
What is China?: A Methodological Reflection

Xin Liu

⟨University of California, Berkeley⟩

Summary

Let us take China as an intellectual problem—rather than a focus of area studies—in order to question what is actually happening in today’s world. The condition of life in the contemporary world is the true objective of our critical reflection; China is a problematic entry into such a reflection. What is “China”? How can we understand it today? What is the significance of it in understanding ourselves in today’s world? These questions, simple and important, are what we hope to address.

For those who are staying not too far away from this social giant, conveniently called China, they could hardly avoid the impression that there is something new happening. What is it? What is new? What is this new thing that is happening? What is this new thing that forces us to think about it? What does this impression mean? What does it mean to us who are trying to figure out its meaning? Swiftly as they can, some people or scholars would point out the rising height of the Chinese cities, or try to show how many more new cars are produced in Pudong. These facts, that is, China is growing in its weight and height, in both physical and metaphysical senses, are true but they should be seen as a symptom of an internal happening, a transformation, which is new and yet uncertain. This internal happening, which is new, is what needs to be treated, rather than our simply spending our time on the external expansion of that huge social continent. Our task, in other words, is to know the new interior space of this social giant. This is an intellectual task, an intellectual task of our time.

Let us take China as an intellectual problem—rather than a focus of area studies—in order to question what is actually happening in today’s world. The condition of life in the contemporary world is the true objective of our critical reflection; China is a problematic entry into such a reflection. It is a means rather than an end of our thinking. In other words, what we hope to do is to work through the question of China to reach a better understanding of the world in radical transformation. Let us make an analysis of the current situation of China as a mirror for some crucial aspects of the global changes. What is “China”? How can we understand it today? What is China to us? What is the significance of it in understanding ourselves in today’s world? These questions, simple and important, are what we hope to address.

* * *

When sociology returned to the scene of Chinese social sciences in the 1980s,¹ it claimed to have made an astonishing discovery—with all its delight and seriousness—that there was an unprecedented growth of towns and cities.² The consequence of this, quite obviously, is the coming of an unprecedented explosion of “urban studies,”³ however such a notion is understood or misunderstood. Nevertheless, one must be aware of the fact that the attention to the problem of Chinese cities is not new. Several major studies in the 1970s have already undertaken the path in trying to figure out the significance of urbanization in that unique socialist/modern development; and the attempt was made alongside a renewed interest in the

cultural meaning of Chinese cities.⁴ The discovery would have been somewhat belittled if one were not too eager to celebrate the recent expansion of sociological knowledge, for what defines an intellectual project is not simply its empirical validity but, more important, its conceptualization. Is there anything new in this new wave of urban studies, sociological or not, in today's China? How far has one moved away from "the urban question" as once raised by Manuel Castells (1977)? Is it not an empirical fact that the city life in China, both historically and culturally, makes an interesting subject of study that goes a long way back to the days of Marco Polo when he traveled in the empire? "'Quinsai ... is the greatest city which may be found in the world,' says Marco Polo, 'where so many pleasures may be found that one fancies himself to be in Paradise.'"⁵ Our sociologists today, having indulged in the urban pleasures, have not yet figured out what is new in a new round of urban studies. Plainly, what is new is not simply the scale of its development; it is *the form*, both historically and culturally, by and with which such a fast growth of urbanity produces and yet is produced. What needs to be done, therefore, is to sort out how such pleasures came to constitute ourselves as what we are—our being in the contemporary world.

Our inquiry, whether sociological or historical, should not be simply about the various types of urban transformation actually taking place in a vast social continent, nor with the divergent forms of expressions of the best or the worst extremes of human potentials in the development of large metropolises, nor with the political effort made by the state to control and manage a growing urban population; instead, a necessary step must be taken is to make an inquiry into "China" or "urban China" as a problematic—not simply as an empirical entity but as an object of critique, as an object of intellectual contemplation, that is, as an object of thought, so as to reflect on the condition of life in the contemporary world as a whole.

Let us first take a brief detour in reviewing the conceptual development of sociological studies in China as a point of departure to situate our below analysis, and then take a quick step in revisiting "the urban question" so as to make clear the genealogical tradition of sociological thought from which our contemplation is derived.

As I argued elsewhere, there was a development of sociological thought in China that prioritized the significance of village life and essentialized it as the nature of Chinese society (Liu 2002). Such an enterprise of conceptual scheme can be traced through the emergence of sociological thought in the early decades of twentieth-century China, especially via the missionary sociology, such as shown in the works of Arthur Smith, de Groot, and perhaps also Granet.⁶ It went through the phase of social surveys, such as those carried out by John S. Burgess, Sidney D. Gamble, and John L. Buck;⁷ and then arrived at, after a few decades, John King Fairbank's synthesis: "To understand China today, one basic approach is that of anthropology, which *looks at the village and family environment* from which modern China has just begun to emerge" (Fairbank 1993, 17; emphasis added). Or, as a native representative of this mode of sociological knowledge stated earlier: "Chinese society is fundamentally rural. I say that it is fundamentally rural because its foundation is rural.... We often say that country people are figuratively as well as literally 'soiled' (*tuqi*). Although this label may seem disrespectful, the character meaning 'soil' (*tu*) is appropriately used here. Country people cannot do without the soil because their very livelihood is based upon it"(Fei 1992, 37).⁸ Such an opinion would have appeared astonishing to Marco Polo and many others; however, it does illustrate the association created in a specific historical context: the essentialization of Chinese society as rural.

If one were to place Fei's work, with its emblematic title—*From the Soil*, against the image of Marco Polo, one would feel compelled to raise the question about why and how such a change in the perception of Chinese society took place, despite of their differences in focus and perspective. What was the sociological question for Fairbank or Fei? And how was it created in the context of a different power relationship in the twentieth century? Could what we have witnessed today in China be simply seen as another round of reincarnation of the spirit of Marco Polo? Or does it mean something different for us—not simply as subjects of the (Chinese) state but as a sign for the state of (subjective) being in the contemporary world? This is the reason that we need to walk through an old lane of thought.

“The urban question,” as Manuel Castells (1977) raised and tried to answer, is not simply a question about *actual* social formations and movements in urban settings or across urban/rural boundaries; rather, it is an inquiry of theoretical specificity of the objective of urban sociology. It is not about what “urban” sociologists do but about the conceptual enterprise of sociological studies on the subject. His quotation from Max Weber in the beginning of an essay shows well his intellectual agenda. “It is not the ‘actual’ interconnections of ‘things’ but the *conceptual* interconnections of *problems* which define the scope of various sciences” (Weber 1949, 68). It seems necessary for us to make clear: What are the conceptual interconnections of the problems when we wish to explore the question of (urban) China?

Castells’s argument is couched in the Althusserian reading of Marx,⁹ of which a distinction is drawn between a theoretical and a real object. This distinction comes from Althusser’s conception of the “materialist” epistemology in opposition to the empiricist one. Put aside his dubious adoption of the term “materialist,” the basic claim of Althusser is to deny any validity of the assertion that theoretical concepts (or objects) are produced as a result of direct abstraction from real experiences. Regarding Marx, Althusser argues that “the mode of production” does not appear in any immediate experience; nor does it appear in any form of knowledge claiming to be part of the real object. Marx’s revolution, according to Althusser,¹⁰ is his power to make an epistemological break, that is, to break down the ideological bridge between knowledge and empirical facts, which are what Althusser called “real objects.” As in the case of most structuralist thinkers, Althusser is not interested in how a person could have made such an epistemological break. Instead, he is concerned with how Marx’s theory acts—in the very sense of the word—upon reality.¹¹

The real object—in a brutally generalized and simple manner—can be said to refer to some aspect of reality, which is always wrapped in certain preconceptions that are usually “ideological.” Althusser makes a rigorous distinction between science (or theory, i.e., Marx’s theory) and ideology, and maintains that all action, including socialist revolution, is carried out within the province of ideology. This is an interesting intervention, which remains useful for our questioning. According to Althusser, it is ideology that gives the human subject imaginary, provisional coherence to become a practical social agent. Therefore, ideology is not simply a false consciousness defined in terms that the subject misrecognizes the world. The misrecognition in question is a self-misrecognition, which is an effect of the imaginary dimension of human life. Here the introduction of the notion of the imaginary, which came to be quite popular later on, is important. What is the relationship of the two, and how do they come together? As Terry Eagleton explains:

Imaginary here means not ‘unreal’ but ‘pertaining to an image’: the allusion is to Jacques Lacan’s essay ‘The Mirror-phase as Formative of the Function of the I’, in which he argues that the small infant, confronted with its own image in a mirror, has a moment of jubilant misrecognition of its own actual, physically uncoordinated state, imagining its body to be more unified than it really is. In this imaginary condition, no real distinction between subject and object has yet set in; the infant identifies with its own image, feeling itself at once within and in front of the mirror, so that subject and object glide ceaselessly in and out of each other in a sealed circuit. In the ideological sphere, similarly, the human subject transcends its true state of deffuseness or decentrement and finds a consolingly coherent image of itself reflected back in the ‘mirror’ of a dominant ideological discourse. Armed with this imaginary self, which for Lacan involves an ‘alienation’ of the subject, it is then able to act in socially appropriate ways.

Ideology can thus be summarized as ‘a representation of the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real conditions of existence’. In ideology, Althusser writes, ‘men do indeed express, not the relation between them and their conditions of existence: this presupposes both a real relation and an ‘*imaginary*’, ‘*lived*’ relation ... In ideology, the real relation is inevitably invested in the imaginary relation. (Eagleton 1994, 214, emphasis original)

Plainly, the real object is ideological in the sense that it is always embedded in an imaginary relationship. An immediate implication of such a theoretical position is that, to begin with, one should take the real object of any kind as an object of epistemological critique. One cannot, or should not, simply dive into the world of urban development without rendering it, in the first place, to a critical examination, for all such feelings or observations, which seem empirically grounded and natural to the observer, are indeed ideological in nature. One must stand back, take a deep breath, seriously think about what sort of imaginary relationship with which one is embracing the world. What Castells elaborated in a series of essays, a few decades back in time, meant precisely to develop such a critique (Castells 1976a and 1976b); and his target is that of urban sociology, to which he asks two fundamental questions. First, does urban sociology have a real *theoretical* object? Second, does urban sociology have an *urban* real object? Let us reverse the order of these two questions and ask: first, is there an *urban* phenomenon, exemplified by the real object of China, that indicates a new mode of social existence in today's world? In other words, when turning our attention to the real object of China, are we contemplating on something that is problematic and indicative of the contemporary experiences of our time? Second, what kind of imaginary relationship do we carry into such studies as these? In other words, how is it possible to undo an ideological embodiment within which we are given an imaginary relationship to the world? What is the theoretical object in and for our inquiry?

The purpose of this detour does not mean to review an old debate but to pose the question: How can we problematize the real object of China as a way of thinking about ourselves/Ourselves in the contemporary world? What are the interconnected problems of our conceptualization through a real object, which is already *ideological* in the Althusserian sense? What is the imaginary relationship within which we are implicated as such? How is it possible to develop a critique of the misrecognition that is a self-misrecognition? It is a meaningless statement to say that urban studies study what is happening in an urban setting. Or China studies study China. Such claims as these are no more than saying that all fish should be studied as aquatic animals. Our inquiry must take China as a theoretical object, with which we hope to enrich our understanding of ourselves/Ourselves in the contemporary world. This is the necessary starting point for our inquiry; it is also the reason for revisiting an old neighborhood of thoughts and ideas as the departure for a new reflection.

Notes

- 1 The abundance of sociological literature on this subject needs not to be reiterated. Instead, for a discussion of the re-emergence of Chinese anthropology, which can be seen as a good example for the effort of rebuilding Chinese social sciences in the 1980s, see Guldin (1990).
- 2 Some scholars have raised the question about the nature of such a discovery. What does it mean and/or how can one understand it in the context of China? For example, see Davis (1995).
- 3 See, for instance, Fei (1986); Guldin (1992) Davis, Kraus, Naughton, and Perry (1995). For a short list of some other titles, which came out in the 1980s but were perhaps influenced by an earlier trend in the field, see also Leung and Ginsburg (1980); Murphey (1980); Ma and Hanten (1981); Whyte and Parish (1984); Kirkby (1985); Victor (1985); Kojima (1987); Schinz (1989).
- 4 For some representative works on this subject, see Lewis (1971); Elvin and Skinner (1974); Skinner (1977). For a historical study of the Chinese city, see Wheatley (1971).
- 5 Quinsai, which is Hangzhou (or Hangchow), came from the Chinese term *Hsing-tsai*, meaning “temporary residence (of the Emperor).” In his work, *Daily Life in China on the Eve of the Mongol Invasion* (1962), Jacques Gernet made frequent references to the Book of Marco Polo who, staying in Hangzhou for a considerable length of time during the years between 1276–1292, reiterated the image that urban life, with its amazing scale and intensity, was a significant feature of Chinese civilization. Gernet's references to Marco Polo are spread throughout the whole book. For example, see pp. 28–29 on city administration; p. 31 on population and the size of the city; p. 39 on transportation; pp. 40–41 on luxurious carriages on the streets; pp. 41–42 on the quality of the pavement and the drainage system; pp. 47–49 on markets; pp. 49–51 on amenities of urban life; pp. 53–54 on the parties of pleasure on the boats. For an overview of early Chinese civilization and, particularly, the origin of “urban life,” see Chang (1976, 1977, 1980).

- 6 See, for example, Smith (1894); De Groot (1892–1910); Granet (1957).
- 7 See Burgess (1928); Gamble (1921, 1963); Buck (1937).
- 8 This quotation is taken from Fei (1992), though it was an translation of his essays written in the 1940s.
- 9 For a critique of Castells’s critique of urban sociology, see Saunders (1986, esp.,162–70).
- 10 See Althusser and Balibar (1968); Althusser (1972).
- 11 For a discussion of Althusser’s work, see Geras (1971).