

# Chinese Sociology: “Chinese Learning” or “Western Learning”

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**Abstract:** Both the problem consciousness and research characteristics reflected in Chinese sociological traditions are closely connected with the changes and development of the contemporary Chinese society and thus have an impact on the basic features of Chinese sociology. The “for oneself” tradition of Chinese sociology has displayed a fully–open mind for the tradition, the core thought and issue resources of western sociology, and at the same time, it also reflects Chinese solid research on western traditions. This tradition is of great inspiration for us to reflect on the challenges and relevant disputes confronting Chinese sociology today, for how to define and think about the “Chinese learning” or “western learning” problem in Chinese sociology is at the same time a core issue both in the disputes between the theory and the methodology, and in interpreting Chinese “localized” sociology as a discipline.

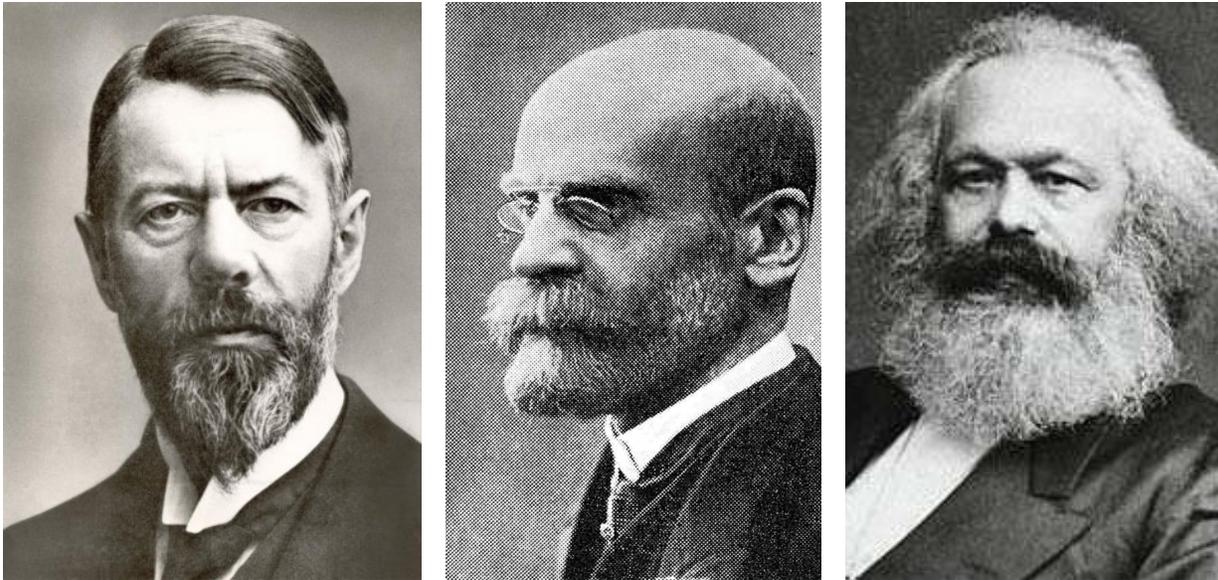
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## 1. Problem consciousness

Many attempts have been made to define “Chinese learning” and “western learning,” however, it does not mean the problem posed by the two terms is non–existent. The relationship between Chinese learning and western learning, since the interaction between them in contemporary history, has long been a core issue in the Chinese academic world, and the worries and arguments associated with it are not abating but are instead becoming more intense in specific problem consciousness in various disciplines, research objectives, and the establishment of institutions. In these aspects, many sociologists and scholars of other disciplines who share the same feelings and ideas are “worried,” yet sociology in itself, as an introduced discipline from the western world, is increasingly complicated when the relationships between Chinese learning and western learning are involved. The

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The three classical sociologists, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx

reason is that nearly the entire discipline framework including its definition, theory, methodology, and research traditions was wholly introduced from Europe and America. The three classical sociologists, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx, were European. After its construction, Chinese sociology has been immensely influenced by American society. So the discussion of Chinese learning and western learning in sociology should concern the question “what is sociology” which however, has no definite answer, for no agreement has ever been achieved among sociologists, making it a fundamental question in shaping different schools and traditions of sociology.

About this question, the Chinese academic world has its own understanding, and the related discussions in themselves have formed a part of the realm of the Chinese learning and western learning problem in a broad sense. It is generally recognized that the first person who introduced sociology to Chinese academic circles was Yan Fu through his *Qunxue Yiyuan*, a translated version of *The Study of Sociology* in which,

as well as his subsequent translated works and other introductions, his perception on sociology had been recognized as representative in the Chinese academic world. In fact, as an individual, Yan Fu presented a complicated attitude towards the relationship between Chinese learning and western learning in sociology, but this is not a concern here. In the preface of *Qunxue Yiyuan* and many other works such as *Original Power* and *A Letter to the Head of Diplomacy Journal*, Yan Fu wrote clearly that he actually introduced sociology as a wise learning to China, hoping it could cure “our sickest sufferers.” If sociology, as an introduced western learning, has complicated its relationship with Chinese learning in its original nature, then the understanding of the two questions “what is sociology” and “what can sociology do” can effectively help us sort out this problem. That is, in China, although sociology was initially regarded as an introduced western learning, scholars with Yan Fu as their representative believed on the one hand, it was the same as traditional Chinese classical theories in its concerns and even more keen, while, on the other hand, its introduction, from the

very beginning, had been conducted with a distinct “for oneself” problem consciousness. (Yan, 1986, pp. 5–15). This dual interpretation of sociology has never ceased its influence on the tradition of Chinese sociology and with the development of the academic history become more and more clear. Under the overall problem consciousness, Chinese sociology, since its establishment, has laid a foundation of an extremely clear spirit based on the tradition in view of the global civilization, and displayed a characteristic of inclusive tolerance, reality orientation and respect for experience.

This spirit and characteristic is well represented by those eminent sociologists during the early period of Chinese sociology, not only in their epistemology of Chinese society and their exploration of sociological research such as Li Jinghan’s “Dingxian Survey”, but also in the discipline construction and personnel training of Chinese sociology such as Wu Wenzao’s achievement,<sup>①</sup> as well as their practice such as the movement of the rural construction represented by Liang Suming and Yan Yangchu. The greatest representative of this tradition was by no means other people but Fei Xiaotong, whose three years of investigations and treatises from the year 1933 when he began his study in Tsinghua University to the year 1936 before his “Jiangcun Village Survey”, were nearly all focused on social mobility, the tradition reservation in social change and how to achieve a social balance. In other words, Fei Xiaotong had distinctly established his problem consciousness in his understanding of Chinese society and what stability social mobility would end with. With his study of Jiangcun as a representative, the later well-known ideal of “enriching the people” was a particularly

specific and real problem for him. Therefore, for the tradition of pioneering Chinese sociology, though an introduced western learning sociology, it was on the one hand, consistent with the spirit of traditional Chinese learning, and on the other hand, “for oneself” or “for China” because of its research characteristics.

In terms of sociological study itself, it was exactly the same as the core concern of the classical sociological studies conducted by sociologists such as Weber and Durkheim: they all expected to accomplish the moral unity of the society, the unified peace of the people, and the reconstruction of orders. It is just because of this common concern that this western learning has gained the most rigorous vitality in China, that is, it is possible for it to become rooted in Chinese cultural tradition and relevant real problems and as a result to become an especially influential research type. “A Survey of the Social Situation in Jiangchun Village” and its published book *Peasant Life in China* have earned a worldwide reputation and become sociological and anthropological classics in the western world. In this sense, it can be said that the most Chinese-characterized and indigenous is the most universal and influential.

Besides, the relentless attempts of the pioneering scholars, from Wu Wenzao who consciously sent excellent students to study in the best western universities regardless of national differences to Fei Xiaotong who, during the “Kuige Period” in the 1930s when he had to move his workshop to Kuige, a place in Yunnan, still endeavored to learn from the most important western academic accomplishment, such as the comprehension of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Wang, 2016). It shows both in education and in academic study that they never held

① When he worked in Yanjing University, Wu Wenzao put more emphasis on the personnel training of Chinese sociology and anthropology and the construction of sociology as a discipline. He once proposed that the excellent students should be sent to study in the worldwide best university. His representative excellent students Fei Xiaotong, Lin Yaohua, Qu Tongzu, and Huang Di, who were all born in 1910, the year of dog, and accomplished a lot in their academic studies, were credited as “Wu’s Four Dogs” by Xie Bingxin, Wu Wenzao’s wife.

fast to the established ideas, but instead persistently tried their best to keep open-minded, not only holding a sincere reverence over western civilized achievements and a keen passion for learning them, but also actively interpreting Chinese society and cultural traditions in the context of the world civilizations, an indispensable context for the forming and refining of Chinese sociological concepts such as “The differential mode of association”, “a society without litigation” and “rule by elders” in the well-known Fei Xiaotong’s *Peasant Life in China*, *Three Villages of Yunnan* and *From the Soil: the Foundations of Chinese Society*.

Only in this context can Fei Xiaotong’s *Peasant Life in China*, though initially written in English, be recognized as a vital part of Chinese academic traditions, and only in this context can this recognition be permitted, which means it is not a natural trend for us to accept English writing as a way to pass down sociological traditions or even a practice as a part of Chinese academic traditions. It is a must to make a concrete analysis of such issues and never use one characteristic to cover or represent all.

It is on the basis of such a problem consciousness that Chinese sociology is rated to possess from its very beginning the unique feature of “a learning neither old nor new, and neither Chinese nor western.”

## 2. The theoretical problem of sociology

Under the guidance of problem consciousness, sociology is necessarily confronted by a more concrete challenge: nowadays, nearly all the recognized sociological theories are western so that any discussion of western learning within sociology will often be taken for the discussion of theory, and the frequently denounced separation of theories from experience within sociological circles is often resulting from mechanical applications of such a simple binary mode to distinguish “western theories” from “Chinese

experience” in research.

Of course, it must be acknowledged that in current Chinese sociological studies, the theoretical studies are all focused on western theories, from the classical to the contemporary, from the grand theory to the middle-range theory and even to the micro-theories, while correspondingly, the empirical studies in Chinese sociological academic circles are mostly developed on the basis of the problem consciousness—“China”. From this perspective, the theoretical problems can really be regarded as the core of Chinese learning and western learning and specified into two questions: what attitude to take toward western theories and whether the reading of western sociological theories is unnecessary when it comes to the study of Chinese society?

As far as the theory itself is concerned, it must be admitted that there should be actually no definite western sociological theory, or some exclusive tradition of sociological theories. Western sociological theories and their predecessors or social theories in a broader sense have presented a very complex scene. The disciplinarity of the social theory is not as distinctive as its subsequent sociology, but it embraces a longer history than sociology itself does. In intellectual history, it can be said that it is social theories that nurture sociological theories, while social theories themselves are nurtured by their abundant empirical evidence. Nevertheless, it must be recognized that what challenges the problem of Chinese learning and western learning in sociology should be the broad western social theories rather than those more tool-like sociological theories such as middle-range theories, for compared with sociological theories, social theories are more inclined to have an affinity for the tradition of western civilization and its core views as well as its issue resources. Indeed, for sociological theories, this is an unavoidable problem and it is also very difficult to produce a response to them, the reason for which lies in that western social theories are also, to a large

extent, “for oneself”, and present the distinct tradition of its intellectual history as well as its concern about reality, and for some theories, even though China is mentioned, they are not written for Chinese people. However, one point must be admitted is that every historical moment of the modernization transformation China has undergone throughout the past century resembles western understanding and experience in many aspects. That’s why many people especially under the background of globalization, feel as much enlightened and inspired by excellent western social theories as by traditional Chinese theoretical resources.

Provided this is acknowledged, with “for oneself” as the premise, the question what attitude to take toward western theories will be no longer a question about the influence of the western world, but a question concerning how to perceive and study the western world and how to interpret and understand ourselves. Of course, just as is done in many other fields like politics, culture, ethnography, anthropology, and international relations, in which the western community is seen as an object of study, not only can we regard western social theories as instruction, we can also study them as the essence of western civilization. To say clearly, to conduct the research on western learning in China, the requirements for the study of sociology should be no different from those for other fields: one shouldn’t become a second-handed theorist by translating some western thought, but should access western learning as a researcher. To study western learning in this sense, the researcher’s problem consciousness, the subject of thinking, and the horizon of understanding will be established on the present China and its traditions, though it doesn’t mean the text and the learning should be understood or interpreted without the context of the present western world and its traditions. What may be more important for us is to sinicize the most essential part of western civilization into the basic objectives. Take Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* for

example. The significant influence exerted by this book on the Chinese academic world is closely connected with Chinese scholars’ thinking about the modernization of Chinese society. Today, after attempts by generations of scholars, it has become one of the required readings in the Chinese academic world to help better understand Chinese indigenous problems. It can be seen from the stories of this book in Chinese academic circles that the reasons for the reading of western classical and contemporary theories which involves questions like what book to read, how to read, and which theory might arouse resonance or be inspiring are, on the one hand, undoubtedly such classical works that deeply discuss the universal modern problems and thus provide a necessary way to understand modernity, and on the other hand, with the indigenous problems of China as the starting point, the study must be of benefits to China, but the sinicization of sociology doesn’t mean to hold China as the only research object, and the attempts to construct the subjectivity of China within the realm of Chinese learning and western learning don’t mean to ignore western theories. In addition to that, if the study of western learning is to enrich our mental world and to enhance the understanding of ourselves, then it must be admitted that it is necessary for sociological theories to refer to traditional Chinese theoretical resources (e.g. Confucian traditions) in order to understand Chinese society and Chinese behaviors. The well-known concept of “The differential mode of association” proposed by Fei Xiaotong can serve as a typical example. In recent years, the Chinese academic world has witnessed the emergence of a research orientation which more distinctly returns to Chinese classical traditions to absorb the essence of the theoretic resources (Qu, 2015; Zhou, 2005), a rare step and attempt during the construction of Chinese social theories and the sociological research subjectivity. Besides, it should also be noted that to gain an understanding of the complexity and diversity

manifested in Chinese social changes today, apart from the traditions and the historic relics of the Chinese revolution in the 20th century and the present global context must be taken into consideration. If a clear limit in understanding is a must in all respects, it will be far from enough to satisfy the demands for understanding through our own theoretic resources, or as is mentioned above, through drawing lessons from western sociological theories. The key is to go back to the tradition of the whole intellectual history, both Chinese and western, with social theories a part of it, just the same as to gain a deeper understanding of human society, human behaviors and their mutual interactions, which must be conducted within a richer context of civilization rather than through vocational training.

### 3. From theories to methods

In terms of theories, not only is the understanding of others a way to truly understand oneself, it is also more a necessary way to enrich oneself, but in sociological research, the problem of Chinese learning and western learning must be focused on the indigenous problem consciousness and the research needs. The understanding of the disputes about the methodology of social sciences must take this premise into account.

In recent years, the sociological circles in the Mainland have continuously seen more and more disputes over methodology that in themselves might be considered as the manifestation of the anxiety about the two questions: What is sociology? What can sociology do? Such disputes have long existed in sociological history, and they themselves are not a rare phenomenon, and even rated to be one of the sociological characteristics. Because in terms of sociology itself, different propositions of

methodologies mean different sociological hypotheses, which will often lead to different social hypotheses and even different political perceptions, the disputes on the specific methodological level are not confined within that level, but conducted on the basis of hypotheses that “are taken for granted.” In this sense, based on the above-mentioned propositions, the tradition of Parsons–Merton–Lazarsfeld theories will not be believed as the only sociological possibility, but instead, perhaps a new challenge to the problem of Chinese learning and western learning in Chinese sociology. In western sociological studies, there also exists a gross lack of vitality. Early in the 1950s and 60s, American native sociologists launched their criticism against the exhaustion of imagination in American sociology and the crisis of social sciences (Gouldner, 1967; Mills, 1959). It must be realized that not only in social theories there exists no integrated or unified western world, but also in sociological research, the existence of an integrated and unified western world and the “social sciences” established on it is also questionable. In this aspect, westernization needs to be given close scrutiny. Perhaps the mechanical copying of the western (especially American) “formalized” external systems such as the academic system, the publication system and the evaluation system and the ignorance of analyzing and absorbing its essential spirit are the real manifestations of the crisis of westernization. Any research method or terminology must have its own specific historic and social background.<sup>①</sup> So, if no concrete examination or analysis are exerted, how can one blindly apply it in the studies of different societies and cultures?

As mentioned above, the crisis of westernization is more like a problem and crisis in the global sense. Once the problem of European science put forward by Edmund Husserl (2001) takes the place of the discussions of those essential problems, the problem

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① Ye Qizheng. *The Tower of Babel: Men of Central Tendency and Those of Dispersion.*

of Chinese learning and western learning and many other substantive research problems as well as the real concern about the research objects will be neglected. For many thinkers nowadays, the major problems in sociology (taking America as its representative) are the trivialization and the superficiality as a result of the over-pursuit of the form (John, 1972), and even take the trend of McDonaldization, a word put forward by Ritzer(2004), and thus deviate from the thinking of the true sufferings of the people's livelihood and other fundamental problems (Zygmunt, 1989). In sociology, this is directly manifested in the problem of research methods. If a discipline overemphasizes its professionalization, how can it deal on a particularly specific research level with the core problems such as the subject-object relationship? And how can it pass the said core problem consciousness of the traditions of Chinese sociology to the concrete studies?

The abstraction of the daily life is the crisis of the modern society (Sun, 2011). If the start of a research about some social science is only founded on the knowledge gained from the abstracted daily life, then the understanding of the abstracted human beings will obviously be taken as the basic argument standardized by the present American-style quantitative designs of sociology, but this, either politically or academically was criticized by Charles Wright Mills and O'Neill. Ye Qizheng has long distinctly pointed out through studying the genesis of modern statistic techniques that "myth means to go beyond the historic and cultural conditions in the belief that the statistic concepts and its methodology and logic in themselves can objectively examine the universal scientific truths, but in reality, the concepts they have relied on for a long time such as central tendency and dispersion—the two 'objective' and 'godly' concepts—are in themselves the special conceptual products under the special cultural and historic background. To put it bluntly, they are nothing but a special 'spell' brought about by the enlightening rationality, under which, anything will necessarily take

on the color of the specified culture and history" (Ye, 2001).

Nevertheless, the problem of sociological logic is still unavoidable. Indeed, since it came into being, sociology has been regarded as a science. But for Durkheim, this is a science handling moral problems, i.e. a learning to adopt scientific methods to materialize the moral solicitude, rectify the order to make the people settled, and re-strengthen the social cohesion. A science must be established on this aim and shouldn't allow the methods to dwarf its substantial concerns. The scientific orientation of sociology was really the essential characteristic at its initial stage, which is true for both the Chinese and the western world. In her thesis studying at Yanjing school, Zhang Jing once distinctly talked about how Yanjing school had become a school of great historical significance. She believed the core of it was the works such as *Peasant Life in China* which "pioneers a way differentiated from the traditional in understanding Chinese empirical facts" (Ye, 2001) a "professional practice" of modernity for Zhang Jing. But for all her clear thesis statements and her decent demonstration, she overlooked another main characteristic of Yanjing school, that is, they consciously inherited and carried forward the spirit of traditional scholars. It is true that Fei Xiaotong regarded himself as an intellectual of the May 4th generation (Zhang, 2000), but recent studies of him in the Mainland began to focus their attention on him as a "gentry" or his self-identified "gentry" side, that is to say both Fei Xiaotong himself in his later years of study and the researchers on him attach great importance to the duality of his thought, which was actually already displayed in his early studies and ran through all his lifelong studies, mainly embodied by his substantial problem consciousness in his new-style studies of anthropology and sociology, which reveal a particular "feeling of a Chinese traditional intellectual and gentry" (Sun, 2017).

This feeling is just the power "for oneself"

possessed by Yan Fu and his subsequent Chinese intellectuals. It is this incessant power that has nurtured generations of Chinese sociologists who bear a complex deeply–implanted intellectuality. It is even be said that the continuing discussions on the theories and methodologies in Chinese intelligentsia, which are at the same time the underlying reasons for the non–prevalence of the scientism in sociology, are also related to this feeling and this is just the meaning of cultural consciousness put forward by Fei Xiaotong in his later years when he got suddenly enlightened while repeatedly reflecting on why he couldn't accomplish a scientific anthropological study (Zhou, 2017).

Of course, this feeling cannot be cultivated through vocational training; instead, it results from cultivation of the traditional culture and education. Yet, Fei Xiaotong's duality poses one clear question: how should a sociological researcher deal with the relationship to the research object? The emergence of a lot of prominent scholars in Fei Xiaotong's generation is in close relation to this question. He was deeply attached to his hometown and Chinese society, which drove him to go beyond pure “scientific” study and put forward “cultural consciousness” in his later years (Zhou, 2017). Till today, if it is believed that there's only one kind of sociology and only one approach to it, i.e. professional sociology and the scientism research method, then the most essential connotation of sociology will be lost and the vitality of imagination in sociology will be exhausted and even exterminated in its professionalization and scientism, concerning which, the essence will not only lie in the problem of Chinese learning and western learning, but also will be presented by time. Since its reestablishment, Chinese sociology has displayed diverse features, not only being invariably influenced by the European and western world, but also solidly promoting the previous good traditions in its empirical studies. However, one of the big challenges confronting this discipline might be the impact brought by the over–

development of the previously mentioned discipline professionalization (rather than specialization) mostly in forms of scientism and middle–range theorization. So, as is mentioned above, such studies in themselves have imposed an indistinct challenge upon Chinese culture, and therefore have gained their proliferation instead. Although it is put by the related circles “Americanization,” it is not entirely accurate, for even in America, the criticism against this tendency is not rarely seen. Moreover, it is obviously inappropriate to regard it as the scientific disciplinary construction of sociology in the modern sense and copy American problem consciousness, methodological principles and theory models in research of Chinese issues, for the tendency of the professionalization and pure scientism in American sociological research has specifically been conditioned by its own political system, market mechanisms and traditions. Put it in words of Qu Jingdong, it is inappropriate to “worship the narrowest part of American social sciences as our model” (Qu, 2014), and even Max Weber wrote in his *Science as a Vocation* that this approach to academic studies would obscure its complexity and the judgement of those essential problems. One question to be strongly stressed is that when the problem of Chinese learning and western learning is concerned, whether the formalized part is also western, a part of western learning called for more caution? That is, today's discussion of western learning should also call for more vigilance against such a tendency of western scholars' repeatedly advocated reflection which is in itself unproblematic but disposed to go to its extreme both in China and in the western world, and will further mislead us to lose the opportunity to gain a true understanding of and a sincere love for the society and the people. This is a very clear point in the Chinese sociological world and if this tendency is left unconcerned, it will become an extremely meaningless anti–historical and a historical research which is not rarely seen today in Chinese sociological

circles, with no exception of those treatises published both in Chinese and in English.

This academic concern, compared with the required free state of ideology, cultural prejudice, politics, and the influence from other academic values, can't merely be assured by its superficial objectivity, but instead by the continuous reflection upon it, for it is no more than another kind of prejudice.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper has only attempted to probe into the problem of Chinese learning and western learning in sociology from the perspective of the academic tradition with a clue from social theories to sociological methods. The most natural and simple way of thinking about this problem is to study it by combining the development of sociology in China together with its background of politics and social mobility, and at the same time, with the intellectual history and the history of ideas in contemporary Chinese society both in the academic and social sense, when the problems recognized by the research subject inevitably become focal political issues. Therefore, in this sense, the choice of the social methods will preset not only the hypothesis of the “society,” but also the political stance and principle. There is no definite line between an academic problem and a political one—though the Weberish matter-of-fact attitude is still a must in our research.

Of course this is not identical to narrow nationalism. It must be realized that for today's Chinese sociology, despite the perception of sociology and its research methods, the classical theorists and their contemporaries have long established the metaphorical and thinking categories for the present studies, whether they are about science, modernity, survival and inhibition, liberation and self-understanding. Without western learning, there will be no source of imagination, and yet, with only western

learning, or even only the most formalized part of it, there will be no Chinese sociological research, for as is previously stated, the most formalized part of western learning has inevitably preset the perception about the people, the society and the politics according to which alone the studies of the Chinese people, the Chinese society and the Chinese politics will depart from its truth, and even the essential elements of the Chinese native culture will be considered something backward and redundant needing to be eliminated and rectified. In this sense, some studies conducted in the name of experience are usually the most abstract and the most unrelated to the life and the self-perception of the Chinese, not only unable to accomplish the objective of learning and understanding oneself, but also clueless to a real sincere motive. A true research is, as was written by Fei Xiaotong, live and penetrating, particularly close to real ordinary life. Therefore, the learning “neither Chinese nor western and neither old nor new” in a sociological sense must attach importance to the function of Chinese traditional culture in the research of the social reality and its methodological significance, in which the traditional culture is more a source of research motive and a methodological evidence for localization than just a research target. That is why Fei Xiaotong put forward in his later years “the cultural consciousness” (Zhou, 2017).

Therefore, learning from Fei Xiaotong requires a sincere and pure motive and attitude that is neither old nor new and neither Chinese nor western to combine the academic studies and the key issues in the political and culture traditions, the individual and social historical experience together with the present real world and daily life, so that the reality will be the concern, avoiding any Procrustean perception or attitude based only on one single methodological proposition, and at the same time paying attention to the perspective of the practice and the changes. The desire to handle prudently the entanglement between the practical significance and the experience in aspects



of the multiple levels in daily life and the living world with a complicated specific and open-minded attitude rather than a simplified and abstract one, will naturally return to the good traditions established by Chinese sociological research, advocate the studies based on the real field work and experience, understand society within the real social context, adhere to a modest attitude towards the worldwide accomplishments of civilizations, repeatedly reflect on the sociological tools and the absolutism of methodology, and put the phenomenon into their tradition and the real world to expose their meaning and structure within their context. However, it is far from enough to emphasize the expression of the real (sociological) experience and feeling in writing, because apart from the work, sociological research should also shoulder the responsibility for furthering theoretic consciousness, and think carefully what the we generation should do, what questions should we think about and how to

think about them, rather than to just make our feelings clearly understood. This is the obligatory historical responsibility for Chinese sociology, and to fulfill this duty, social scientists must, as Fei Xiaotong (1998) once put it, go beyond the scientific limits of being only an “outsider,” consciously keep to the excellent Chinese traditional intellectuals’ implanted feelings and ambitions, treat the research objects with an attitude of “putting oneself in others’ place and considering others in one’s own place” (p. 274). Only in this way can we again face the somewhat familiar yet unfamiliar, and the familiar yet more strange present society, further really dig out the Chinese traditional theoretical sources and the “social implications,” and finally directly confront the fundamental problems and reestablish Chinese sociology as a discipline which boasts a long history, vigorous vitality and cultural depth.

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