geography, history, local government, communities, industry, commerce and finance, family, education, tradition, and custom (Li et al. 1987: 623). The research was supported by the China Association for the Promotion of Popular Education, a voluntary group under the popular education and rural construction movements led by Y. C. James Yen (a Chinese Christian) and Liang Shuming (a neo-Confucian scholar). Li's study was widely regarded as the beginning of the social survey movement, as it was followed by a wave of survey researches by Chinese sociologists, including Li Jinghan's *A Survey on the Situation of Peking Rickshaw Pullers* in 1925, and Tao Menghe's *An Analysis of the Cost of Living in Beijing* in 1926 (Rouleau-Berger 2016: 20). From 1927 to 1935, Chinese sociologists completed over 9000 survey projects.

What factors contributed to the spectacular achievement of the social survey movement? From an institutional point of view, a network of universities, associations, and foundations played a strategic role here. In the capacity of the social research director at the China Foundation for the Promotion of Education and Culture (which was founded with American war indemnities), Li Jinghan was recruited as a faculty member of the Yanjing sociology department in 1926. With a broader basis of students and research volunteers, Li soon became the pivotal figure in the social



survey movement. Under the leadership of Li and other Yanjing sociologists, the department had published 68 survey reports in *Sociological World* and other channels between 1922 and 1934 (Huang and Xia 2008: 54–64). As a distinctive mode of organizing research activity, team-based social surveys fit well with the liberal arts mission of Yanjing, which put a premium on close teacher-student relationships and the provision of social service to the community. What also favored Yanjing was its status as a private Christian college, by virtue of which it could secure a more regular flow of financial resources from the Rockefeller Foundation, Russell Sage Foundation, and other American and international agencies. Finally, Yanjing's linkages with local Chinese associations, including the aforementioned popular education and rural construction movements, served to enable and facilitate large-scale regional surveys. Taken as a whole, what made Yanjing the center of survey research was its position and skill in maintaining bicultural collaborations with foreign and local groups (Rosenbaum 2015).

Important as it was, Yanjing and its organizational networks did not exhaust the social survey movement. Non-Christian, non-American scholars such as Chen Da of Qinghua University also made huge contributions to labor and household surveys. Zhongshan University offered a rural survey program in 1920 (Trescott 2007: 262). Generally speaking, most sociologists of the day simultaneously served as university professors and research directors in voluntary associations or research institutes. John Steward Burgess was a professor in Yanjing and a member of the Y.M.C.A., whereas Chen Da of Qinghua and Tao Menghe of Peking University were in charge of the Institute of Social Survey in Peking. Thanks to this double status, a collaborative network could be formed between the various educational institutions. But compared to private universities, voluntary associations and overseas foundations, the state only assumed a subordinate role in offering research supports in this period. While the Nationalist government had been appointing the board of trustees for the China Foundation for the Promotion of Education and Culture, in 1926 it was merged with the Institute of Social and Religious Research in New York to provide regular sponsorship to the Institute of Social Survey in Peking (Wong 1979: 15).

A major intellectual accomplishment of the social survey movement in China was to go beyond the introduction and translation of Western works by applying sociological theories and methods to the studies of Chinese society (Li et al. 1987: 622). But the survey method began to

invite criticism as it was increasingly adopted. Most were directed against its empiricist tendency, as the massive collection of facts did not yield a coherent picture of social life or a consistent solution to social problems. Without the guidance of a conceptual framework, the social surveys were often nothing more than fact-finding regarding the history, geography, population and other spheres of life in a given region. But a closer look at the historical evidences would serve to qualify these complaints. It was true that the sociology curriculum at Yanjing was designed to prepare students for conducting social surveys (*Sociological World* 1929: 283–285). Under Xu Shilian's supervision, however, some of the students devoted themselves to studies of Chinese social thought and Chinese history from a sociological perspective. The survey method was not anti-theoretical to sociological theory; the latter indeed underwent significant development in the subsequent period.

#### SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY AND THE STATE-SPONSORED CODIFICATION OF KNOWLEDGE

With the end of warlordism and partial unification of China in 1927, the Nationalist government decided to reform the higher education system and provide stronger institutional support for academic disciplines, including sociology. In the meanwhile, a new batch of overseas Chinese students was returning from America and Europe. In 1929, a group of Chinese sociologists teaching in Shanghai and Nanjing, including Sun Benwen, Wu Jingchao and Wu Zelin, founded the Southeast Sociological Society and its official journal, *Shehuixuekan* (Journal of Sociology). This was welcomed by Xu Shilian and other sociologists in Beijing, who proposed to merge the new society with the Yanjing Sociological Society into a nationwide association. The proposal was officially passed in 1930, and the new association adopted the name of Chinese Sociological Society (Li 2012: 72; Dai 1993: 91). Sun Benwen served as the first chairman and chief editor of its journal. Up to 1949, the Chinese Sociological Society had held 9 annual conferences, and its membership was more than doubled from 66 to 160 between 1930 and 1947 (Li et al. 1987: 619).

At a broader institutional level, the close relationship of Chinese sociologists with private foundations and voluntary associations was being replaced by a higher level of interaction with the state. A new sociology department was housed by the National Central University in Nanjing,

with Sun Benwen serving as its head. Sun also served in the Ministry of Education from 1930 to 1932, while Chen Hansheng, a sociologist at Peking University, was appointed as head of the newly founded Department of Sociology at the Institute of Social Sciences, Academia Sinica. While the missionary universities had been enjoying a special status under the laws of Virginia, in 1930 the Nationalist government decided to unify the university system and apply nationwide educational policies to private and public universities alike. In 1938, the Ministry of Education issued the first standardized curriculum, in which sociology was designated as an elective course for all students in the faculties of arts, science, law, and education (Hsiao 1990: 136). A required course in anthropology and a new subject area of social administration were included in the national sociology curriculum (Zheng and Li 2003: 104–105). Before 1929 most of the sociology departments were not affiliated with any faculty; now it was classified under the faculty of arts or law. Though the Nationalist Government acknowledged sociology, political science, economics and law as social sciences, it rejected the idea of establishing a faculty of social science (Wong 1979: 20; Yan 2004: 36; Zhang 2002: 409).

A remarkable impact of the nationalization of higher education was an increase in student intake in the sociology departments. According to official statistics, in 1934 there were 483 university students majoring in sociology, making up 7% of the total in China. Sociology was ranked as the fifth most popular subject after Chinese literature, Western literature, history, and education (Wong 1979: 19; Li et al. 1987: 617). In the 1940s, the number of sociology major students reached its peak around 1000–1500 (King and Wang 1978: 38; Zheng and Li 2003: 105). In the Department of Sociology at Qinghua, a total of 82 sociology major students were graduated from 1932 to 1947, of whom 74 were male and only 8 were female. It was noteworthy that 20 graduates worked in the government and 15 worked in sociology departments and related organizations, testifying to the strong linkages between sociology and the state (Su 2004: 159–164).

Closely related to the standardization of the sociology curriculum was the codification of sociological knowledge. In terms of intellectual impact, the nationalization of the university system offered an incentive for Chinese sociologists to build a more solid and coherent theoretical foundation and thereby to enhance the academic status of their discipline. In 1929, Sun Benwen set out to compile a book series on

social control, social organization, social change, rural sociology, urban sociology, research methodology and other sociological topics. It was published in 15 volumes under the title of *An Outline of Sociology* in 1931, of which 3 were written by Sun himself and 12 were written by 9 other Chinese sociologists. Underlying this codification effort was Sun's vision of "synthetic sociology," which aimed to encompass a whole range of themes and approaches in the study of society. In this regard, Sun published *The Principles of Sociology* in 1935 and *The History of the Development of Contemporary Sociology* in 1947, in which different schools of sociology were introduced, discussed and synthesized. Though not all sociologists would follow Sun's synthetic approach, they were more eager to write introductory texts in sociology and its various subfields. By 1947, around 1000 books had been published on sociology and other relevant topics, of which 67% were related to social problem and social policy and 13% were pure sociology and social thought (King and Wang 1978: 38; Wong 1979: 23).

In addition to textbooks and research monographs, Western sociological classics such as Durkheim's *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Marx's *Capital*, William Ogburn's *Social Change*, Raymond Firth's *Human Types* and Karl Mannheim's works in the sociology of knowledge were translated (Wong 1979: 24). The wide range of these translations reflected a latent trend of the period. As the sociological community was expanding from Beijing and Shanghai to Nanjing and elsewhere, it offered an opportunity for the diversification of sociological knowledge. Though American sociology remained the dominant model, some sociologists were experimenting with different schools and national traditions in Western sociology. An example here was Hu Jianmin, a sociologist in Shanghai with an academic training in France instead of America. As a former student of Maurice Halbwachs, Hu published an introductory series on Durkheimian sociology in the *Journal of Sociology* (1930 2(1): 139–148; 1930 2(2): 151–174; 1931 2(3): 152–157). Similar efforts were made by Wu Wenzao, who began his academic career in the early 1930s by introducing the sociological traditions of France, Germany, Britain, and America (Wu 2010).

On the whole, however, the discussions of American and European sociology were couched in highly general terms. Methodological issues such as the differences between statistics and case studies were only briefly addressed. Outside their professional circle, Sun Benwen, Chen Xujing and others were able to contribute to the intellectual debate on

Western and Chinese culture by drawing upon the new concept of culture developed by American sociologists and anthropologists in the 1930s. But a remarkable tendency of the more specialized articles in the *Journal of Sociology* was an emphasis on theoretical synthesis and a relative neglect of empirical studies—a reversal of the *status quo ante* during the social survey movement. In this light, one of the major academic accomplishments of Chinese sociology in the 1930s was the compilation of book series and textbooks, while the attempt to work out a theoretical synthesis was still by and large premature.

A possible explanation for the predilection for armchair theorizing lay in the division of labor between sociology and social administration on the one hand, and theoretical work and empirical research on the other. With the progressive march of state-building, the administration of social affairs was increasingly regarded as the specialized field of social welfare officers, while the implementation of large-scale research projects was primarily reserved for the newly founded Academia Sinica. Established under the instructions of the Nationalist government in 1928, the Academia Sinica housed the Institute of Social Sciences that in turn consisted of two subdivisions in ethnology and economics in Nanjing, and another two subdivisions in sociology and law in Shanghai. While the Institute of Social Survey headed by Chen Da, Li Jinghan and Tao Menghe was once the spearhead of survey research, in 1934 it was incorporated into the Institute of Social Sciences, Academia Sinica (Gransow 2003: 502–503; Li 2012: 71). Under this new division of academic labor, sociologists were assigned with the supporting role of teaching general sociological knowledge to professional social workers and social researchers. Taking up this supplementary task might secure financial resources for sociology departments, but it also implied a higher level of dependency on the state's educational and social policies.

Although sociology as an academic discipline grew progressively at the turn of the 1930s, it encountered some serious drawbacks alongside the marked increase in enrollment and funding (Zheng and Li 2003). A crisis occurred when the sociology department at the National Central University was temporarily closed down by the Nationalist government in 1932 and then again in 1936 (Au-Yeung 2000). Some other universities also closed their sociology departments in the same period. One possible factor was that the Nationalist government was skeptical about the worth of sociology as a separate science, especially as it was focusing on the building of industrial and military infrastructures. But according

to Sun Benwen's observation, the hesitation mainly came from the confusion of sociology with socialism (Dirlik 2012: 6; Zheng and Li 2003: 104). Especially between 1934 and 1937, sociology had experienced considerable pressure under the anti-Communist New Life Movement mobilized by the Nationalist Government (Hsiao 1990: 136). The government's attitudes began to stabilize only as Sun Benwen openly pledged for value neutrality and aligned academic sociology with the state goals of social reform and social engineering (Dirlik 2012: 9).

## SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND COMMUNITY STUDIES IN THE WAR PERIOD

Parallel to the attempts to develop a theoretical system, a breakthrough in sociological research took place in Yanjing. It was initiated by Wu Wenzao, who became the chairman of Yanjing sociology department in 1933. Through his personal network, international scholars such as Radcliffe-Brown and Robert Park were invited to give visiting lectures and training workshops at Yanjing. With such exposure, Wu eventually worked out a new research program that combined human ecology in the tradition of Chicago sociology with the functionalist school of British social anthropology. Under Wu's supervision, a group of young scholars began to produce distinguished studies in Chinese society using the fieldwork method. One of his students was Fei Xiaotong, who was referred to Bronislaw Malinowski for doctoral studies in anthropology at the London School of Economics. Upon his return to China in 1939, Fei soon became the proponent of community studies and field investigation in Chinese sociology, and won international acclaim with the publication of *Peasant Life in China* (1939) and *Earthbound China* (1949). Under his influence, community studies of the period focused on particular villages or ethnic communities in China. Some of the representative works included We Zhelin and Chen Guoyun's *The Life of the Black Miao Nationality in the Lu Mountains* in 1940, Zhang Zhiyi's *Handicraft Industry in Yi Village* in 1943, Xu Yitang's *The Luo People in the Xiaoliang Mountains* in 1944, and Shi Guangheng's *The Workers of Kun Factory* in 1945 (Li et al. 1987: 624).

With this impressive record, it might not be an exaggeration to conceive the 1940s as the golden era of academic sociology in China. It was even proposed that "before the Second World War, outside North America and Western Europe, China was the scene of the most

flourishing sociology in the world, at least in respect of its intellectual qualities” (Freedman 1962: 113). The Sino-Japanese War in 1937 did affect the sociology departments in China, as major universities were forced to move to the southwestern regions of Chongqing and Kunming (Zheng and Li 2003: 104). But Chinese sociologists could continue their teaching and research activities via temporary platforms such as the Yanjing-Yunnan Station for Sociological Research, which was established by Wu Wenzao and later headed by Fei Xiaotong during the 1930s and 1940s in their capacity of sociology professor at the Yunnan University. Other institutions such as the Business Office for Social Investigation were also set up for sustaining empirical social research.

To a certain extent, the community studies inaugurated by Wu Wenzao, Fei Xiaotong and others could overcome the empiricism of earlier social surveys by introducing a functionalist framework. But most of these studies were confined to specific communities, and as such they failed to provide an empirical basis for broader theoretical generalizations. Above all, the concept of function invoked in Chinese community studies did not address the integration of society as a whole, but largely served as a heuristic device linking disparate phenomena such as family, custom and economic life at the local level (Liu 2007). Instead of an inability to theorize as such, the problem was at least partly derived from institutional constraints. In the original plan of Wu Wenzao, students were to be systematically recruited and assigned to do fieldworks in their respective hometowns. These local and regional studies would eventually add up to a coherent picture of Chinese society at large. But this research practice was adopted only because there were few organizational linkages with local communities. Apart from the withdrawal of support from American and international agencies during the Great Depression, a plausible explanation for the lack of organized access to research subjects was the shrinking space of local and international civic associations under the centralized party-state. In this interpretation, state-building could be detrimental to the development of Chinese sociology, as it rooted out the fabric of social relationships that had been supporting survey activities in the past.

The problem of coordinating research efforts was also aggravated by the war with Japan. As mentioned before, Chinese sociologists and other academics had migrated to the southwest from 1937 onward. This helped to refurbish the basis of sociological and anthropological research, as ethnic minorities in this region readily constituted the objects of social

scientific investigation (Fei 1979). But this also blurred the disciplinary boundary of Chinese sociology when it was still at the incipient stage. Chinese sociologists such as Li Anzhai had to redefine their academic interests in accordance with topical concerns such as Tibetan Buddhism, and Wu himself was exploring “frontier studies” as a new field of study (Yang 2015). While individual figures like Fei Xiaotong and Lin Yaohua could garner international recognition, the effective dissemination of their works was heavily dependent on personal connections with the international academic community. In this way, Wu and his “Yanjing school” was increasingly decoupled from the rest of the indigenous sociological community. In fact, Yanjing sociologists and their works were scarcely mentioned in Sun Benwen’s (1948 [2010]) definitive account of Chinese sociology before the Communist takeover.

In retrospect, the history of academic sociology in China prior to 1949 was a strange story in which a new branch of knowledge arose and developed in spite of the paucity of local resources, but ceased flourishing when state supports became more available. From the 1920s onward, an increasing number of returning overseas students, chiefly from America, endeavored to build the intellectual and organizational basis of Chinese sociology by founding associations and editing journals. In the meanwhile, Chinese sociologists had made steady progress in the collection and analysis of social survey data. Thanks to their multiplex ties with the universities, voluntary associations, and international foundations, these early Chinese sociologists served as chief agents in the global (albeit Eurocentric) flow of knowledge in the first half of the twentieth century.

Somewhat paradoxically, the growth of Chinese sociology began to fluctuate and stagnate with the expansion and consolidation of higher education. As the Nationalist Party wielded military, political, and administrative power, the 1930s marked the inception of state-building projects, of which the nationalization of the university system was a constitutive part. The housing of a new sociology department at the National Central University in Nanjing provided an impetus for the standardization of curriculum and codification of knowledge. Yet a reversal of fortune soon occurred: theoretical synthesis came to a standstill and was increasingly decoupled from empirical work. Instead of the national university system, sociology attained a certain breakthrough only at a private Christian college, Yanjing University. While young scholars like Fei Xiaotong could produce impressive works and gain



individual recognition in the international academic community, the sociological discipline as a whole failed to articulate a coherent basis of knowledge production and accumulation. Hence Chinese sociology up to 1949 did not lack professional associations, academic journals, and exemplary works, but these developments did not yield to a systematic collection of social facts based upon a unified conceptual scheme.

### MARXIAN SOCIOLOGY AS A COUNTERCURRENT

Obverse to the twists and turns of academic sociology was Marxism, which likewise made its headway into China by the turn of the twentieth century. While Chinese students and scholars had been drawn to radical social thoughts before the 1920s, the strongest appeal came from anarchism rather than Marxism per se (Dirlik 1989; Zarrow 1990). With the May Fourth Movement in 1919, more intellectuals and students were converted to a sinicized version of Marxism, which was distinctive in its emphasis on the role of will and consciousness in the making of history through class struggle and the resistance against feudalism and imperialism. Two years after the formation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Shanghai, a sociology department was founded at the Shanghai University in 1923. Li Dazhao and Qu Qiubai, respectively the founder of the CCP and the chairman of the new sociology department, lectured and wrote on socialism in the disguise of “sociology”. The choice of the label was a strategic move to avoid political persecution; the Chinese Marxists’ teachings and writings on society had little in common with the sociological discipline then promulgated by the American missionaries and academic Chinese sociologists.

Being part of an opposition party and its revolutionary ideology, Marxian social teaching could not expect the institutional support and scientific glamor enjoyed by academic sociology. The equivalent to empirical research was “social investigation” (*shehui diaocha*), which likewise took the form of social surveys but was guided by the motifs of historical materialism and class analysis. An exemplar was Mao Zedong’s *Report on an Investigation into the Peasant Movement in Hunan* in 1927, which could be regarded as one of the earliest attempts to relate Marxist theory to empirical studies. However, few efforts had been devoted to incorporate Marxian themes into treatises in general sociology, the only notable exception being Li Da’s *An Outline of Sociology* published in 1935.

In this light, Marxian sociology seemed to be caught in a zero-sum game with its academic counterpart. Alongside the institutionalization of sociology in the university system, the Nationalist government began its bloody purge of Communists in 1927. In the meanwhile, the “debate on social history” took place inside the Marxist circle, which consisted of some serious (though at times confusing) discussions on the periodization of Chinese history. The crux of the matter was the Marxian scheme of history and its applicability to China, specifically how the pre-capitalist social formations should be understood and mapped onto various stages of Chinese history (Dirlik 1978). Apart from involvements in class and anti-imperialist struggle, the Chinese Marxists inadvertently produced their own version of academic sociology by way of meticulous, theoretically-informed studies in economic and social history. But the spirit of open debate and free inquiry did not last long, as the victory of the CCP in the Civil War had brought about the ideological supremacy of Marxism-Leninism. More fatally, the cultural and political catastrophes following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China eventually rendered all forms of historical and sociological reflection obsolete.

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