RESEARCH

The Making of a Sociology with Distinctive Chinese Characteristics

CAO Liqun, YAN Fei and Nicholas P. LOVRICH

This article re-examines the recent history of Chinese sociology from a sociological viewpoint by adopting a perspective that transcends the official powerholders' framework. It focuses on the period between 1978 and 2023, and offers a descriptive analysis of the six features of socialist sociology with distinctive Chinese characteristics under Xi Jinping's regime. It also introduces the concept of "cooperation to resist" and identifies the subfields of sociology that are at risk of decline. The article contends that sociology in China has faced a crisis in the past decade due to its increased utilisation as a tool to support the authoritarian vision of China's modernisation. Such a shift has constrained the discipline and limited the scope of its inquiries, so that it increasingly focuses on politically safe subjects and topics that avoid critical scrutiny. Consequently, such scholarship blurs the boundaries between academic knowledge and propaganda, ultimately compromising the quality of scholarly work in favour of political power.

Sociology in China made a putatively "successful" comeback from virtual extinction to experiencing a robust reincarnation in 1979. To better understand the significance of this rebirth, this article critically examines official Chinese sociology—specifically, works published in major journals and books in Chinese—as an academic discipline since its revival. The inquiry focuses on the process of knowledge development, academic positioning, research content, research methodologies employed, and discipline-building activities.[1] The discussion is situated within the humanistic tradition of C. Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* and Michael Dutton's conceptualisation,

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[1] Yan Fei and Cao Liqun, "Situated Knowledge and Situated Action: The Rise of Chinese Sociology Since 1978", in *Paradigm Shifts in Chinese Studies*, ed. Hua Shiping (Singapore: Palgrave-Macmillan Press, 2022), pp. 263–83.

inspired by Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, of China as a *registered society*.[2] It is argued that the present can best be understood in terms of the past and a dynamic evaluation of the contemporary will reveal insights into an unknown future. The authors argue that sociology in China since 2012 has largely failed to reflect core enlightenment doctrines—such as constitutional government, human rights, progress, tolerance of diversity, and the pursuit of knowledge obtained through reason and the evidence of the human senses. If the current trajectory continues, sociology, as practised and taught in China's contemporary classrooms, will increasingly resemble a "Potemkin village", offering sociology in name only.

The article is divided into three parts. The first presents the remarkable historical comeback of sociology since 1979. Secondly, it draws upon the situated knowledge of contemporary sociological research to offer a substantive critique of the characteristics of official sociology in China. Thirdly, the discussion details ideational regimentation, which involves circumscribing the frontiers of discourse, information dissemination, research and knowledge using regime-sanctioned ideological and cognitive concepts,[3] and highlights its major implications. Fourthly and finally, feminist sociology—viewed as a subversive force vis-à-vis the Party's legitimacy—is used as a telling example of an underdeveloped area of sociology, presenting a missed opportunity for Chinese sociology to establish itself as a full-fledged academic discipline.

THE UPS AND DOWNS OF SOCIOLOGY IN CHINA

Today, sociology is fully institutionalised in China, but with distinctive Chinese characteristics setting it apart from the global community of sociological scholarship. A well-grounded understanding of the past provides a firm foundation for an informed interpretation of the current state of the discipline. According to Yan and Cao, the history of Chinese sociology can be divided roughly into four major periods: the *onset* (1900–51), the *long hiatus* (1952–78), the *reincarnation and great expansion* (1979–2012), and the *full institutionalisation with distinctive Chinese characteristics* (2012–the present).[4] This article focuses on the last two periods, but it is worthwhile to note the main characteristics of the previous two.

Sociology arrived in China around 1900, early in its development as a discipline worldwide, during a time when the need for unprecedented change, not only in science/technology but also in social thought and ideology,[5] became a matter of broad

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[2] C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959); Michael R. Dutton, *Policing and Punishment in China: From Patriarchy to "The People"* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

[3] Romi Jain, "The Tightening Ideational Regimentation of China's Higher Education System", *Economic and Political Weekly* 54, no. 30 (2019): 55–63.

[4] Yan and Cao, "Situated Knowledge and Situated Action".

[5] Edmund S.K. Fung, *The Intellectual Foundations of Chinese Modernity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

consensus among *fin-de-siècle* Chinese intellectuals. As an academic discipline, sociology grew awkwardly (although in 1931 a non-governmental Chinese Sociological Society was established) and lacked favour with various governments between 1900 and 1951.[6] The primary focus of sociology was on the social problems of the lower echelons of society.[7] Sociological thinking was largely influenced by Marxian thought, but it also included a mix of liberal, conservative and socialist thinking, providing the public with a wide spectrum of ideologies.[8] Before 1950, "outside the United States and Great Britain, there were few countries which had as good a body of teachers and advanced institutions studying sociology as China".[9]

The second period, **the long hiatus**, began not long after the Communist Party of China (CPC) assumed power following a prolonged violent revolution. In its attempt to create a "new society" based on the Soviet model, the regime ordered the closure of all sociology programmes in 1952.[10] While the liberal use of the punishment of death for "enemies" of the state was somewhat expected,[11] the extent of mass surveillance and monitoring of citizens' private conduct constituted an unprecedented form of ubiquitous social control.[12] In this regard, Dutton's theory of "*registered society*", inspired by Foucault's disciplinary power theory, provides insight into the underlying logic of totalitarian governance. Foucault examined how complete power over society is exercised,[13] viewing power as involving an "interaction of warring parties, as the decentered networks of bodily, face-to-face confrontations, and ultimately as the productive penetration and subjectivizing subjugation of a bodily opponent".[14] During the 1950s' Stalinisation of China, "social problems" were declared non-existent, and society, modelled on Soviet Marxism, was not subject to criticism. The CPC's active subjugation of citizens occurred through not only physical, but also disciplinary and cognitive coercion whereby individuals, from one's physical *corpus* to one's cognitive and affective processes, were meticulously archived in personal files (*renshi*

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[6] Lu Yuan, *Chuancheng yu duanlie: Jubian zhong de Zhongguo shehuixue yu shehuixuejia* (*Continuation and Rupture: Sociology and Sociologists amidst Monumental Change in China*) (Shanghai: The Commercial Press, 2019).

[7] Ambrose Yeo-Chi King and Wang Tse-Sang, "The Development and Death of Chinese Academic Sociology: A Chapter in the Sociology of Sociology", *Modern Asian Studies* 12, no. 1 (1978): 37–59.

[8] Fung, *The Intellectual Foundations of Chinese Modernity*.

[9] William H. Newell, "Modern Chinese Sociologists", *Sociological Bulletin* 1, no. 2 (1952): 89–94, esp. 89.

[10] Chen Hon Fai, *Chinese Sociology: State-building and the Institutionalization of Globally Circulated Knowledge* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018); Hsiung Ping-Chun, "The Politics of Rebuilding Chinese Sociology in 1980s", *Qualitative Inquiry* 23, no. 1 (2007): 89–101.

[11] Cao Liqun and Bill Hebenton, "Criminology in China: Taking Stock (Again)", *The Criminologist* 42, no. 2 (2018): 1–9.

[12] Lu, *Chuancheng yu duanlie* (*Continuation and Rupture*).

[13] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

[14] Jürgen Habermas, "Some Questions Concerning the Theory of Power: Foucault Again", in *Critiques and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, ed. Michael Kelly (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), pp. 79–108.

dang'an). These detailed dossiers followed a person wherever he/she went, resulting in the creation of this "registered society".[15] Higher education without sociology was confined to ideological indoctrination and technical training to serve the needs of a planned economy.[16]

The reincarnation and great expansion (1979–2012). While Yan and Cao's division of periods has served their purpose well, it is possible, given that any historical account is subject to controversy since a range of interpretations is implicit in the use of historical materials, that a more detailed periodisation could be developed within this era: (i) *rebirth* under Hu Yaobang/Zhao Ziyang (1979 to 1989); (ii) *great expansion* under Jiang Zemin (1990 to 2002); and (iii) *stability-maintenance* under Hu Jintao (2002 to 2012).

The political situation took a dramatic turn after Mao Zedong's death in 1976. The reform-minded faction of the CPC shifted the Party's policy focus from class struggle to the active pursuit of economic growth. To enlarge the CPC's social base and to save the national economy from collapse, Deng Xiaoping decided to incorporate the *intelligentsia* into the ranks of the "ruling proletariat", viewing them as intellectuals or *mental workers* (*naoli laodongzhe*). Within this dramatically reconfigured political context, a rebuilding of sociology was permitted. A new Chinese Sociological Association, fully sponsored by the CPC, was established on 16 March 1979 with British-trained sociologist Fei Xiaotong selected as its first president. It is worth noting that this association is not a non-governmental organisation, but rather a peripheral organisation fully funded and assiduously monitored by the CPC. The declared intention of the Association was to develop sociology as another tool for the Party to serve the cause of socialism.[17]

While sociology was once more an officially sanctioned enterprise, the CPC remained cautious and sceptical about the emancipatory potential of the discipline's long-established penchant for critical thinking. To nip any threat in the bud, recruits admitted to sociology programmes were selected from those who "had formally undergone an intensive training in Marxism".[18] A strict political background reliability check (*zhengshen*) was conducted for these newly minted scholars shortlisted to steer the course for the sociology discipline, given their meticulous documentation of their qualification as loyal followers of the communist cause.[19] The first one-year training programme in sociology was launched at Nankai University in 1980–81 (see Table 1). The first department of sociology was established at Shanghai University in 1980. Soon after, sociology programmes began to crop up throughout China.

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[15] Dutton, *Policing and Punishment in China*.

[16] Li Hanlin et al., "Chinese Sociology, 1898–1986", *Social Forces* 65, no. 3 (1987): 612–40; C. Edwin Vaughan and Zhang Chunhou, "The Impact of Modernization on Higher Education in China", *International Sociology* 11, no. 2 (1996): 213–28.

[17] Du Renzhi, "Fully Develop Sociological Research to Serve Socialism", *Chinese Sociology & Anthropology* 13, no. 3 (1981): 41–51.

[18] Li et al., "Chinese Sociology, 1898–1986".

[19] Lucie Cheng and Alvin So, "The Reestablishing of Sociology in the PRC: Toward the Signification of Marxian Sociology", *Annual Review of Sociology* 9 (1983): 471–98.

When Fei Xiaotong accepted the challenge of rebuilding sociology, he was fully aware that his role, as a non-CPC member, was contingent on compliance with CPC aims. Accordingly, he posited that Marxism should be regarded as sociology's guiding theory and that Mao's "field investigation" was its principal method.[20] From 1979 to 1989, the Chinese *intelligentsia* experienced the "Second Liberation" during which time it enjoyed much-needed breathing space and unprecedented freedom. Following the June Fourth Massacre in 1989 and a brief period of greatly restricted freedom of expression,[21] CPC controls began to loosen again as China moved into the 1990s. Economic reform-minded communists regained their prior traction and Chinese society progressively moved into closer alignment with international norms concerning limited academic freedom. A clearer separation between the Party and governmental administration began to develop, and genuine liberalisation appeared to lie ahead.[22] The dominant slogan of the time was "to integrate with the world" (*yu shijie jiegui*). Some features of civil society were permitted to develop, and Jiang Zemin's regime (1992–2002) witnessed another period of relative tolerance. Talented and critical scholars outside academic establishments, such as Deng Zhenglai (邓正来) and even ex-convict Qiu Xinglong (邱兴隆), were recruited into the universities. However, it was also observed that "thinkers fade away while scholars stand out" (*sixiangjia danchu, xuewenjia tuxian*). Sociology emerged as a prominent academic discipline. One of Fei's successors, Zheng Hangsheng (郑杭生), a Marxist scholar (within the Chinese context), insisted on confining sociology within a predetermined Marxist pattern of thought. He believes that the main role of sociology is not societal critique, which he deemed to be detrimental to the development of the discipline in China. Instead, he argues that sociology should focus on contributing to socio-economic development and documenting CPC achievements by collecting massive amounts of data and inventing, whenever possible.[23]

The first cohort of undergraduate degrees in sociology was conferred in 1984 at Shanghai University, and the first PhD degree was awarded in 1988 at Peking University (see Table 1). By 2008, nearly 900 journal articles in sociology had been published,[24] and the annual number has since increased with the emergence of additional publication outlets. As of 2015, more than 6,000 professional sociologists were working in universities and academies, maintaining numerous undergraduate programmes. In 2021, there were, on average, 45 PhD degrees granted for the three largest PhD programmes in China (14 from Tsinghua University, 11 from Peking University and 20 from Fudan University). Nationwide, an estimated 120 to 180 sociology PhD

[20] Yan and Cao, "Situated Knowledge and Situated Action".

[21] Rilly Chen and Yan Fei, "Dynamics of Multidimensional Interaction: The Beijing Upheaval of 1989 Revisited", *Contention* 7, no. 2 (2019): 76–99.

[22] Cao Liqun, "Returning to Normality: Anomie and Crime in China", *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 51, no. 1 (2007): 40–51.

[23] Zheng Hangsheng, *Shehuixue gailun xinxiu* (*New Introduction to Sociology*) (Beijing: Renmin University Press, 1994).

[24] Bian Yanjie and Zhang Lei, "Sociology in China", *Contexts* 7, no. 3 (2008): 20–5.

degrees were awarded in 2021. In 2023, 41 PhD programmes were admitting new PhD applicants. Sociology in China has thrived in many ways, surpassing its first historical period and outperforming all other nations with the sole exception of the United States. A timeline of major sociological events is presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1
A Timeline of Major Events related to Sociology in China

Timeline	Sociology
Around 1900	Missionary universities begin to offer sociology courses
1914	St. John's University in Shanghai sets up a Department of Sociology
1931	The Chinese Sociological Society is established as a non-governmental organisation
1952	All sociology programmes are forced to cease operation
1979	The Chinese Sociological Association is established as a quasi-governmental entity
1980	Nankai University offers instructor training Shanghai University sets up a Department of Sociology
1981	Shanghai University publishes the first professional journal, *Chinese Journal of Sociology*
1984	Shanghai University confers its first cohort of graduates with bachelor's degrees in sociology
1986	The Institute of Sociology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, publishes its journal *Sociological Studies*
1988	Peking University confers its first PhD degree in sociology
2021	China grants an estimated 120 to 180 PhD degrees in sociology
2023	41 PhD programmes in sociology are recruiting students

Notes: Data compilation of the number of PhD degrees in sociology from the Annual Report on Degree-awarding Institutions (*Xuewei shouquandian niandu baogao*). Since 2022, the Ministry of Education has required each university to publish its annual report online, detailing the development and establishment of every degree programme. These reports include student enrolment data and the number of graduates for the preceding year. The total number of PhD degrees awarded in 2021 is estimated by the authors.

During his tenure (2002–12) as President of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Hu Jintao was indecisive about the direction of China's future, vacillating in his public policy initiatives between strengthening ideological control and furthering economic reform. For him, "stability" overrode all other considerations. Sociologists at Tsinghua University were able to pioneer a new path for sociology within the framework of "communist civilisation".[25] The internationalisation of higher education began during this period. In general, sociology benefitted from the rapid economic development after China became a member of World Trade Organization, and it became a lucrative profession. Ideological control was stricter than it had been under Jiang Zemin but only intermittently so, and occasional resistance was not met with overly punitive consequences.

Institutionalisation with Chinese characteristics (2012 to the present). The latest period of sociology began when Xi Jinping rose to the CPC leadership in 2012—clearly a watershed year in hindsight. This period can be divided into two

[25] Aurore Merle, "Towards a Chinese Sociology for 'Communist Civilisation'", *China Perspectives* 2 (2004): 1–17.

distinctive periods: "*taking the reins*" (2012–18) and "*assuming full control*" (2018 to the present). Many observers of Chinese political life believe that Deng Xiaoping's reform initiatives began to ebb significantly in 2012.[26] Since then, the CPC has embraced the notion of the "New Era [*xin shidai*] of Xi". To the outside world, China could be seen as the nation which in 2013 surpassed Japan as the second-largest national economy. Inside China, Xi shifted the focus from prioritising economic growth to emphasising political control, initiating his one-person trajectory towards increased ideological control.[27] Academic organisations were actively nudged into serving as bureaucratic organs of the Party-state.[28] The regime's anti-corruption campaign garnered popular support, although such campaigns did not differ greatly from past political purges. Xi's political enemies have been either systematically retired or removed from positions of influence. By 2018, Xi was able to abolish term limits for the presidency of the PRC, with *no open resistance* from the nearly 3,000 delegates of the National People's Congress.

The tightening of ideological control began immediately as Xi Jinping secured the reins of governance. As a single-minded and mission-driven person, Xi has demonstrated patience in gradually intensifying control, becoming in due course the undisputed leader in all areas of public life. Maoist principles and practices—such as the principle of "sticking to the Party's unified leadership" (*yiyuanhua lingdao*)—have been revived across all levels, in all walks of life, including universities. During the reform years (1978–2012), the role of the CPC committees was to support the work of presidents, deans and department chairs to run their academic programmes. In the new era, presidents, deans and department chairs operate under the directives of CPC committees at all levels. While the press enjoyed intermittent periods of limited freedom from 1978 to 2012, control and scrutiny over the media and the content of publications originating from all of academia, including sociology, have been significantly enhanced.[29] In a speech at a symposium of experts in economics and the social sciences, Xi explicitly

[26] Carl Minzner and Jeremy Wallace, "Is China's Reform Era Over? Renewed State Controls in Politics and the Economy May Unravel the Consensus That's Kept China Sable for Decades", *Foreign Policy*, 28 July 2015, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/28/china-reform-era-xi-jinping-new-normal/> [8 August 2023].

[27] Lance L.P. Gore, "Leninism for the 21st Century: Xi Jinping's Ideological Party-building", *China: An International Journal* 21, no. 2 (2023): 8–25.

[28] Pi Yijun, "Turning of Academic Organisations into Bureaucratic Organs", *Issues on Juvenile Crime and Delinquency* 181 (2012): 109–10.

[29] Chen Hon Fai, *Chinese Sociology*; Yan Xiaojun, "Engineering Stability: Authoritarian Political Control over University Students in post-Deng China", *The China Quarterly* 218 (2014): 493–513; Yuan Guiren, "Gaoxiao jiaoshi bixu shouhao zhengzhi, falü, daode santiao dixian" (University Instructors Must Uphold the Three Bottom Lines of Politics, Law and Ethics), Xinhua News Agency, 29 January 2015, at <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/0129/c70731-26474982.html> [10 August 2023]; Jennifer Ruth and Xiao Yu, "Academic Freedom and China: Every Instructor Walks on Thin Ice", *Academic Freedom around the World* 105, no. 4 (2019): 39–44.

emphasised the need to develop "socialist sociology with distinctive Chinese characteristics" (*Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi shehuixue*).[30]

SITUATED KNOWLEDGE: "SOCIALIST SOCIOLOGY WITH DISTINCTIVE CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS"

The following discussion of sociology must be qualified with two caveats. First, the observations and commentaries pertain to sociological literature published within China and written in Chinese. By contrast, sociological studies of China written in English outside the country address a myriad of issues comparable to global sociological concerns, encompassing every aspect of people's "lived" experiences.[31] Second, the commentaries are related to sociological publications published in print (journals and books). They are less relevant to the numerous alternative publications generated in online and grassroots public spaces. These forums of expression are highly volatile, often existing for only a few minutes to a few days before being officially deleted.[32] Publications unfiltered by the CPC are classified as "unofficial sociology", while those publications that had passed the CPC censors are classified as "official sociology".

The political context in which the discipline has evolved can be viewed as an amalgamation of ancient Chinese despotic tendencies and a veneer of Confucian ideals, governed through a Soviet-style dictatorship that employs communism as the ideological foundation.[33] This combination has resulted in a new variation of systematic pervasive control epitomised by the "registered society" established during Mao's era and the

[30] "Xi Jinping: zai jingji shehui lingyu zhuanjia zuotanhui shang de jianghua" (Xi Jinping: Speech at the Forum of Experts in Economic and Social Fields), Xinhua News Agency, 24 August 2020, at <http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-08/24/c_1126407772.htm> [11 August 2023].

[31] Michael Caster, *The People's Republic of the Disappeared: Stories from Inside China's System for Enforced Disappearances* (New York: Safeguard Defenders, 2017); Merle Goldman, *From Comrade to Citizen: The Struggle for Political Rights in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Gail Hershatter, *Women in China's Long Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007); Daniel F. Vukovich, *Illiberal China: The Ideological Challenge of the People's Republic of China* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Zheng Tiantian, *Violent Intimacy: Family Harmony, State Stability, and Intimate Partner Violence in Post-Socialist China* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022); Jude Howell and Tim Pringle, "Shades of Authoritarianism and State–Labour Relations in China", *British Journal of Labour Relations* 57, no. 2 (2019): 223–46; Zheng Wang, "'State Feminism'? Gender and Socialist State Formation in Maoist China", *Feminist Studies* 31, no. 3 (2005): 519–51; Pei Yuxin, Sik-ying Ho Petula and Ng Man Lun, "Studies on Women's Sexuality in China Since 1980: A Critical Review", *Journal of Sex Research* 44, no. 2 (2007): 202–12; Xu Jianhua, "Urbanization and Inevitable Migration: Crime and Migrant Workers", in *The Routledge Handbook of Chinese Criminology*, ed. Bill Hebenton, Ivan Y. Sun and Cao Liqun (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 209–23; Tony Huiquan Zhang, "The Rise of the Princelings in China: Career Advantages and Collective Elite Reproduction", *Journal of East Asian Studies* 19, no. 2 (2019): 169–96.

[32] Sebastian Veg and Edmund W. Cheng, "Revisiting the Public Sphere in 20th- and 21st-century China", *The China Quarterly* 246 (2021): 317–30.

[33] Cao Liqun and Bill Hebenton, "China and 'La questione criminale' ('The Criminal Question'): Revolutionary and Reformist Periods", *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice* 52 (2018): 98–105.

rapid development of the cyber surveillance state under Xi.[34] In-group trust and *guanxi* (connections) have taken top priority over out-group trust.[35]

In this context, a "socialist sociology with distinctive Chinese characteristics" has been proclaimed; this is characterised by six key features. First, under Xi, sociology, like all academic disciplines, has regressed to the Mao era—i.e. in the attempt to replicate Mao's era without Mao himself. Like the law and punishment,[36] it functions as an instrument for social control that serves primarily the interest of the Party-state. Specifically, under Xi, sociology is tasked with contributing to the realisation of the "Chinese dream" of national rejuvenation, providing a platform for promoting Chinese culture globally[37] and suppressing certain memories domestically.[38] Sociologists are integrated into the top-down structure of political communication and must therefore act as the vanguard of the communist regime; they function therefore as elements in an ideological enterprise, enabling state supervision and control, and facilitating indoctrination that perpetuates the Party rule.[39]

Second, knowledge production, considered as part of the ideological domain, has been dominated by the Party-state rather than by independent individual scholars or academic disciplines,[40] resulting in an exercise of *political intellectualism* rather than an objective pursuit of intellectual inquiry. Government projects are not aimed at generating critical and reflexive research. Even in the area of anti-corruption, only retrospective analyses are permitted. The purpose of sociological inquiry is to provide nuts-and-bolts (political) knowledge for the governing body *in a reaffirming way*. For

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[34] Margaret Hu, "From the National Surveillance State to the Cybersurveillance State", *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 13 (2017): 161–80; Shi Chen and Xu Jianhua, "Surveillance Cameras and Resistance: A Case Study of a Middle School in China", *The British Journal of Criminology* 64, no. 5 (September 2024): 1150–70; Tony Huiquan Zhang, Xu Jianhua and Liu Jinjin, "How Do Toothless Tigers Bite? Extra-institutional Governance and Internet Censorship by Local Governments in China", *The China Quarterly*, online first (2024), at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741024000602>.

[35] Fei Xiaotong, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992); Bian Yanjie, "The Prevalence and the Increasing Significance of Guanxi", *The China Quarterly* 235 (2018): 597–621.

[36] Dutton, *Policing and Punishment in China*; Susan Trevaskes, "A Law unto Itself: Chinese Communist Party Leadership and *yifa zhiguo* in the Xi Era", *Modern China* 44 (2018): 347–73.

[37] Jain, "The Tightening Ideational Regimentation of China's Higher Education System".

[38] Jean-Philippe Béja, "Forbidden Memory, Unwritten History: The Difficulty of Structuring an Opposition Movement in the PRC", *China Perspectives* 4 (2007): 88–98.

[39] Rogier J.E.H. Creemers and Susan Trevaskes, *Law and the Party in China: Ideology and Organization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Hao Zhidong and Guo Zhengyang, "Professors as Intellectuals in China: Political Identities and Roles in a Provincial University", *The China Quarterly* 228 (2016): 1039–60; Susan Trevaskes, "A Law unto Itself: Chinese Communist Party Leadership and Yifa Zhiguo in the Xi Era", *Modern China* 44, no. 4 (2018): 347–73; Ruth and Xiao, "Academic Freedom and China: Every Instructor Walks on Thin Ice".

[40] Bill Hebenton and Susyan Jou, "Criminology in and on China: Discipline and Power", *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 26, no. 1 (2010): 7–19; Susyan Jou, Bill Hebenton and Cao Liqun, "Development of Criminology in Modern China", in *The Routledge Handbook of Chinese Criminology*, ed. Cao Liqun, Ivan Y. Sun and Bill Hebenton (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 16–26.

example, no existing sociological journals have published any opposing or questioning articles regarding the negative and morally questionable aspects of the zero-COVID policy over the past three years. In addition, little reflexive and/or critical theory, which for many of the world's sociologists are the foundation of sociology,[41] has been produced by sociologists. As Mills argues, "sociological imagination" encourages researchers to "not allow public issues as they are officially formulated…to determine the problems that [they] take up for study".[42] The outwardly impressive presence of sociologists at PRC universities masks the absolute lack of critical intellectual questioning of public institutions and the continuance of dubious policies.

Third, there is a tendency in published articles to obfuscate rather than clarify reality. Avid and uncritical sociologists often create highly abstract Chinese neologisms for concepts already well-established in English. For example, social classes become "social layers" and "social inequality" (*shehui bu pingdeng*) is replaced with "social disparity" (*shehui chaju*). The concept of "rule of law" is substituted with "rule by law", and punishment is equated with justice. The severe exploitation of migrant workers is euphemistically referred to as deriving "population dividends".[43] The narratives about peasants who leave home to work in cities often focus on their satisfaction in earning a higher income, omitting the suffering they endure in factories and the discrimination they face from urban residents.

Fourth, in response to the call for "socialist sociology with distinctive Chinese characteristics", sociologists have reignited another round of fruitless bickering about *bentuhua* or indigenisation of sociology, initially started in the 1930s by Wu Wenzao.[44] The debate is largely one-sided in favour of methodological nationalism, and hardly argues in defence of cosmopolitanism.[45] Methodological nationalism assumes that nation-states are the natural and necessary form of organising a successful modern society. It tends to feed off the banal nationalism of everyday language and social practices. By contrast, cosmopolitanism rejects the notion that a nation's exclusionary dimensions are permanent, unsurmountable or all-encompassing,[46] advocating instead for openness, inclusivity and self-determination.[47] The indigenisation debate in China

[41] Julian Go, "Unveiling Power, or Why Social Science's Task is Explanation", *The British Journal of Sociology* (2023): 1–5, at <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.13056>.
[42] Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, p. 226.
[43] Zhang Xinyi, Yan Fei and Chen Yulin, "A Floating Dream: Urban Upgrading, Population Control and Migrant Children's Education in Beijing", *Environment and Urbanization* 33, no. 1 (2021): 11–30.
[44] Wu Wenzao (吴文藻), a Chinese sociologist in the 1930s, was the leader of the "Chinese school of sociology".
[45] For a balanced and rigorous debate on the issue from both sides, see Daniel Chernilo, "Beyond the Nation? Or Back to It? Current Trends in the Sociology of Nations and Nationalism", *Sociology* 54, no. 6 (2020): 1072–87.
[46] Gerard Delanty and He Baogang, "Cosmopolitan Perspectives on European and Asian Transnationalism", *International Sociology* 23, no. 3 (2008): 323–44.
[47] Francis T. Cullen, "Social Support as an Organizing Concept for Criminology: Presidential Address to the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences", *Justice Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (1994): 527–59.

largely concluded by the 1930s and the current debate is seen as having little scientific value and is considered a pseudo-problem.[48]

Fifth, the limited scope of academic freedom significantly influences what data are collected, how they are assembled, and consequently how they are interpreted and which interpretations are disseminated. Censorship is pervasive in survey research; topics considered politically sensitive are prohibited and certain survey items are removed. These omissions preclude the possibility of comparative studies and severely reduce the comparability of cross-cultural studies.[49] In addition, expressed opinions under a totalitarian state are often inaccurate as people are alienated from the political decision-making process and fear government persecution.[50] Consequently, such quantitative data are dubious and less reflective of true public sentiment. Uncritical use of these data often results in what Mills characterised as "abstracted empiricism"[51]—scholarship in which social reality is largely lost in a narrow focus on method and measurement.

Sixth, many sociological areas of study are at risk of becoming extinct due to both vertical (top-down) censorship and horizontal self-censorship. Limited studies that were permitted from the previous periods have now become endangered, including but not limited to studies related to feminist sociology, criminology, social movements and political participation (see Table 2 for details). As governmental censorship continues to intensify, the list of taboo topics will likely expand further: capital punishment, civil society, constitutionalism, economic deprivation, ethnic minority riots, homelessness, human rights, injustice, intimidation of dissidents, mistreatment of criminal defendants and even lawyers, the petition system, press freedom, sexual harassment, state crime, suppression of intellectuals, village voting, and the white paper movement, etc.

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[48] Xie Yu, "Zouchu Zhongguo shehuixue bentuhua taolun de wuqu" (Avoiding the Misleading Trap of Sociology Localisation in China), *Shehuixue yanjiu* (*Sociological Studies*) 2 (2018): 1–13. While Xie Yu believes that *bentuhua* is a non-issue, Zhao Dingxin, a retired professor of sociology from the University of Chicago and currently a professor at Zhejiang University, posits that sociology is not a Western import but rather it reflects indigenous thinking of the Chinese. See Zhao Dingxin, "Cong Meiguo shiyong zhuyi shehui kexue dao Zhongguo tese shehui kexue: zhexue he fangfa lun jichu tanjiu" (From American Pragmatic Social Sciences to Social Sciences with Chinese Characteristics: An Ontological and Epistemological Reflection), *Shehuixue yanjiu* (*Sociological Studies*) 1 (2018): 17–40.

[49] Zhuo Yue and Cao Liqun, "Civil Disputes Resolution in Contemporary China: Action vs. Intention", *Crime, Law and Social Change* 66, no. 5 (2016): 507–23.

[50] Cao Liqun and Dai Mengyan, "Confidence in the Police: Where Does Taiwan Rank in the World?", *Asian Journal of Criminology* 1 (2006): 71–84.

[51] Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*.

TABLE 2
A List of Endangered Subfields of Sociology in China

Subfields of Sociology	Specific Topics
Feminist Sociology	gender equality, LGBTQ2 (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and two spirit), prostitution, sex industry, women's rights
Criminology	Anomie, constitutionalism, corruption, justice, legitimacy, police deviance, policy on ascetic deviance, rule of law, state crime
Social Movements	collective behaviour, contentious politics, political conflicts, ethnic riots, popular protest
Government	Government–business collusion, government trust, interest groups, political capital, political suppression, medical sociology, state–labour relationship
Political Participation	civil society, civic engagement, civil rights, democracy, non-governmental organisations, religious practice
Social Inequality	class politics, disadvantaged social groups, income disparities, marginalised social groups, rural-urban divide

Notes: Table 2 is a modified version based on a table developed by Yan Fei and Cao Liqun. While Yan and Cao highlight the underdeveloped subfields of sociology, Table 2 highlights that the subfields are at risk of elimination in the immediate future; see Yan Fei and Cao Liqun, "Situated Knowledge and Situated Action: The Rise of Chinese Sociology Since 1978", in *Paradigm Shifts in Chinese Studies*, ed. Shiping Hua (Singapore: Palgrave-Macmillan Press, 2022), pp. 263–83.

Reform-minded scholars view the new period with notable trepidation, considering it a retrograde development and a new form of despotism that pretends to respect expertise and openly disparages sociological knowledge.[52] Before Xi's era, the state typically coaxed intellectuals into compliance with the Party-state dictates. However, in the new era, the Xi regime has publicly clamped down on academics who dare to deviate from the Party line.[53]

The governance power of the CPC is however certainly not monolithic. While the phenomenon of "educated acquiescence"[54]—acceding to political compliance in exchange for benefits and visibility in the state-sanctioned academic limelight—appears to be widespread, the reality is more complex. Beneath this seeming acquiescence lies a potential volcano of dissent, indicating that the *intelligentsia*, sociologists included, are not entirely convinced of the Party's goals.[55] Many sociologists, with years of training in the discipline, adopt a "cooperate to resist" approach towards their jobs and their publications. They attempt to comply with the Party's demands to keep

[52] Xu Zhangrun, "Women dangxia de kongju yu qidai" (Our Contemporary Fear and Expectation), Unirule Institute of Economics, at <http://unirule.cloud/index.php?c=article&id=4625> [18 September 2023].

[53] Tom Phillips, "Chinese Universities Must Become Communist Strongholds, says Xi Jinping", *The Guardian*, 9 December 2016, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/09/china-universities-must-become-communist-party-strongholds-says-xi-jinping> [10 August 2023]; Christian Shepherd, "Chinese Academic Stopped from Teaching after Criticizing Party Leadership", *Financial Times*, 25 March 2019, at <https://www.ft.com/content/8af0cfdc-4f11-11e9-b401-8d9ef1626294> [11 August 2022].

[54] Elizabeth J. Perry, "Educated Acquiescence: How Academia Sustains Authoritarianism in China", *Theory and Society* 49, no. 1 (2020): 1–22.

[55] Hao and Guo, "Professors as Intellectuals in China".

their jobs and get their articles published (see a case study by Wang and Liu[56]). The "cooperate to resist" concept pertains to a strategy of public obedience coupled with private resistance. This form of resistance is common in totalitarian regimes, where open opposition is impossible and governments can never fully extinguish human freedom. The concept is similar to Erika E.S. Evasdottir's "obedient autonomy" concept, which is "a self-directed control over change that takes effect only through the concerted effort".[57] Moreover, a few sociologists, such as Guo Yuhua (郭于华), Sun Liping (孙立平), Yu Jianrong (于建嵘) and Zheng Yefu (郑也夫), along with legal scholars like Lao Dongyan (劳东燕), Xu Zhangrun (许章润) and Zhang Qianfan (张千帆), have openly steered clear of making a Faustian bargain and work within the "cracks" of virtual public spaces, which are characterised by their short-lived presence or duration in cyberspace, always far removed from the official limelight. Without legal protections and the support of civil society, these scholars, like some of their administrators who are also intellectuals and are unable to resist ideological encroachment, cannot function openly for long. Nevertheless, through considering the courageous work being done in these cracks, the authors find both light and continuing hope for the future of Chinese sociology.

Xi's tightening grip on society, akin to Maoist totalitarianism, has intensified melancholy among intellectuals. The global sociological community actively celebrates diversity of thought, self-critical introspection, ongoing critical assessments of social institutions, and the active exchange of insights across cultures and nations. The concept of universal human rights holds genuine significance for them and demonstrating through scientific inquiry how contemporary social institutions and orthodox thinking often impede the realisation of those rights is a core element of Mills' *Sociological Imagination*. Xu and Liu, in their commentary on "public criminology" in China, argue that the term connotes "neither public nor criminology" because criminology in China is heavily influenced by the state and lacks both public engagement and academic independence.[58] Given the aforementioned six features of sociology, a similar conclusion can be drawn about the field as a whole: sociology in China is on its way to becoming "sociology" in name only.

Ironically, the current critique of sociology in China originates from the Western Marxian tradition of sociology, spanning from C. Wright Mills to Edward W. Said, and from Michel Foucault to Michael Dutton. These scholars consistently warn against the often subtle power/knowledge nexus in the West. On the other hand, the blatant collusion of power and knowledge, as well as propaganda and academic research, began

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[56] Wang Di and Liu Sida, "Performing Artivism: Feminists, Lawyers, and Online Legal Mobilization in China", *Law & Social Inquiry* 45, no. 3 (2020): 678–705.

[57] Erika E.S. Evasdottir, *Obedient Autonomy: Chinese Intellectuals and the Achievement of Orderly Life* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004), p. x.

[58] Xu Jianhua and Liu Weidi, "Public Criminology in China: Neither Public nor Criminology", in *Routledge Handbook on Public Criminologies*, eds. Kathryn Henne and Rita Shah (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 152–62.

with the Soviet Union under Stalin and has since been inseparable in communist states. Such power-centric scholarship, like its totalitarian form of governance, represents an alternative mode of knowledge production that challenges the sociology of knowledge. It also weakens the long Confucian tradition of remonstration, which emphasises principled service and holds that it is morally wrong to point to a deer and claim it is a horse. The viewpoint in this article is also supported by some courageous voices within Chinese sociology; some of these voices are outside of Chinese government control, such as Edmund Fung and Chen Kuan-Hsing[59] who artfully articulate sociologists' concerns in China.

FEMINIST SOCIOLOGY IN CHINA: AN UNDERSTUDIED AREA OF INQUIRY

Feminist sociology serves as a convincing example of the significant limitations in the development of sociology during the reform years (1978–2012); today, under the current regime, it faces the risk of extinction. Since the 1970s, feminist sociology has established a significant presence in North America and Europe. Feminist views have, in many respects, redefined long-standing debates about epistemology, the scientific method, political dynamics and forms of human knowledge.[60] Gender studies has emerged as a speciality area of wide interest in the discipline of sociology. The "Sociology of Sex and Gender" section of the American Sociological Association was re-established in 1973, and the journal *Gender and Society* was launched in 1987. Within the American Society of Criminology, the Division of Women and Crime was established in 1983, and the journal *Feminist Criminology* was launched in 2006. A gender-based view of knowledge and a "standpoint epistemology" that includes feminist ontology, feminist pedagogy and feminist methodology are now common in North American and European sociology.

In China, Confucianism has long defined women's role as subservient.[61] However, extensive contact with Western civilisation since the late Qing dynasty prompted significant changes in the status of women. At the start of the 20th century, Christian missionaries first introduced the idea of gender equality and led the anti-foot-binding movement in the country. As the first wave of industrialisation reached China, women began to work in factories in major coastal cities. In 1912, the Republic of China abolished the practice of foot-binding for women—the ultimate symbol of male oppression of women.

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[59] Fung, *The Intellectual Foundations of Chinese Modernity*; Chen Kuan-Hsing, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

[60] Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory", *Signs* 7, no. 3 (1982): 515–44.

[61] Susan L. Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

The Constitution of the Republic of China, adopted in 1947, granted universal suffrage. After the communists assumed power in 1949, women appeared to enjoy a more equal status.[62] The CPC, through its organisation, the All-China Women's Federation, continued with the previous Nationalist government's policy of abolishing prostitution, deeming it a form of violence against women. In the 1950s, the CPC forced all known prostitutes into labour camps for re-education. In 1958, the CPC proudly declared to the world that prostitution had been eradicated nationwide, claiming this achievement as a major symbol of communist China's transformation into a modern nation.[63] Outside China, many scholars tend to associate "Chinese women's liberation" under the CPC with the Western feminist movement, partially out of nostalgic fantasy. Some published articles and monographs reference a quote attributed to Mao Zedong: *Women can hold up half the sky*, citing it as evidence of Mao's sympathy towards feminism. However, scholars found no evidence of such a statement in their research of all published works by Mao.[64] Revisiting Mao's female labour models and "Iron Girls" myths reveals that women's stories were far more complex than the Party-state's claim that women had broken through all gender boundaries in the workplace.[65] In fact, traditional gender roles have remained widely accepted by many Chinese women to this day.[66]

Sociological research indicates that progress on the status of women in China has been very limited. While recognising improvements in employment and income for rural and urban women during Mao's era, researchers report that this progress fell short of the promised revolution for gender equality.[67] Since the introduction of the market economy in 1978, female workers have faced significant discrimination in hiring and layoffs. Similarly, wages in both state and non-state sectors have been deteriorating, further lowering the economic status of women relative to men. Despotic management practices in the private sector have worsened working conditions for hundreds of thousands of women in south China.[68] Similar disheartening stories from rural China suggest that, while men lead the expansion of family businesses, women

[62] Zheng, "'State Feminism'?".

[63] Liang Bin and Cao Liqun, "China's Policies toward Illegal Drugs and Prostitution in the New Era: Struggle within the Global Context", in *Modern Chinese Legal Reform*, ed. Li Xiaobing and Fang Qiang (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2013), pp. 189–212.

[64] Zhong Xueping and Ren Ming, "Funü nengding banbiantian: yige you sizhong shuofa de gushi" (Four Interpretations of the Slogan 'Women Hold up Half the Sky'), *Nankai xuebao* (*Nankai Journal*), no. 4 (2009): 54–64.

[65] Yang Wenqi and Yan Fei, "The Annihilation of Femininity in Mao's China: Gender Inequality of Sent-down Youth during the Cultural Revolution", *China Information* 31, no. 1 (2017): 63–83.

[66] William L. Parish and Sarah Busse, "Gender and Family", in *Chinese Urban Life under Reform*, ed. Tang Wenfang and William L. Parish (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 209–31.

[67] Martin King Whyte, "Sexual Inequality under Socialism: The Chinese Case in Perspective", in *Class and Social Stratification in Post-Revolution China*, ed. James L. Watson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 198–238.

[68] Lee Ching Kwan, "Engendering the Worlds of Labor: Women Workers, Labor Markets, and Production Politics in the South China Economic Miracle", *American Sociological Review* 60, no. 3 (1995): 378–97.

are often left to bear the onerous burdens of agricultural production work. One study noted that sexual harassment is a severely understudied subject in China; over the past 50 years, over 5,320 papers in English but just 122 in Chinese have examined this issue.[69] Although formal regulations against sexual harassment in the workplace exist, there are no published data on the number of cases filed and won by women in court.

Even well-educated and self-employed female entrepreneurs can experience how a cycle of violence is perpetuated.[70] Studies reveal that domestic violence is a serious issue, particularly in rural areas.[71] Surprisingly, few ethnographic studies on intimate partner violence have been conducted in China to date. Despite official claims regarding the status of women, the entrenched male-dominant culture remains strong. The release of Tan Weiwei's 2021 song "Xiao Juan" brought the outcry of the Chinese #MeToo movement to public awareness. In response, the Party-state, however, has intensified its suppression of the movement, prohibiting discussions and barring harassment survivors from posting on social media.[72] Disturbing stories of domestic violence have also frequently captured public attention,[73] underscoring that women's emancipation and gender equality are still far from reality. Traditional Chinese concepts of a well-ordered family, with women in subservient roles to the male head, are strongly reflected in the CPC's emphasis on monogamous, heterosexual families.[74] This tradition was reaffirmed by Xi Jinping's recent call for women to fulfil their primary roles as "dutiful wives and virtuous mothers" in promoting family harmony through "raising and educating the next generation, taking care of their husbands, and supporting the elderly".[75]

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[69] Sun Yufan, "Haiwai xingsaorao yanjiu 50 nian 5,000 pian zongshu: weishenme Zhongguo meiren yanjiu?" (A Review of 5,000 Articles on Sexual Harassment Research Conducted Overseas in the Past 50 Years: Why is No One Doing Research within China?), 7 May 2023, at <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/Zh3V1w_OcKVpvsvCYVhlvg> [26 December 2023].

[70] Zhang Dongling, "The 'She Power' That Was Not: A Contextual-Interfaces Analysis of Chinese Women Micro-Entrepreneurs' Experiences of Gender-Based Violence", *American Review of China Studies* 22, no. 2 (2021): 1–29.

[71] Wang Xiangxian, Fang Gang and Li Hongtao, "Gender-based Violence and Hegemonic Masculinity in China: An Analysis Based on the Quantitative Research", *China Population and Development Studies* 3 (2019): 84–97.

[72] Qiu Geping and Cheng Hongming, "Gender and Power in the Ivory Tower: Sexual Harassment in Graduate Supervision in China", *Journal of Gender Studies* 32 (2024): 600–15.

[73] Elsie Chen, "Her Abuse was a 'Family Matter' until It Went Live", *The New York Times*, 15 November 2020, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/15/world/asia/china-women-domestic-abuse.html> [9 August 2023]; Wu Yitong et al., "Chinese Commentators Slam Official Findings in Jiangsu Chained Woman Case", *Radio Free Asia*, 24 February 2022, at <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/woman-chained-02242022123530.html> [9 August 2023].

[74] Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History*.

[75] Zheng, *Violent Intimacy*, p. 7.

During periods of relatively lax censorship, termed the "good times", research on sexuality began to appear in Chinese sociological literature.[76] These studies were introductory and descriptive, reflecting a theme of resistance to social injustice. They did not challenge the CPC's official policy, but rather sought to raise awareness of the ongoing inequality. As MacKinnon aptly observes, "sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one's own, yet most taken away".[77] Indeed, the delicate topics of sexual orientation and gender identification have been largely neglected by sociologists. Simultaneously, the thriving sex industry, which re-emerged in contemporary China following economic reforms, has also escaped rigorous sociological investigation. The Chinese government has enacted a series of laws banning prostitution and third-party involvement in prostitution. These laws premise that prostitution both humiliates and commodifies women, thereby undermining advancement towards gender equality. However, Zheng has observed that while males who engage in unauthorised migration are generally depicted as making rational, self-serving economic decisions, female migrants are more likely to be lured or coerced into prostitution due to limited economic opportunities, low levels of education and a lack of social mobility. As a result, women are frequently cast as passive victims in need of rescue and "rehabilitation".[78]

Such differential framing of male and female behaviour reinforces the marginalisation of women and undermines gender equality. Choi argues that the victim's perspective has displaced the blame for unsafe sex practices, which harm public health, onto sex workers themselves. In reality, male clients resist the use of condoms. The legal prohibition of prostitution prevents sex workers from negotiating safe sex practices, thereby increasing their risk of exposure to HIV (human immunodeficiency viruses) and sexually transmitted diseases.[79] In other words, the overmoralisation of prostitution does not halt the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. By contrast, sociologists in other countries have tended to focus on the lived experiences of women, listening carefully to the voices of sex workers themselves rather than merely representing their voices, speculating on their behaviour or making assumptions about their moral character.

Under state-derived feminism, human agency becomes the monopoly of the Party-state. Changes regarding gender equality are directed entirely from above and mobilised through the organisational channels of the All-China Women's Federation. The Party-state, through the Federation, defines the causes, methods and vision of change and serves as the guardian and male protector of women's rights and interests.

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[76] Luo Muyuan, Li Tangmei and Shi Junpeng, "Sociology of Homosexuality in Twenty-first-century China", *International Sociology* 37, no. 5 (2022): 569–81.

[77] MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State", esp. 515.

[78] Zheng Tiantian, "Prostitution and Human Trafficking", in *The Routledge Handbook of Chinese Criminology*, ed. Cao Liqun, Ivan Y. Sun and Bill Hebenton (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 197–208.

[79] Susanne Y.P. Choi, "State Control, Female Prostitution and HIV Prevention in China", *The China Quarterly* 205 (2011): 96–114.

Although women can be mobilised for change, they cannot act as *their own* agents of change. Women's various rights were "granted by the state", and were *not won* by women themselves.[80] The moralisation of issues such as homosexual relations or prostitution reflects a deeper tendency to adhere to a single version of what a family should be, one in which patriarchal privilege and fealty are cardinal virtues. It has further reinforced the boundaries limiting the possible gender roles of males and females in general,[81] and even students on university campuses,[82] which, arguably, have been the cradle for the avant-garde. Within this broader framework, the Party-state has assumed the role of *pater familias*, reserving the right to dictate moral standards, appropriate modes of personal sexual conduct, the number of children, religious practice and much more.

Similar to their attempt to steer clear of examining topics associated with the sex industry, sociologists in China have also largely avoided the related topics pertaining to same-sex relationships and sexual identity.[83] Scholarship on these themes is scarce, even during the reform years before 2012.[84] The Party-state tends to view issues such as homosexuality and transgender identification as condemnable immorality. During periods of relative openness, voices from the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) community could be heard, but life has been increasingly difficult for sexual minorities since 2012.[85] Under Xi's leadership, the space for LGBTQ individuals has significantly shrunk.[86]

The conundrum is, of course, not limited to the study of prostitution or human sexuality. There is a general perception that the Chinese lack a rights-conscious orientation to social life and political institutions.[87] Under the omnipresent CPC, human rights are not conceptualised as inherent privileges for all individuals; rather, they are viewed as state-issued awards that can be altered at the state's discretion. The CPC has reinforced a patriarchal tradition that has spanned over 2,000 years—this implies that any licence that one enjoys as a privilege from the authorities could be withdrawn at their discretion. The work of feminist theorists foregrounds the recognition

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[80] Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History*.

[81] Huang Lan-Ying and Cao Liqun, "Exploring Sexual Harassment in a Police Department in Taiwan", *Policing* 31 (2008): 324–40.

[82] Qiu and Cheng, "Gender and Power in the Ivory Tower".

[83] Lin Kai and Wang Wenjin, "Changing Public Tolerance for Same-sex Sexual Behaviors in China 2010–2017: A Decomposition Analysis", *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 50 (2021): 3433–45; Tony Huiquan Zhang and Robert Brym, "Tolerance of Homosexuality in 88 Countries: Education, Political Freedom and Liberalism", *Sociological Forum* 34, no. 2 (2019): 501–21.

[84] Luo, Li and Shi, "Sociology of Homosexuality in Twenty-first-century China".

[85] Gong Jing and Liu Tingting, "Decadence and Relational Freedom among China's Gay Migrants: Subverting Heteronormativity by 'Lying Flat'", *China Information* 36, no. 2 (2021): 200–20.

[86] Nicole Hong and Wang Zixu, "With Rainbow Flags, 2 Students Test China's Shrinking L.G.B.T.Q. Space", *The New York Times*, 3 June 2023, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/03/world/asia/rainbow-flags-china-lgbtq.html> [11 August 2023].

[87] Peter Lorentzen and Suzanne Scoggins, "Understanding China's Rising Rights Consciousness", *The China Quarterly* 22 (2015): 638–57; Dutton, *Policing and Punishment in China*.

that power and influence should be inherent considerations in the study of gender and gender equality.[88] Ignoring these issues is, after all, both politically expedient and calculated. The Chinese government's recent call for female workers to return home has intensified since the implementation of the new two-child policy in 2015. By relegating women to domestic roles, society may be losing half of its intellectual potential.[89] Sociological research on feminism, which was under-researched before the Xi Jinping era, is now viewed either as a menace from the decadent "West" or an entirely foreign phenomenon.[90]

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Chinese sociology re-emerged under the leadership of reform-minded Deng Xiaoping. However, its revival was not a complete rebirth. While all CPC *apparatchiks*, from top to bottom, acknowledged the need for economic reform, "integrating with the world" in practice meant adopting the *economic* practices of other nations while resisting substantive *political* behavioural or systemic changes. This selective borrowing of ideas from the outside world mirrors the Westernisation Movement (circa 1861–95) of the late Qing dynasty, when foreign technologies were adopted for practical use while Chinese traditions remained the core, or "essence" (*tiyong*). The divide between "application" and "essence" in this context refers to the integration of new technology while maintaining the Qing dynasty's political system—a recurring tension in preserving the status quo. The current debate between indigenisation and Westernisation is merely a modern expression of this resistance to systemic change.

Since its rebirth, empirical sociological research has experienced impressive growth and notable methodological sophistication has taken root.[91] However, sociological insight into contemporary China has not advanced to a significant degree.[92] Similarly, critical sociology has remained "significantly underdeveloped", even during the reform years.[93] Having assumed a subservient consultative rather than an emancipatory and questioning role in relation to the Party-state, the officially sanctioned sociology has largely lost its way in its fixation on empirical methodologies and conceptual arguments confined within narrow boundaries. Thus, sociology during the reform era before Xi was simultaneously prospering and underperforming as an academic discipline. Since then, large quantities of sociological research articles have continued to be pumped

[88] Coraline Jortay, Jennifer Bond and Liu Chang, "Legible and Thus Legitimate? Reading and Blurring Gender in China, Today and Yesterday", *China Perspective* 3 (2020): 5–8.
[89] Zheng, *Violent Intimacy*.
[90] Chaguan, "China's Elites Think Feminism is a Foreign Plot", *The Economist*, 16 June 2022.
[91] Andrew Walder, "The Relevance of China's Transformation for Contemporary Sociology", *Chinese Sociological Review* 44, no. 1 (2011): 8–13.
[92] Zhou Xueguang and Pei Xiaomei, "Chinese Sociology in a Transitional Society", *Contemporary Sociology* 26, no. 5 (1997): 569–72.
[93] Bian and Zhang, "Sociology in China".

out. However, many of these published "feel good" policy articles are largely out of sync with the lived reality of ordinary people.

Under Xi's reign, "socialist sociology with distinctive Chinese characteristics" has been at risk of returning to Orwellian-style governmental control.[94] The Xi regime and the CPC have issued repeated stern warnings against expressing doubts about the central government's policies (*wangyi Zhongyang* 妄议中央), and have prohibited seven specific areas of "Western thinking" (*qi bu jiang* 七不讲) from being taught in classrooms.[95] In addition, select students monitor professors' lectures and report any deviations from the official Party line to the authorities.[96] Good sociology universally requires *Verstehen*—an epistemology that requires a self-critical and open-minded viewpoint from scholars seeking to understand the lived reality of people.[97] In the internet and digital information era, nations should seek to maintain their geographic boundaries, but sociology as an academic discipline should not be confined by boundaries. The boundaries of sociological inquiry should be determined by sociologists themselves, rather than by politicians wielding governmental powers.[98]

As a scientific discipline, sociology in China can and should be "extrapolated"—it should examine social reality with few political restrictions and explore untested options for societal action. It needs to return to its original humanitarian concerns voiced in the 1930s, focusing on the disadvantaged, the socially disfavoured, the marginalised, the accused and the incarcerated,[99] as well as to investigate the denied, the deterred, and the disenchanted in contemporary times. Chinese sociology, like sociology elsewhere, has the potential to be emancipatory and transformative, offering new theoretical insights into the experiential journey towards modernity. It should help humanity achieve a state where individual happiness is found in the construction of a good society[100]—one that is just, secure, fruitful and inclusive. However, the analysis presented here leads the authors to draw a conclusion that the contemporary telos of official Chinese sociology is a loyal subservient entity promoting the perpetuation of Party-state rule. This type of sociology is *sui generis* rather than universal in its ambition.

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[94] See "Zhongban guoban yinfa guanyu jiaqiang xinshidai faxue jiaoyu he faxue lilun yanjiu de yijian" (Opinions on How to Strengthen Education of Law and Its Theory in the New Era, Issued by the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council), *People's Daily*, 27 February 2023, at <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2023/0227/c1001-32631603.html> [11 August 2023].

[95] Cao and Hebenton, "Criminology in China: Taking Stock (Again)".

[96] Ruth and Xiao, "Academic Freedom and China".

[97] Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1949).

[98] Andrew Abbott, "Varieties of Normative Inquiry: Moral Alternatives to Politicization in Sociology", *American Sociologist* 49, no. 2 (2018): 158–80.

[99] Cao Liqun and Du Shaochen, "Yi guojihua shiye zuo Zhongguo yanjiu" (China Study in International Perspective), *Qinghua shehuixue pinglun* (*Tsinghua Sociological Review*) 10 (2018): 1–12.

[100] Robert N. Bellah et al., *The Good Society* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011).

Equipped with new AI-assisted surveillance technologies, including "big data mining", "facial recognition", individual citizen tracking and digital surveillance of social media and the social credit system, the Party-state has vastly expanded its control of people in the 21st century.[101] The CPC is militarising society and infusing it with patriotic fervour, reshaping the education system and reinforcing traditional roles for women, and conditioning a new generation of youth to view the West as a mortal enemy in the fight for China's rise. Since Xi assumed power, xenophobia has returned to national prominence, posing challenges to sociologists who wish to achieve a universalistic ideal of offering an independent and often critical voice for a cosmopolitan understanding of humanistic values. Many young Chinese academics have fallen prey to their deteriorating informational ecosystem, becoming victims of its circumscription. Increasingly severe print and online censorship, the rise of semi-closed "WeChat Moments" as the main platform for news dissemination among mainland Chinese,[102] and the incessant production of "patriotic-cum-ideological education" have made it difficult for intellectuals to perceive the outside world accurately. However, so long as the flow of information is not completely cut off, the authors remain sanguine that once the current suppressive political climate is lifted, Chinese sociologists, like their global counterparts, will rise to live up to the expectations of that "sociological imagination" that C. Wright Mills articulated to fellow sociologists about "threescore years and five" ago.

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[101] Javier C. Hernández, "Professors, Beware. In China, Student Spies Might be Watching", *The New York Times*, 1 November 2019, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/01/world/asia/china-student-informers.html> [15 December 2022]; Zhang, Xu and Liu, "How do Toothless Tigers Bite? "

[102] Wu Huizhong and Ting Fu, "China Steps up Online Controls with New Rule for Bloggers", *The Diplomat*, 17 February 2021, at <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/china-steps-up-online-controls-with-new-rule-for-bloggers> [18 December 2022].