



The Cultural Sociology of China: Trajectory and Dynamics of a Burgeoning Field

Cultural Sociology

1–24

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DOI: 10.1177/1749975519855837

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Abstract

In this essay, we review the burgeoning field of the cultural sociology of China. We first describe the trajectory and features of the development of the cultural sociology of China. We argue that the evolution of this scholarship has involved three intertwined social, political, and intellectual processes across national boundaries: (1) the production, diffusion, reception, and reproduction of modern social scientific paradigms from the West, especially the USA, to China; (2) the tensions between China studies as “area studies” in western academia and sociology as a discipline; (3) the entangled relations between politics and knowledge in both China and the West. Then we review existing cultural sociological studies of various topics in three broad categories: economy, politics, and civil society. We end our essay with a discussion of promising topics and agenda for future research and potential challenges.

Keywords

China, cultural sociology, field dynamics, intellectual fields, sociology of knowledge

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Introduction

In this essay, we discuss the development of the cultural sociology of China. We examine features and trajectories of the cultural sociology of China in the light of three intertwined processes: knowledge diffusion, disciplinary tensions, and the politics of knowledge. Then we review major approaches and representative works in this field. We end this essay by discussing some future directions of and challenges to the field.

Two key terms need further clarification before we proceed. First, in this essay, “cultural sociology” refers to both a subfield within sociology *and* a general sociological perspective that emphasizes the constitutive role of culture in actions and structures. This perspective was formed during the “cultural turn” in the 1970s and 1980s, a sweeping trend across the humanities and social sciences, including sociology (Bonnell et al., 1999; Jacobs and Spillman, 2005). We do not engage in the debate over the distinction between the “sociology of culture” and “cultural sociology.” Our essay covers both, including sociological studies of cultures as a specialized system and a theoretical perspective that emphasizes meaning-making, discourses, and symbolic practices in various social realms, such as politics and economy (Alexander and Smith, 2001; Griswold, 2008; Sewell, 1999).

Second, the “cultural sociology of China” refers to the cultural sociological studies of contemporary, mainland China.¹ We use the term “cultural sociology *of* China” rather than “cultural sociology *in* China” to include the works *on* China by scholars both *within* and *outside* China. A common fallacy of country-specific review essays is that they sometimes artificially isolate scholarship within a country from global knowledge production and diffusion. As we will show later, global and transnational processes have significantly shaped the trajectory of the cultural sociology of China and made national boundaries permeable.

With this conceptualization, we conducted systematic searches to supplement our knowledge about our own particular specialties. First, we searched 126 leading universities in China, Europe, Australia, and the USA, in both sociology departments and major East Asia/China centers or programs for sociologists with “culture” and “China” as their specialties.² We collected their publications and also other relevant information, such as their age, specialist research, undergraduate schools and majors, PhD institutions and years, and major methodologies. Second, we compiled a list of relevant books published with major university and academic presses in and outside China. Third, we searched articles in leading sociological and China studies journals in English and Chinese published over the past 40 years, a time period since China ended the Cultural Revolution and opened to the outside world.

A review essay inevitably involves drawing boundaries among disciplines and fields, and any boundary-making effort may provoke controversies over what should be included and excluded. By birth and in current practices, cultural sociology overlaps with other sociological subfields and sociology’s sister disciplines, such as anthropology, media studies, and cultural history. This overlapping has been a deep well of creativity and inspiration but can also be a source of conceptual confusions. Given our purposes here, however, we set a less ambitious goal for ourselves. We do not include

anthropology, cultural psychology, and cultural studies, except for those which explicitly adopt sociological methods and theories (Hockx, 1999; Yan, 2010). Within sociology, we also limit our scope to only sociological studies of China with explicit cultural sociological approaches and forgo excellent studies that marginally touch on culture. Nevertheless, we recognize that real-world research practices are not—should not be—compartmentalized by disciplines and fields. Thus, to facilitate readers' further exploration, in our discussions and footnotes, we also make reference to some relevant and important works outside our main scope.

Dynamics of the Fields and the Transnational Processes of Sociological Knowledge

The development of the cultural sociology of China has involved three intertwined social, political, and intellectual processes across national boundaries: (1) the production, diffusion, reception, and reproduction of modern social scientific paradigms from the West to China; (2) the tensions between China studies as “area studies” and sociology as a discipline; (3) the entangled relations between politics and knowledge in both China and the West.

China has a long, rich history of social philosophies and thoughts. But “sociology” (*shehuixue* in Chinese), a modern social science, did not grow naturally in this fertile cultural soil. Instead, it was imported from the West in the late 19th century, when intellectuals like Yan Fu translated works of some founding figures of sociology, such as Herbert Spencer, into Chinese. Their purpose, however, was not to establish a discipline but to seek solutions to China's grave problems revealed by its military defeat and social upheavals. In the early 20th century, sociology began to boom in China, thanks to the diffusion and production of knowledge from the West. Some modern universities set up by American missionaries, such as Yenching University, offered sociology courses and hired sociology professors (Gold, 1993). Scholars trained in western countries, such as Wu Wenzao, a PhD graduate from Columbia University, and Fei Xiaotong, an anthropology PhD graduate from the London School of Economics, accounted for half of the sociologists in China (Chen, 2018: 11–14). Meanwhile, as part of the diffusion of Communism as both academic knowledge and political practice, Marxist sociology was taught by Communist scholars like Li Da at various universities.

In the 1950s, after the Communist Party came to power, sociology was either incorporated into “Marxist philosophy” or eliminated as a “bourgeois sociology” (Chen, 2018: 30). Major sociologists like Fei Xiaotong were purged in the Anti-Rightist Movement or forced to switch to other disciplines. Most of them suffered in the Cultural Revolution. After the Cultural Revolution, sociology was restored through a new transnational process. Fei Xiaotong invited some renowned American sociologists and overseas Chinese sociologists, such as Peter Blau, John Logan, Nan Lin, CK Yang, among others, to teach intensive classes in Beijing and later to train the first cohort (1981) of sociology majors at Nankai University in Tianjin.

Since its rebirth, Chinese sociology has been developing along at least four major paths. Sociologists along the first path conduct policy-oriented research to meet the

government's demand for information and consultation. Sociologists along the second path are heavily influenced by the humanist Marxism and western social and political philosophies, which became popular during the "cultural fever" in the 1980s (Calhoun, 1994). Sociologists along the third path are trained or self-trained in anthropology and employ ethnography in their studies of Chinese society. This path demonstrates the heavy influence of anthropology on Chinese sociology, through both the prominent figures' anthropological background (Fei Xiaotong in particular) and the institutional arrangement under which sociologists and anthropologists often work in the same sociology department. Scholars along the fourth path often collaborate with overseas Chinese and American scholars to conduct large-scale surveys on stratification, family, education, social networks, and demography, the topics which constitute the mainstream paradigm of the sociology of China (Bian, 2002; Chen, 2018).

These four major paths, however, did not turn into a hotbed for cultural sociology. In theory, the second and third paths, with their emphasis on theory, culture, and ethnography, could have had an affinity with cultural sociology. In reality, the philosophy-inspired sociologists along the second path have gravitated toward public commentaries without much interest in empirical research. The anthropology-influenced sociologists have headed in the opposite direction—producing fine-grained research on local societies without a conscious effort to build a subfield of cultural sociology.

In the meantime, the English-language sociology of China also experienced a historical transformation after the Cultural Revolution, mostly because the Chinese government opened some access—albeit restricted—to China for foreign scholars and students (Gold, 1993: 50–56). Before that, scant sociological studies of China drew on limited textual data and mainland émigrés to Hong Kong (A Chan et al., 1984; Whyte, 1974, 1975). The first group of sociologists who acquired access to China were mostly trained in the tradition of sinology/area studies, established by senior sinologists like John King Fairbank and Ezra Vogel, whose tremendous academic and public influence came from informing the American public and policymakers about Chinese politics and society. Nevertheless, as Andrew Walder, a prominent sociologist of this generation, candidly observes in a self-reflexive account of their intellectual habitus: "If we were aware of the core concerns of theory and research in our disciplines, and were interested in them, we usually had no idea how to relate our research to these concerns, and almost never had the kind of data that would permit us to do so" (Walder, 2004). The China specialists' intellectual goal, then, was to use their sociological training to understand China rather than to contribute to general theories, let alone to enter into dialog with cultural sociology, which emerged at the same time as the sociologists went to China (Bonnell et al., 1999).

This certainly does not mean their works paid no attention to culture. On the contrary, some of their studies, included in this essay, put much emphasis on cultural topics such as morality (Madsen, 1984), rituals (Whyte, 1974), consumer culture (Davis, 2005), the cultural implications of *guanxi*—or 'personal connections'—(Gold et al., 2002), religious civil society (Madsen, 1998), and perceptions of social inequality and distributive justice (Whyte, 2010). Nevertheless, the irony was that without claiming membership of the subfield of cultural sociology, even if they did research on culture, the China scholars

were largely regarded as area specialists whose work was ignored by the cultural sociology.

The next wave of development in the sociology of China came as a result of both data availability in China and demographic changes of graduate students in the USA. In the late 1980s, American and Chinese scholars began to collaborate on large-scale surveys, which significantly changed the contours of the sociology of China. This change not only provided much-needed ample data but also matched the intellectual habitus of the new generation of China-born graduate students who pursued their PhDs in the USA. According to Walder (2004), those Chinese graduate students “bypassed” the first generation’s area studies perspective and quickly engaged in the general sociological literature, most often through quantitative methods. Our US sample of sociologists of China substantiates his observation. Among the China-born sociologists, 26 (70.3%) of them use quantitative methods. This feature is unsurprising if we closely examine their habitus-forming process and the incentives and constraints they face in their day-to-day academic life. Most Chinese graduate students encounter serious language barriers when they first arrive in the USA. Lengthy qualitative studies and theoretical readings, which require a significant amount of pre-knowledge and sophisticated language skills, usually seem insuperable, let alone writing, a daunting task even for native speakers. Nevertheless, their advanced quantitative skills—thanks to the demanding and even draconian math education in Chinese secondary schools—often impress their American peers and professors. Therefore, it is natural for them to choose the path with the lowest cost and highest returns.

In the 1990s, some of them rose to prominence and held tenured positions in leading research universities, and they also became role models for later generations of Chinese students that they trained. This matching process between the dynamics of the field and scholars’ dispositions led to the dominance of quantitative studies and the prosperity of some subfields, such as demography, stratification, social networks, and economic sociology. Certainly, cultural sociology is not—and should not be—immune to those fields and corresponding quantitative methods. Nevertheless, cultural sociology was still fighting an uphill battle, distinguishing itself from mainstream sociology by emphasizing its interpretive approach and qualitative methods (Bonnell et al., 1999). Consequently, the sociologists of China, who were celebrating their newly acquired intellectual prominence in sociology through quantitative rigor, did not pay much attention to cultural sociology.

On the other hand, the sweeping influence of the “cultural turn” across social science disciplines reached the sociology of China in the 1990s, albeit in a limited way, particularly through the convergence of a few representative figures influenced by the cultural turn and the multidisciplinary effort to study the Tiananmen protest in 1989. The rich symbolic practices in the Tiananmen protest reminded scholars of the political cultures in the French Revolution, one of the representative cases in the cultural turn (Hunt, 1984). The culture-laden feature of Tiananmen also inspired scholars to eschew the static image of “Chinese political culture” in the old-school scholarship and to embrace an approach that emphasized multiple cultural repertoires and stressed the fluidity of political practices, as well as provided “equal time” for culture and structure (Wasserstrom and Perry, 1994). This “neoculturalist approach to politics” was advocated by leading

figures in political science and history, such as Elizabeth J Perry and Jeffrey Wasserstrom, but it also reached sociology through the works of Craig Calhoun and Guobin Yang (Calhoun, 1994; G Yang, 2000).

The first two decades of the new millennium have seen a growing number of sociological studies of China that explicitly draw on cultural sociology. The major scholars entered graduate school after 2000 when cultural sociology had already won its battle and gained its legitimacy. “Sociology of Culture” became one of the largest sections of the American Sociological Association, and “culture” is integrated into various subfields as a fundamental factor rather than a residual category. This younger generation of scholars was trained in strongholds of cultural sociology (e.g. Northwestern, NYU, Berkeley, Princeton) and supervised by major figures in cultural sociology (Robert Bellah, Craig Calhoun, Gary Alan Fine, Wendy Griswold, Robert Wuthnow, among others). In the last decade, they have won four ASA’s sociology of culture section awards for graduate student papers and books (CS-c Chan, 2011; Liang, 2017; B Xu, 2017; X Xu, 2013) as well as awards in other sections. Their demographic features are more diverse and reflect the more frequent transnational migrations: Chinese scholars in China, Chinese scholars who finished their college education in mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong and pursued their PhDs in the West, ethnic Chinese and Taiwanese who grew up in Europe and the USA, and white Europeans and Americans.

Nevertheless, the cultural sociology of China has not evolved into a mature field with a clearly defined agenda, canons, prominent figures, and theoretical approaches. An important indicator is the small number of devoted scholars. Only 12 China scholars in the 126 universities we searched listed “culture” or its constituent parts (such as fashion) as their major research fields (2 based in China, 3 in the USA, 6 in Hong Kong, and one in Canada). Others occasionally published one or two relevant articles but do not identify themselves as cultural sociologists. Admittedly, one does not have to identify oneself as a “cultural sociologist” to do cultural sociological work, but, given the prominence and legitimacy of cultural sociology in today’s sociology, such a small number of self-identified cultural sociology scholars indicates the lack of adequate field-building effort.

Within China, cultural sociology did not emerge as a subfield until the last decade and is now at the stage of field-building. It started with the translation of western theories and the writing of introductory texts. The early introductory texts, such as Sima Yunjie’s book *Cultural Sociology*, mainly draw on the philosophical and anthropological traditions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, such as Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, and Bronislaw Malinowski (Sima, 2011). More recent introductions begin to focus on the cultural sociology after the cultural turn, introducing its representative figures such as Pierre Bourdieu, Herbert Gans, and EP Thompson, and some major conceptualizations of culture (Y Zhou, 2004, 2008). Empirical works also use the term “cultural sociology” to identify their analyses, albeit with no explicit dialog with cultural sociology in general (Fan et al., 2012; X Gao, 2006; X Yang, 2009). A new “cultural sociology” section was established within the Chinese Sociological Association while *Sociological Studies* (*shehuixue yanjiu*), the flagship journal of the Institute of Sociology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, published a series of articles on the sociology of arts and culture in 2018.

As a burgeoning field, the cultural sociology of China instantiates the global diffusion and reproduction of social scientific knowledge and undergoes political entanglements in

the process. As in other disciplines, the hegemony of western, largely American, scholarship is more than evident (Hiller, 1979). Most of the self-identified cultural sociologists of China are based in or trained in American and Hong Kong universities. They define what cultural sociology is and should be, and their perceptions shape the current paradigm. The British Marxist cultural sociology, an organic part of the cultural turn (Nash, 2001), was influential in the humanities and philosophy of China but not in the sociology of China. On the other hand, this strong American influence did not overshadow many Chinese sociologists' effort to draw on both their western training and local cultural resources to advance their scholarship. This effort can be dated back to the first half of the 20th century when scholars like Wu Wenzao and Fei Xiaotong endeavored to establish Chinese sociology and studied the underlying cultural logic of Chinese society (Fei, 1992). In the late 20th century, a new round of an "indigenization" movement originated in Taiwan and later spread to the mainland. Scholars involved in this movement regarded Chinese behavior patterns as a reflection of the deep cultural structures in Chinese society, composed of Confucian ethics based on a hierarchy of social relationships (Hsiao, 2018; Hwang, 2012). A further complication is that the term "indigenization" sometimes is used and subtly transformed by state-backed scholars and institutions to defend a paradigm of social science governed by the Party-state's ruling ideology from the influence and penetration of western political ideologies underneath western social sciences.

On the other hand, such a political entanglement is counterbalanced by the institutional logic of elite Chinese universities. The state encourages China's top universities to enter the global competition of knowledge production, but the rules of the game are largely defined by western academia. In top Chinese research universities, the percentage of overseas sociology PhD holders among the faculty is close to or even exceeds the aforementioned 50% before 1949. Those returnees regularly publish in English-language venues and visit European and American universities. The research evaluation criteria at top Chinese universities also lean to the English-language—mostly American—journals listed in the SSCI (Social Science Citation Index), although publications in a few flagship Chinese-language journals still count. Overall, Chinese sociologists and sociology departments have to follow two kinds of logics—the political logic of the state and the institutional logic of academia—and walk an academic and political tightrope.

The main topics in the cultural sociology of China reflect the dramatic social changes in China in the past four decades. The market transition has been the major driving force behind those changes, and, thus, most researched topics unsurprisingly relate to economic activities, such as economic transactions, work and labor, and cultural production and consumption. Moreover, the Chinese state plays a much more powerful and expansive role in cultural life than their counterparts in the West, and, thus, scholars explore the constitutive role of culture in the state's governance and the society's political interactions with the state. Civil society, the third sector besides the market and the state, has been the focus of normative debates over its influence and limitations as well as its democratic potential. The next sections group the representative works in the three major realms—market, state, and civil society - followed by a review of the works that do not neatly fall into the three realms and review their contributions to this burgeoning field.

Culture and Economy

Economic reform since 1978 has caused significant institutional changes, the rapid growth of the private sector, and, correspondingly, the transformation of private life and perceptions, such as removal of individuals from historically prescribed forms and dominance, loss of traditional security, and new social commitments (Yan, 2010). A challenge for the Chinese in the post-1978 period has been the relations between “something old” and “something new”: how to reconcile their cultural repertoires inherited from the pre-1978 period—both the traditional culture and the Communist political culture—with sea changes in the market economy.

Much work has been done on *guanxi*, a distinctive Chinese cultural expression related to personal connections. The sociology of China outside of cultural sociology has successfully turned this colloquial term into an analytical concept, combined it with network analysis, and used it in the inquiry of economic actions like job attainment (Bian, 2019, 2018; Gold et al., 2002). A more explicit cultural approach is represented in Cheris Shun-ching Chan’s *Marketing Death: Culture and the Making of a Life Insurance Market in China* (CS-c Chan, 2011). She aims to explain why and how a life insurance market rapidly grows in China despite cultural resistance to talking about death which is regarded as a cultural taboo. Chan suggests that according to different situations, economic actors creatively and selectively use two forms of culture: culture as overarching social values and shared ideas, and culture as an incoherent and situation-based “toolkit.” For example, Chinese insurers redefine life insurance as a money management instrument and mobilize the cultural tools such as *renqing* (sentiments) and *guanxi* to circumvent the taboo topic of death. Chan’s recent study of the unofficial medical payment (*hongbao*, red envelopes containing money) shows that the *hongbao* exchanges are driven by the public’s generalized distrust in doctors’ moral ethics in a context with weak institutional and legal structures. When patients have *guanxi* with the doctors, they give doctors *hongbao* as a token of appreciation. When they do not have *guanxi*, they seek personalized assurance by using *hongbao* as a form of bribery (CS-c Chan and Yao, 2018).

Similarly, Becky Yang Hsu’s *Borrowing Together: Microfinance and Cultivating Social Ties* (Hsu, 2017) conceptualizes culture—such as one’s moral image—as a norm that emerges from interactions rather than a fixed cultural system or individuals’ internal belief. Hsu argues that Grameen Bank’s microfinance program failed because the funded peasants used the money to maintain their social ties and corresponding “personhood”—an honorable self-image in the local context. The group repayment mechanism also broke down since the peasants found it socially and morally costly to sanction their peer villagers who did not repay. Ng and He (2017) draw on a similar conceptualization of culture to show that in legal commensuration in China, parties involved in the reconciliation process imbue it with a moralizing logic of valuation and tend to make stories about how defendants raised the money and what the money meant to them.

Work and labor, traditional topics in China studies, have a strong presence in the cultural sociology of China. The Marxist approach emphasizes the constituting role of cultural categories and meaningful practices in forming and reproducing class-structure-based

relations like exploitation, hegemony, and resistance, and other forms of inequality, such as gender. For example, Ching-Kwan Lee's study (Lee, 2000, 2002) shows an upsurge of nostalgia for the Mao years among the laid-off workers during the state-owned enterprise reform in the 1990s. Their collective memory of the socialist past came from their cultural repertoire, which was formed in their coming-of-age experience, and was reconstructed and stressed in their protest against the state.

Service work is central to this line of research. With a fine-grained comparative ethnography, Amy Hanser (2008) examines three different retail places in Harbin and shows how individual employees performed cultural distinctions tied to classes and gender in different organizational settings. For example, the upscale "Sunshine" store easily claimed its elite, cosmopolitan status by higher prices, luxury brands, and young and pretty salesclerks, while the "underground" marketplace challenged both luxury and state-owned stores by blurring these distinctions, claiming the same quality of their products, and debunking the snobbishness of their competitors. Carolyn Hsu explores the cultural meaning of work in transnational settings, in her case, western restaurants in Harbin (Hsu, 2005). Hsu finds that, for the Chinese employees, working in a western restaurant means joining the world of cosmopolitan consumerism (in folk terms, *yang*, meaning foreign and upscale) in contrast to the provincial and backward (*tu*) features attributed to local restaurants. The employees also find in foreign restaurants meritocracy and opportunities to develop vis-a-vis the fixed career path on a job in state-owned companies. Other works explicitly combine the feminist and global perspectives with service work. For instance, Eileen Otis (2012) emphasizes the feminized bodies of female service workers, who are trained to meet hospitality industry requirements. In an international luxury hotel in Beijing, for example, workers went through strict screening and draconian training to produce customized, femininely embodied services for mostly male, western, and wealthy customers.³

Studies of cultural production, a classic topic in cultural sociology (Peterson and Anand, 2004), focus on how Chinese producers and consumers make sense of their actions in the periphery of the global cultural market.⁴ On the producers' side, Xuefei Ren shows that real-estate developers, architects, and local government turned a neighborhood with "*shikumen*" (tenements built by western landlords for working-class Chinese tenants in the colonial period) into a posh entertainment compound (Ren, 2008). Kharchenkova's study focuses on Chinese art market actors' conceptualization of globalization vis-à-vis China's elevated but still peripheral status in the global art market. She shows that those actors use a metaphor of the Chinese market as an organism juxtaposed to "mature" western markets to justify their behaviors and contemplate future courses of actions (Kharchenkova, 2018). In another study with Velthuis, she explains why the Chinese art market uses auctions, rather than museums and art critics, as a judgment device of works of art by examining the institutional context where the Chinese art market is embedded, including strong government support and lack of alternative validating organizations (Kharchenkova and Velthuis, 2018).

On the consumers' side, cultural sociological studies revolve around the meanings Chinese consumers intend to express through their consumption, against the backdrop of the neoliberal economic policies and practices that the Chinese state endeavored to advance in the 1980s and 1990s. Much of the work along this line revolves around a

classic debate in cultural sociology regarding the autonomy of reception. Some early works were done by scholars who personally and professionally witnessed dramatic social changes from the late 1970s to the 1990s. They tended to stress the agency of Chinese consumers, who understood the social changes in light of their still fresh memory of the Mao era, especially the material scarcity and individuals' dependence on the state. For example, Deborah Davis showed that in the 1990s urban residents enthusiastically spent money on revamping the condos they newly owned and on appliances and eating out. For them, consumption meant both unprecedented material abundance and a confirmation of their social positions and autonomy in choosing their own lifestyles (Davis, 1995, 2000, 2005). Similarly, the people who gained their wealth in the new market economy used expensive consumer products like cigarettes, which used to be available exclusively for high-ranking cadres and foreign guests in the early reform years, to signal their status and to smooth the path for effective social interactions (Wank, 2000). Li Zhang shows how commercialized real-estate development and exclusionary residential space provided the new middle class with a tangible embodiment of their classification of tastes and lifestyles to demonstrate and reproduce their newly acquired class status (Zhang, 2010).

Other studies in both English and Chinese languages no longer use the shortage economy in the Mao years as the reference point, though autonomy of reception is still the focal point of debate. Li Zhang and Aihwa Ong provide a cautionary tale about the hidden logic behind all the enthusiastic expressions of autonomy and status. They argue that such new practices of consumption reflect what they term "privatization," a set of practices expressing self-interest and self-animation associated with the neoliberal logic which the Chinese state used as a technology for governing and achieving growth (Zhang and Ong, 2008).⁵ In more recent studies, the framework has transformed to reflect broader changes in global society. Correspondingly, those empirical studies focus on how Chinese consumers, especially the younger generations, interpret the meanings of cultural products in a global context. Some emphasize the active role of consumers in creating their own meanings through consumption. For instance, Yang Gao shows that Chinese viewers regard American TV drama series as "real" even if they know the dramas are fictional. This paradox can be explained by the dramas' complexity, the audience's comparison of the American TV dramas with the domestic equivalents, and the audience's cultural elite status (Y Gao, 2016). Similarly, a recent Chinese-language article challenges Bourdieu's class-based taste theory by showing that class attributes cannot predict the differences in art consumption among Chinese middle-class families (Fang, 2018). Tommy Tse, in contrast, shows a less empowered image of Chinese fashion "prosumers" who lack the awareness of their ability to influence fashion production and to redefine fashion conceptions (Tse and Tsang, 2018). Other studies attempt to depict a balanced image of the relative powers of producers and consumers. For instance, Matthew Chew investigates the revival of a retro style of clothing, "*qipao*," and explains it by reference to both the significant role of fashion industry and celebrities, who repackaged the symbolic meanings of the modern historical *qipao* into a style with socially acceptable fashionability and sexiness, and the agency of consumers, who interpret the meanings of the *qipao* style differently (Chew, 2007).

Culture and Politics

The cultural sociology of Chinese politics has been following the “state-society relations” paradigm, a pluralistic and subtle view of Chinese politics, which China scholars began to use in the late 1980s to replace the old totalitarian model (Perry, 1994b). The Tiananmen protest in 1989 marked a turning point in this line of research. As mentioned earlier, a “neoculturalist approach to politics” emerged and demonstrated the clear influence of the cultural turn; in fact, in her agenda-setting introduction, Elizabeth Perry cited Lynn Hunt’s work on the French Revolution, a representative cultural-turn study, as a major theoretical support (Perry, 1994a: 5). This approach views symbolism, language, rituals, and identities as loci of confrontation and contestation, emphasizes the fluidity and flexibility of Chinese politics, and gives equal status to both culture and structure.⁶ Meanwhile, Craig Calhoun’s study of the Tiananmen protest, arguably the first self-conscious cultural sociological monograph on China, highlighted the central role of cultural identity in shaping the contours and trajectory of the Tiananmen movement. The students’ and intellectuals’ self-identities were deeply rooted in historical tales of martyrdom and the Confucian intellectuals with moral authority and responsibility. Consequently, they transformed themselves from self-interested cultural elites to passionate participants who were willing to sacrifice themselves for China. Their elite identities, however, also limited their outreach to other classes and partially explained the failure of the movement (Calhoun, 1994). Following a similar approach but with a different emphasis on emotion, Guobin Yang analyzed the emotional dynamics of the Tiananmen movement and showed that the students’ pursuit of self-fulfillment and self-realization was intertwined with their identities during the process of movement (G Yang, 2000). In a comparative study of the 1989 protests in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Tiananmen, Pfaff and Yang argue that official rituals in authoritarian contexts usually have “double-edged effects”: they are held to enact the state’s domination but unintentionally provide protesters with rare opportunities to air their grievances publicly (Pfaff and Yang, 2001).

One thing that stood out in the Tiananmen protest and other conflicts was the robust persistence of traditional and Communist cultural expressions and practices. For example, the students and intellectuals adhered to traditionalism in their style of protests, their stress on moralism, and their elite identities (Wasserstrom and Perry, 1994). Dingxin Zhao (2000) offered a more structuralist explanation: the traditionalism in the students’ contestations (for example, the students’ familial discourse and ritualistic kneeling) can be explained by features of the state–society relations: stronger state, weaker civil organizations, and the state’s effort to enhance moral legitimacy. Yang’s book on the Red Guard generation emphasizes the persistent role of revolutionary passion and ideology in collective violence during and after the Cultural Revolution (G Yang, 2016). Ho-Fung Hung (Hung, 2011) suggests a similar resemblance of contemporary protests to traditional rhetorics and forms, including the emphasis on subsistence issues, moral economy, and familial language and practices, but traces these to the popular protests in China’s early modernity, the mid-Qing period (1740–1839), which was imbued with the Confucian concepts of authority and rights and strengthened by the centralized state. Similarly, Chinese sociologists Ying Xing emphasizes “*qi*” (vital force), a uniquely cultural term which expresses the pursuit of dignity, value, and recognition and tendency to

resist contempt and humiliation, in peasants' interpretations of their collective actions against local governments (Ying, 2007).

Other sociologists attempt to combine a cultural analysis with an organizational analysis of social movements and revolution. In a theatrical analysis of the Tiananmen incident, Doug Guthrie argues that, although the students' social movement organizations failed to link with the mass population, they managed to mobilize the larger society through symbols and performance on public stages, such as the square and TV reports. Both the performative strategy and organizations were enabled by the students' access to information and the rise of an autonomous economic sector (Guthrie, 1995). From an innovative Weberian perspective, Xiaohong Xu (X Xu, 2013) explains that Communism was able to take root in China in the May 4th movement because of the "hybrid" ethos of some political groups and their corresponding organizational forms, including the traditional Chinese ethic of "self-cultivation" (*xiushen*), the Christian missionaries' similar idea, and the Christian organizations' disciplinary group methods. This hybrid cultural schemata and organizational styles had the affinity with the Bolshevik culture of democratic centralism and the corresponding organizational form.

Sociologists also explore the other side of the state–society relations, such as the state's cultural practices and performances. In doing so, some conceptualize culture mainly as "ideological power," a "site of competition for dominance" as opposed to other sources of power, including economic, military, and political power (Zhao, 2015). Others follow the tenet of more recent cultural sociology of the state, which asserts that state power intrinsically includes discursive, symbolic, and performative dimensions (Geertz, 1980; Reed, 2013; Steinmetz, 1999). For example, drawing on dramaturgical theory, Bin Xu examines the effectiveness and dilemmas of the Chinese state's performance in the intensive situation after the devastating Sichuan earthquake in 2008 (B Xu, 2012, 2016). Scenes like a massive earthquake create an emotive context for the state to perform its moral message of being a secure and empathic state, but the scene also leads to public demands for the state to address the causes of the suffering and provokes repercussions for its legitimacy. Carolyn Hsu's study of the state's corruption narratives takes a similar performative perspective (CL Hsu, 2001): in the 1990s the state constructed an "anti-corruption" story, in which the Party-state battled corruption on behalf of its citizens to bring them economic and social welfare. Thus, the theme of the narrative changed from a moral or political issue to an economic management issue, and the regime managed to control the corruption crisis.⁷

Culture and Civil Society

The beauty and trouble of "civil society," together with its sister concept "public sphere," come from the same normative source: the idea of equating "civil society" with the "good society," in which we want to live and within which our civic engagements are pursued. This is where cultural sociology can contribute: to empirically interpret how in specific political contexts civic actors participate in public affairs according to their political and moral understandings of the "good society" (Lichterhan, 2005). This cultural sociological approach also makes historical sense in the context of China. The public discussions and scholarship of "civil society" in the 1980s started with the

neo-Tocquevillian approach based on a teleology of democracy. Following the East European model of “civil society versus the state,” this model aimed to explore the possibility of an autonomous public sphere with independent voluntary associations as the social basis for democratization. If some changes in China in the 1980s, mostly in the elite public sphere of intellectuals and media, might have substantiated this normative goal, then the Tiananmen crackdown quickly smashed it. The majority of the studies since then have shied away from the normative and cultural aspect and been devoted to empirical descriptions of the complex coexistence between associations and the authoritarian state (Spire, 2011).

Nevertheless, given the normative nature of civil society in its theory and practices, cultural sociology still has its presence, albeit less visible, in the scholarship on Chinese civil society. Richard Madsen was one of the pioneers along this line. As early as 1993, Madsen advocated a focus on the moral and cultural dimensions of Chinese civil society in order to understand the quality of the moral resources civic actors mobilize in their actions. The influence of the cultural turn was discernible in his piece: for example, he argued that the way to study the moral and cultural aspects of civil society was to borrow ideas and methods from anthropologists and cultural historians such as Geertz (Madsen, 1993). This agenda was materialized in his 1998 book on China’s Catholic Church, in which he focused on “civility”—such as self-restraint, tolerance for diversity, and a commitment to fair treatment for all—rather than the autonomy of civic organizations (Madsen, 1998). Craig Calhoun’s aforementioned research on the 1989 Tiananmen movement (1994) was another pioneering study but focused on the “public sphere.” Calhoun showed the emergence of a public sphere in China in the 1980s, where newspapers, think tanks, salons, cafes, bookstores, and literary journals mushroomed. The public sphere went beyond the authoritarian state’s direct control and constituted a social space for students to play to larger domestic and international audiences. But the students’ and intellectuals’ self-identity as cultural elites, which largely drew from the higher status of literati in the Confucian culture and the heroes in the Communist political culture, failed to build an alliance with less educated classes such as workers and peasants. Thus, the public sphere that boosted the tremendous fervor in the media was not open or robust enough to have significant impacts on Chinese society.

Since then, cultural sociological studies of Chinese civil society have diverged along the paths set by the two pioneering authors, one devoted to the narrow sense of the “public sphere”—a discursive space constituted by the media, the internet, and other institutional scaffoldings—and the other to voluntary associations. Cultural sociology has a stronger presence in the scholarship on the “public sphere.” Guobin Yang’s study of online activism focuses on the digital culture of contention in the idiosyncratic space of the internet, but such a culture is inherited from traditional offline activism (2009). Gleiss (2015) analyzes discursive struggles and resistance in China’s online space, with a focus on a Weibo-based campaign for medical treatment for workers with pneumoconiosis. Sometimes such resistance and contention may seem playful and trivial. For example, Yang et al.’s study of “diaosi,” a popular vulgar online word, shows that the sociopolitical critique the word offers takes place somewhere between overt defiance and benign entertainment and is hidden in self-mockery and transformed into other cultural

valences (P Yang et al., 2015). This line of studies has become part of a vibrant interdisciplinary scholarship of the Chinese public sphere.⁸

In contrast, the cultural sociological approach to voluntary associations and civic engagement remains underdeveloped until recently. Most studies in English and Chinese revolve around the organizational and institutional relations between the authoritarian state and the associations (Spire, 2011; Teets, 2014).⁹ How the Chinese associations and individual participants view their civic engagement and how this understanding affects their actions remain less addressed. In other words, the normative aspect (“the good society”) has been largely forgotten. Bin Xu’s book *The Politics of Compassion: The Sichuan Earthquake and Civic Engagement* (2017) partially remedies this issue by raising a cultural sociological approach. The book examines the unprecedented wave of volunteering after the Sichuan earthquake. It shows how the widespread death and suffering caused by the earthquake illuminates the moral-political dilemma the volunteers faced, how they acted on the ground, how they understood the meaning of their actions, and how the political climate shaped their actions and understandings. Xu’s case, however, is a disaster, an unusual situation with a heightened level of moral emotions. Anthony Spire’s recent study focuses on normal, day-to-day situations, in which young volunteers stray from the official, formulaic culture of voluntarism and articulate their strong desire for meaningful, personal engagement (Spire, 2018). Yunxiang Yan examines the complexity in an even less organized type of civic engagement: when “Good Samaritans” help victims of accidents in public places but are wrongly accused even extorted by the victims. Instead of simply lamenting the moral degradation of contemporary Chinese society, Yan reveals the moral dilemmas of the involved people: the often elderly, socially underprivileged extortionists harbor doubts about strangers’ altruism and desperately seek compensations for their economic loss and physical pain. Those cases of troubled civic engagement can be explained by the problematic legal system, particularistic morality, and the increasing social inequality in today’s China (Yan, 2009). This cultural sociological approach to civic actions constitutes a challenge to neo-Tocquevillianism and shows a strong potential for comparative analyses of civic engagement between China and other political contexts.

Other Topics: Memory and Everyday Interactions

The cultural sociology of Chinese memory has been developing rapidly in the past decade and has concentrated on memories of significant events in contemporary Chinese history (Lee and Yang, 2007; Qian and Zhang, 2015). For example, Gao Rui found a surprising absence of collective trauma of the Anti-Japanese War in the official narratives within the first several decades of the founding of the PRC. The reason, as she argued, was that the trauma of class struggles overrode the trauma of individuals’ suffering in the state’s promoted stories (R Gao, 2015). In contrast, Xu and Pu approached the Anti-Japanese War memory in a different case (the Chinese war reparations movement in the 1990s and 2000s, in which victims of the Second World War demanded compensations and apologies from Japan) and from the bottom up instead of from the top down. They showed that official discourses are translated into citizens’ political participation

and that the state–society interactions in different places lead to variation in the development of different movement sectors (B Xu and Pu, 2010).

A few studies examine the Communist regime’s reconstruction of memory of the Republican era, especially the systematic, forcible commemorative practices at the grassroots level. One such commemorative practice was “speaking bitterness” (*suku*)—the state’s strategy of encouraging poor peasants and workers to recount their suffering before 1949 as a way to mobilize them to participate in the land reform and other political campaigns (Guo, 2008; Guo and Sun, 2003).

Some studies have analyzed memories of the “sent-down youths” (*zhiquing*), a generation of youths who were mobilized or forced by the Chinese state to migrate to the frontiers and villages in the 1960s and 1970s. In one of the first studies, Guobin Yang argues that the *zhiquing* generation’s nostalgia, expressed in their memoirs, functioned as their cultural resistance to the rapidly changing Chinese society in the 1980s and 1990s (G Yang, 2003). Jennifer Hubbert’s ethnography examines old *zhiquing* restaurants as a type of commemoration of the Cultural Revolution (Hubbert, 2005). Bin Xu explains the variations in their autobiographic memories according to their present class positions and their habitus formed in the political class structure in the Mao years (B Xu, 2019). Chinese-language studies by Liu Yaqiu and Wang Hansheng analyze how this suffering became meaningful through the narratives about the nation (Liu, 2003; Wang and Liu, 2006).¹⁰

Some sociological studies go deeper into interactions in everyday settings and attempt to discover its underlying cultural logic, often through ethnography. One stream of research, which was discussed in the economy section, comes from the effort to understand the mechanisms and moral meanings of “*guanxi*” (connections), “*mianzi*” (face), and “*renqing*” (sentiments) in light of social exchange theory and anthropological theories of gift exchange (Hwang, 1987; Yan, 1996). A consensus among the scholars is that “it is better to treat *guanxixue* [knowledge of *guanxi*] not as a timeless given of Chinese culture, but as a historically situated cultural practice whose features and discourse have different deployments in given historical moments and contexts” (MM-h Yang, 2002: 469). Some scholars have taken a radical stance, directly using the indigenous terms to construct a theoretical system without borrowing and conversing with western theories (Zhai, 2014). Other scholars go in the opposite direction and aim to directly enter into dialog with the established theoretical tradition in the West, for example, symbolic interactionism. For instance, Xiaoli Tian shows how disembodied online information influences the dynamics of face-to-face interactions, a central focus of Goffman’s dramaturgical theories (Tian, 2017). Lily Liang examines China’s new generation of urban “ant tribes” (*yizu*)—young people who have low-paid jobs and have to live in crowded apartments with 10–20 similar people (Liang, 2017). She shows how those young women with college degrees draw symbolic boundaries by using defensive strategies to protect their identity as “high-quality” (*gaosuzhi*) people. James Farrer’s ethnography of sex culture in Shanghai presents a story of agency rather than a conventional trope of suppression–resistance or restriction–liberation: the younger generations in Shanghai seek ways to talk about their personal choices, motives, and desires in their stories and conversations when facing the whirlwind of social and cultural changes (Farrer, 2002).¹¹

The Road Ahead

We are cautiously optimistic about the long-term prospect of the cultural sociology of China. We have shown that three processes—knowledge diffusion, disciplinary tensions, and politics of knowledge—have shaped this burgeoning field. Our optimism comes from some promising new opportunities generated by the three processes. For example, the younger generation of graduate students in and outside China tend to have more diverse theoretical and methodological interests than older generations. The Chinese-language and English-language fields tend to communicate with each other more frequently and substantively than in recent years. Globalization matters here. More and more Chinese students go to Europe and the USA to study for PhDs, and sometimes even undergraduate degrees. Most of them return to China. Chinese scholars frequently visit western universities. China scholars in the English-speaking world more frequently interact with their colleagues in China, attending co-organized meetings, giving talks in Chinese universities, holding visiting scholarships, co-authoring articles, executing surveys, and so on.

Our optimism also comes from several promising topics for future research. First, culture and stratification, an important topic in cultural sociology, remains underdeveloped in the cultural sociology of China, but has a strong potential for future development, because of the abundant existing scholarship on Chinese stratification and data availability (Bian, 2002). Second, much work can be done on morality, a topic which recently has attracted much attention in general sociology (Hitlin and Vaisey, 2010). Chinese social life provides sociologists with numerous cases of actions imbued with ethical considerations and moral discourses. Morality was once central to China studies (Madsen, 1984; Yan, 2003). Some new and ongoing studies have begun to utilize these cultural resources. For example, a new volume edited by Becky Hsu and Richard Madsen, with contributions from some scholars discussed in this essay, focuses on social and ethical understandings of “happiness” (*xingfu*) (BY Hsu and Madsen, 2019). Third, collective memory studies may have a stronger prospect because of the visible memory boom in Chinese society in recent decades regarding unaddressed and unhealed past atrocities and catastrophes. Fourth, with more Chinese citizens’ adoption of transnational lifestyles (study abroad, migration, frequent travel, working in transnational organizations, etc.) and corresponding cultural transitions and changes, transnational studies of culture will potentially become a significant body of literature.

The “cautious” part of our optimism comes from some challenges. First, while most cultural sociologists of China today do not essentialize “Chineseness” or use “Chinese culture” as an omnipotent independent variable for inexplicable puzzles, we still need to have more explicit epistemological discussions about the balance between cultural specificities and generalization. To have a constructive dialog with general sociology, sociologists of China have to meet intellectual and professional challenges, including reversing the center-to-periphery flow of knowledge, overcoming obstacles between nation- and language-based fields, and sometimes dealing with intellectual and even political pride and prejudice on both sides. Every cultural sociologist of China stands at the intersection between China studies as a field of area studies and sociology as a discipline. Unlike scholars in the humanities and political science, whose disciplines allocate area-specific havens (“Chinese history” or “comparative politics”) for them, sociologists

are expected to be generalists who “happen to” have China as their primary site. This expectation not only raises epistemological issues about generalization but also poses professional challenges to the cultural sociologists of China, especially those based outside China. They may feel the constant pressure of giving satisfying answers to questions like “Why China?” while their European or American colleagues are less frequently asked to justify their case choices. Such questioning can have real-world consequences: peer reviews of journal articles, tenure evaluations, and grant applications are all based on whether the scholar can contribute to “general theories” of the discipline rather than knowledge about China. This has pushed younger generations of sociologists toward embracing big data, sophisticated methods, and well-crafted measurements whose generalizable features may fend off such criticisms. Nevertheless, this tendency has its negative consequences, as Kevin O’Brien, a veteran political scientist of China, warns: “Concentrating on comparison and measurement . . . may be crowding out context and efforts to develop a rich, rounded picture of Chinese politics” (O’Brien, 2018). There is no easy way out of this dilemma. The difficulties, however, should not hinder a pursuit of a less hegemonic, more egalitarian mode of communication, and an internally diverse but intrinsically connected agenda.

Finally, we are vigilant for the influence of politics on the future of the cultural sociology of China. Whereas we must attend to the latent knowledge/power nexus in any academic worlds, including the western ones, the major political peril now is of a blatant type, the authoritarian Chinese state’s censorship of published studies and possible research topics. This is not breaking news, but state censorship is now reaching beyond Chinese-language writings. It attempts to prevent English-language articles from being read in China—for example, blocking some articles in flagship journals like *China Quarterly*—and, in a pre-emptive practice, to fund existing English-language journals or even create new ones to screen out unwanted topics. Scholars based outside of China certainly can still publish freely but are afraid of losing access to data and sites because of a “sensitive” word (such as Xinjiang or Tibet) in their book titles. This political barrier impedes the transnational process of knowledge, the lifeline of the cultural sociology of China. Not only sociologists, but the whole intellectual community needs to be alert to this issue and take persistent and creative efforts to counter these political restrictions.

Acknowledgements

We thank Deborah Davis and Tom Gold for their helpful comments on an early version of this paper.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. We do not include Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macau, because those Chinese-speaking societies have distinctive political and social features, although we understand that people may have different opinions about their political status.
2. We selected the top 50 US sociology programs ranked by the US News and World Report and top sociology programs in other countries ranked by the QS Top Universities, including 10 universities in China, 5 in Canada, 5 in Hong Kong, 3 in Singapore, 16 in the UK, 10 in Australia, 10 in Germany, 7 in the Netherlands, and 10 in Scandinavia.

3. Some anthropologists' research on work and profession offers a noteworthy point that the autonomy the Chinese workers and professionals feel is in fact a part of the governmentality and subject-formation process driven by both the state and the market (Hoffman, 2010).
4. Media and literary scholars also explicitly adopt sociological approaches to study media-based cultural products, including DIY music (Jian, 2018), *China's Next Top Model* shows (Wei, 2014), independent films (Nakajima, 2013), online literature reading (Wu, 2014), and, in a case with explicit and conscious use of Bourdieu's field theory, literary fields in various historical periods in China (Hockx, 2003, 1999).
5. The chapters in the volume they edited, from various disciplinary perspectives, cover a wide range of economic actions, from tobacco consumption to homeownership (Zhang and Ong, 2008).
6. Other works by Perry and Wasserstrom on cultural politics, albeit not sociological, are worth noting here, given their historical depth and affinity with the tenets of cultural sociology (Esherick and Wasserstrom, 1990; Perry, 2002, 2012; Wasserstrom, 1991).
7. Some recent studies in the political science of China make similar performative arguments about the state's rhetoric, symbolic practices, and schemas, such as Sorace's book on the state's symbolic practices after the Sichuan earthquake (Sorace, 2017).
8. Agnes Ku's important work, despite her focus on Hong Kong instead of the mainland, adopts an explicitly cultural sociological approach to the public sphere in Hong Kong, especially its symbolic and discursive aspect (Ku, 2000). Some recent studies of the public sphere in other disciplines have affinity with cultural sociology (Han, 2018; Repnikova, 2017). Ya-Wen Lei's sociological study of the public sphere, albeit an institutionalist approach, is also worth mentioning (Lei, 2017).
9. A notable exception is Chinese scholar Gao Bingzhong, who uses "civility" and "solidarity" to address the transformation from a danwei society (the old state socialist workplace-based social system) to a "civil society," although no significant study followed this theoretical contemplation (B Gao, 2006, 2008).
10. A few other studies, which cannot be neatly grouped in the categories discussed or are not sociological works, are worth mentioning: Bin Xu's article on memorialization of the Sichuan earthquake (B. Xu, 2017), Denton's book on museums (Denton, 2014), Denise Ho's work on museums and exhibits in the Mao years (Ho, 2018), Zhou Haiyan's study of the identity and legitimation in the memory of "Nanniwan spirit" in the "Big Production Campaign" in the Party's base in the 1940s (H Zhou, 2013), among others.
11. Anthropologist Lisa Rofel makes a similar argument about the younger generation's subjectivity in expressing desires and longings in sexuality and consumption, but stresses the influence of neoliberalism on their subjectivity (Rofel, 2007).

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