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## Article

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economic sociology. perspectives and conversations

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# Economic sociology in China: Past and promises

Ping Fu and Dian Yang

## Economic sociology in pre-reform China

Chinese sociology has a long-standing tradition of studying economic phenomena. Although the academic research and discipline construction of contemporary Chinese economic sociology are directly affected by Western economic sociology after the 1970s, Chinese sociologists carried out a large amount of investigation and research on economic phenomena and economic problems before the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. The social surveys carried out by scholars record the transformation of Chinese traditional economic and social structure and bring forth a group of influential scholars and academic thought of far-reaching value.

After the founding of the Republic of China (ROC) in 1911, some intellectuals recognized that social reform was the premise for political reform, and social research was the way to find solutions to various social problems. In this context, a social research movement in the early twentieth century encouraged many scholars in the disciplines of sociology, economics, history, and culture to apply Western research methods in the analysis of the economic and social situation at that time. Social research conducted by sociologists mainly focused on urban and rural areas, covering the eco-

economic foundation, poverty, land, labor class, industrialization process, and other aspects of Chinese society (Yan 2010, 59–88; Yang 2010). Those works related with economic sociology could be grouped into two sub-themes: one is “capitalism, industrialization, and labor,” and the other, “rural industry.”

The role of capitalism and industrialization in the process of China's modernization has always been the key question of Chinese economic sociology. In the first half of the twentieth century, American-trained sociologist Wu Jingchao put forward a set of theories on industrialization and social construction and tried to explore an approach to integrate the two social and economic systems “free market” and “plan economy” (Li, Qu, and Yang 2009, 317–27). Taking the relationship between environment, ethnicity, and institution as the perspective, Chinese American sociologist Li Shuqing discussed the reasons why Chinese society failed to take the road of capitalism, and clarified the man-land relationship, capital accumulation, historical and cultural tradition, and social system foundation in the process of social structure reform in China at that time (Li, Qu, and Yang 2009, 329–39). In terms of labor research, Shi Guoheng, as an excellent representative scholar in this field, firstly discussed the identity, interpersonal relationships, life style, and labor mode changes of the rural labor force working in factories in the ROC, as well as the process of social and industrial transformation at that time, in *China Enters the Machine Age* (Li, Qu, and Yang 2009, 530–44). As leading figures of the social research move-

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ment, Tao Menghe and Li Jinghan have carried out many research projects, promoted the investigation of Chinese working-class individuals and families, and enriched the research of labor-capital relations, the working class, and social classes and their family con-

sumption behavior (Yang 2010, 73–78). From a more macro perspective, Chen Da, one of the pioneers of modern Chinese demography, comprehensively investigated the industrial characteristics, the origin and development of labor-capital problems, and the living conditions of the working class (including trade union organizations) in Chongqing, Kunming, and Shanghai during the war, and put forward the theories of “survival competition” (economic character) and “achievement competition” (social character) of the working class (Li, Qu, and Yang 2009, 627–44).

Meanwhile, the rural industry, mainly based on the household handicraft industry, was directly squeezed by the large industrial capital and products from both domestic enterprises and foreign countries. The rural industry research on Ding County, such as that of social survey experts Zhang Shiwen and Li Jinghan, classified the household industry and workshop industry and suggested that industrial development in China could be both concentrated and decentralized (see Zhang Shiwen 1991). The famous sociologist Fei Xiaotong also paid much attention to rural industrialization (Fei [1939] 2001). His early study of the silk industry in Kaixiangong Village (Jiang Cun) in Jiangsu Province not only emphasized the historical inheritance of the household handicraft industry and the practical needs of small-scale agricultural economy but also highlighted the impact of foreign capital and large industry invasion on rural industry. Fei Xiaotong's *Peasant Life in China* (1939) was considered the first systematic analysis of economy from a sociological perspective by a Chinese scholar. This book is Fei Xiaotong's doctoral dissertation, published by Routledge, UK. In the preface, he pointed out that the book aimed to describe the consumption, production, distribution and trading system of Chinese peasants, and to explain the relationship between the economic system and the specific geographical environment, as well as the relationship between the economic system and the social structure of this community (Fei Xiaotong [1939] 2001). It is the mainstream research approach of economic sociology to analyze the economy from the perspective of a specific institutional environment and social structure. However, this academic approach was interrupted for decades due to the rearrangement of the discipline and colleges in the 1950s, and it was not revived until the restoration and reconstruction of sociology after reform and opening-up. Rural sociologist Zhang Zhiyi's study of “Yi Village” suggested that the household handicraft industry and workshop industry both had typical characteristics of Chinese traditional industry and reflected the combination of industry and agriculture with Chinese characteristics (Li, Qu, and Yang 2009, 487–507). Fei's and Zhang's studies, focused on the transformation and develop-

ment of rural industry (handicraft industry), suggested that the structural foundation and basic motive mechanism of rural modernization were the external manifestation of the internal integration of organization, technology, and capital in modern Chinese society. Moreover, the Marxist social scientist Chen Hansheng obtained a great amount of firsthand information on the rural economy in the Republic of China after his field trips to Jiangnan, Hebei, Lingnan, Shandong, Anhui, and Henan. This information was valuable documentation to analyze the wartime economy, the changes in rural economy, the land system, the relationship between agriculture and industry and commerce, and the operation of international monopoly capital (Li, Qu, and Yang 2009, 156–58).

During the first three years of the PRC, sociologists participated in the land reform movement, analyzed the problems of production and the wealth gap in the agricultural economy, discussed the foundation and process of industrialization in China, and raised the sociological voice for social science research and economic and social reform of the PRC. However, some social science disciplines such as sociology and political science were conceived of as being bourgeois by nature and hence were disavowed by the top leaders of the Chinese Communist Party. In 1952, the central government conducted a large-scale rearrangement of disciplines and colleges according to the Soviet model, and as a result more than twenty sociology departments were abolished nationwide. In 1953, the last two departments of sociology at Sun Yat-sen University and Yunnan University were abolished during the adjustment of colleges and departments, and sociology as a discipline had disappeared entirely in China by this year. Despite all this, some sociologists, such as Wu Jingchao (1954), continued to adopt a sociological perspective to analyze the institutional structure and micro practice of economic development in China to varying degrees until the Anti-Rightist Movement began in 1957. Many studies on economic problems conducted by early Chinese sociologists have shown that sociological analysis of the economy is an important tradition of Chinese sociology.

## Economic sociology in contemporary China

As one of the significant branches of Chinese sociology, economic sociology developed with the recovery and reconstruction of sociology after reform and opening-up. In March 1979, Deng Xiaoping put forward the statement that sociology is “making up missed lessons” in the Party's theoretical working

meeting, which inaugurated the restoration and reconstruction of Chinese sociology. Although some scholars held the first symposium on economic sociology in Tianjin in 1984, construction of economic sociology as a discipline in China, and especially academic research, started relatively late. Chinese economic sociology in contemporary China can be divided into three stages according to the characteristics of its development.

The first stage was the gestation stage in the 1980s, when some universities and social science academies in China rebuilt or built new sociological institutions and gradually restored teaching of and research in sociology. In 1980, Nankai University and the Institute of Sociology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences were authorized to jointly organize a training class in sociology, aiming at providing professional talents for key universities and research institutes of sociology. Foreign scholars were invited to China to give lectures to train the students. The American sociologist Peter M. Blau was one of the first foreign scholars that entered Chinese universities, and he taught a course called the "The History of Sociological Theories" at Nankai University in 1981. Foreign theories and methods of economic sociology began to be translated and introduced into China. The first group of works in economic sociology to be introduced into China include textbooks and books compiled by the Japanese sociologist Tominaga Kenichi and Professor Stinchcombe and Professor Smelser from the United States.<sup>1</sup> Their works have helped Chinese scholars to comprehend the historical origin, development process, basic content, theoretical perspective, and research methods of economic sociology. In this period, some Chinese sociologists wrote articles introducing foreign economic sociology theories and research reports with certain characteristics of economic sociology.

The second stage is the prospering stage in the 1990s. After more than ten years of digestion, discussion, and absorption of Western theories, Chinese economic sociology developed rapidly in the 1990s; especially at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the discipline advanced qualitatively and quantitatively. In this period, the translation and publication of foreign textbooks basically came to an end, and more translation and introduction work began to focus on important research works. Meanwhile, a variety of economic sociology textbooks and reference books were published by Chinese scholars. According to our preliminary calculation, in the 1980s there were no economic sociology textbooks and reference books compiled and published by Chinese scholars, while more than eight books were published in the 1990s. These textbooks entered the economic sociology classrooms of universities (see e.g., Wang 1993; Zhu and

Gui 1998; Wang 1999; Zhu 1999), which laid a foundation for the popularization of economic sociology theory and the cultivation of intellectuals. Furthermore, empirical-based and theoretical-oriented economic sociology research began a growth spurt at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Some high-quality papers with rich local economic phenomena and a certain theoretical contribution were published one after another. At that time, the research subjects of sociologists were also closely related to the popular and critical economic topics, such as the reform of township enterprises (Qiu 1999), the reform of state-owned enterprises (Li 1998; Qiu, Xu, and Zhao 1997), and the booming private economy (Li 1995, 1996). Therefore, research in economic sociology thus got rid of the straightforward investigation report or simple application of Western theories to explain the situation of China's economic phenomena from the late 1990s.

Since the start of the twenty-first century, economic sociology has entered the third stage of rapid development and advancement. Based on the discipline construction and research foundation established in the past twenty years, more textbooks, reference books compiled by Chinese scholars, translated classic research works, and more academic papers were published at this stage. Economic sociology has also become the key branch of sociology discipline construction and academic research in many distinguished universities in China. Among them, Shanghai University of Finance and Economics established the first department of economic sociology in China in 2003. The department stresses the characteristics of economic sociology in both teaching and scientific research. In undergraduate and postgraduate courses, emphasis is placed on a curriculum including economic sociology, corporate sociology, development sociology, labor sociology, organizational sociology, consumer sociology, financial sociology, and fiscal sociology. In academic research, the department focuses on economic sociology research topics such as industrial upgrading, finance, labor, corporates, and aging, and the faculties have published a number of academic papers and books in these fields. Economic sociology's position in China's sociology discipline system has, as it were, been further strengthened, which further promotes the training and research in economic sociology.

In the third stage, Chinese economic sociologists are no longer blindly accepting and following foreign theories but are paying more attention to research based on local economic and social practice rather than academic issues framed by the foreign academic discourse system, and consciously constructing the localization of concepts and discourse systems, which demonstrates the "theoretical consciousness" and

“practical consciousness” of Chinese economic sociology. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the economic sociologists made many landmark achievements on the topics of the reform of township enterprises, the reform of state-owned enterprises, and the economic behavior of local governments. Some studies have also carried out in-depth discussions on some classical theories: for example, Liu Shiding, She Xiaoye, and Zhou Xueguang develop the theory of property rights based on a set of research with a “social perspective of property rights” (see a group of papers in Institute of Sociology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences 2006); Li Peilin (2001) and Liu Shaojie (2005) extended the theoretical implications of rational choice theory; Wang Hejian (2013) put forward the social practice theory of self-action logic on the social structure of the market; and Fu Ping (2013) proposes the theoretical approach “political-structural framework” for the study of the formation of market order in China. Meanwhile, scholars have put forward some original concepts with academic potential, such as “three dimensions of possession” (Liu 2003), “property rights as a relational concept” (Zhou 2005), and “property rights are a continuous spectrum” (Li 2004). The research not only discovers more “Chinese experience” and “Chinese model” but also pays attention to the theoretical contribution and the advancement and development of relevant theories from different perspectives. In recent years, economic sociology research has been attempting to expand new research methods, research perspectives, and research fields, and provides new sociological perspectives and new evidence for the multidisciplinary research fields of transaction behavior, property rights, corporate governance, enterprise strategy, market governance, financial markets, industrial development, and political and commercial relations. For example, the Chinese sociologists have started to explore the financial markets that have not been addressed by Chinese sociology and found that the Chinese financial market is not only a means of enterprise financing and rapid prosperity but also an important driving force of modernization of economic governance in China. The financial market plays a vital role in the transformation of the governance mechanism of both small and state-owned enterprises and the overall modernization of Chinese enterprises (Yang 2018). Scholars also explored the social mechanisms that a booming economy grows from an over-embedded industry structure, and paid attention to some important changes in the development of the Chinese economy, such as the relationship between the non-public economy and the Party (Zhu, Miao, and Wang 2021), the “state capacity for understanding,” and the development of certain industries (Feng, Jiang, and Zhao 2021).

In the past decade, Chinese economic sociology has also accelerated its institutionalization process, especially in the establishment of professional organizations and the regularization of professional conferences. With the continuous efforts of the older generation of scholars, the economic sociology section of the Chinese Sociological Association was officially established in 2012. The establishment of the national professional academic organization is a milestone in the development of Chinese economic sociology, a symbol of the gradual maturity of the discipline, and plays an obvious positive role in building an academic community of economic sociology. Meanwhile, a series of professional academic conferences held in many parts of the country, as well as the series of Economic Sociology Research published since 2014, not only boost the internal communication and cooperation in economic sociology but also function to clarify the research topics and refine the key direction of discipline development. In addition, Fu Ping and Yang Dian co-edited the anthology *Forty Years of Chinese Economic Sociology*. On the one hand, the anthology reviews the academic achievements and major progress of Chinese scholars in the field of economic sociology in the past 40 years and provides a communication platform for the development status, frontier fields, and research perspectives and methods of Chinese economic sociology, so as to prospect and plan the development of economic sociology. On the other, the anthology aims to further promote the institutionalized discipline construction of Chinese economic sociology, advance the specialization and localization of economic sociology research, and provide academic “nutrients” for the training in this discipline. The anthology covers six themes, namely, theory and method research, enterprise research, market research, industry research, financial research, and development model research. More than twenty scholars have conducted fruitful theoretical exploration and empirical research on the frontier issues of Chinese economic sociology, expanding and deepening the research scope of economic sociology and its disciplinary significance (see Fu and Yang 2020).

## The prospect of economic sociology in China

Although sociologists established the tradition of sociological analysis of the Chinese economy before the founding of the PRC, contemporary economic sociology research does not set out to continue the theoretical tradition but to change the academic paradigm of the early tradition of economic analysis in Chinese

sociology. This is mainly reflected in the fact that the early Chinese sociologists discussed economic issues per se, with strong concern for reality and a vague consciousness of research dialogue and theoretical contribution, while contemporary Chinese economic sociologists have attached great importance to theoretical dialogue, theoretical concerns, and theoretical contributions based on the academic context. The major theoretical perspectives of new economic sociology (Dobbin 2008), the perspective of new institutionalism, the performativity perspective (Callon 1998), and the perspective of population ecology have been widely used by contemporary Chinese economic sociologists in the sociological study of economic phenomena. At the same time, the trend for contemporary Chinese economic sociologists to integrate organizational sociology, cultural sociology, consumption sociology, financial sociology, and other branches of sociology is also emerging (Wang 2009; Yang 2018; Chan [2012] 2020).

In Western academia, relying on an increasingly broad spectrum of methods, from sophisticated network analyses to rich ethnographic observation, economic sociologists offer revealing accounts of how economic organizations and activities actually work (Zelizer 2011. xi). In China, in the past forty years or so, Chinese economic sociologists have shown a remarkable improvement in the sense of the application of sociological methods and theoretical dialogue and have gradually established a substantive dialogue with Western academia in the past decade. It is the arduous work and unremitting efforts of generations of Chinese economic and sociological scholars in the past 40 years that have made Chinese economic sociology grow from a deserted land that was abandoned for decades and with a weak foundation into an active field of academic research whose scope of influence is gradually moving beyond the discipline of sociology itself.

Although Chinese economic sociology has made gratifying progress and has broad prospects, it must be noted that many problems exist in the discipline: research topics are too scattered and academic continuity is not strong enough; the scale of research teams is limited; there are few original concepts and native theories with academic potential; there are few forward-looking studies, such as economic sociology studies on strategic emerging industries and artificial

intelligence; there are few studies responding to grand issues, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, Sino-American trade relations, and COVID-19. Furthermore, the progress in productivity and the change of cognitive concept brought by technological innovation and new economic forms will affect the global mode of production, industrial division of labor, value flows, employment relationships, and changes in world political and economic patterns, hence economic sociology research in these aspects also needs to be strengthened. In addition, it is of great importance for economic sociologists to apply the perspective of integrity to address issues of the relationships between economy, technology, and society, such as the integration of technology and economy e.g., digital currency based on blockchain technology and financial electronic services based on the traditional financial system), as well as the interaction between technology, economy, and society (e.g., the different consequences of different investors investing in the financial market via mobile internet). In terms of the discipline's relationship with economics, a few branches of contemporary economics have highlighted the trend of "sociologicalization." On the one hand, some economists pay more attention to the traditional sociological issues; on the other, economics draws more on sociological knowledge in research methods, models, and ideas (Fu 2018, 266). In the current dilemma or at the crossroads of discipline development, to promote Chinese economic sociology to a new stage of development at a higher level, economic sociology should not only supplement more sociological factor analysis to the mainstream economic explanation of economic phenomena based on abundant practical experience in China but also make breakthroughs in the Chinese theory of economic sociology.

## Endnote

- 1 From November to December 1984, Tominaga Kenichi was invited to teach "economic sociology" for postgraduate students in the just-founded department of sociology at Nankai University. The *Economic Sociology* (the first edition of 1974) edited by him was the first translated and published economic sociology work in China.

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