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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Translated from the French original by Philip Liddell

- 1 Sociology, having been banned from China's universities and research centres for nearly thirty years, was rehabilitated at the start of the 1980s by the central government, which called on sociologists to join the campaign to modernise the country¹. Under the guidance of Marxist-Leninist theory, the task ahead was to “rebuild-restore” (*chongjian hui fu*) a “Chinese” and “socialist” sociology². The equation for the sociologists to resolve was generally: how to combine Marxist theory with Western sociological theories and methods in the Chinese context? The development of the discipline over the subsequent two decades was marked by a gradual relaxation of ideological control. But the question, how to use knowledge acquired in the West to study Chinese society, still remained, the replies often varying between universalist and culturalist poles³. The aim of this article is to provide for that question a reply that is innovative in its theoretical and methodological aims. “The sociology of practice” (*shijian shehuixue*) was developed by a group of researchers in the Department of Sociology at Tsinghua University; it set the discipline in China a new subject for research—the study of “communist civilisation” (*gongchan zhuyi wenming*) and its changes—and proposed an adapted theoretical and methodological framework. How did this “formula for research”⁴ emerge? Why did this change of emphasis, from “socialist” sociology to the sociology of communism and its transformations take place? And how is it reflected in practice? These are questions that we shall try to answer. But, beyond such purely academic issues, arises the question of the sociologists’

commitment and the social purpose of their scientific production—what is this new sociology for? And who is it for?

The “enigma” of the Chinese countryside

- 2 In May 2000, the first edition of *Qinghua shehuixue pinglun* (*Tsinghua Sociological Review*)⁵, the review of Tsinghua’s brand new Sociology Department, devoted a special report to the question of relations between the state and society in the Chinese countryside of today⁶. The report, the fruit of several years of empirical research, opened with a theoretical discussion paper: what tools did sociology provide for assessing the relationship between the state and the peasants in present-day China? This study, carried out by Sun Liping, one of the founders of Tsinghua’s Sociology Department, opened with an enquiry into the control exerted by the political authorities over the Chinese countryside. The disappearance of the People’s Communes and the redistribution of the collective means of production to peasants’ homes from the 1970s onwards suggested a weakening of the local power structures in the countryside. For some, this “retreat of the state” was to lead to genuine autonomy in the countryside. Sun Liping, however, pointed out, this was only one aspect of the matter. This view of a retreat by the authorities could be opposed with another view—that the application of the state’s will had been maintained. The collection of grain and of various forms of taxation, the imposition of birth control, and the basic functions of local representatives of the state were, despite difficulties, mainly fulfilled. How was this paradox to be explained? The sensation of having come up against a theoretical enigma led sociologists to question the traditional frameworks for observation and analysis, and to seek a new approach that would go beyond the existing dichotomous and static view of the state and society.
- 3 To observe as closely as possible the concrete forms of relationship between the peasants and the state, the research strategy that was developed and called “process-event analysis” consisted in starting off with “events”, envisaged as “dynamic processes”⁷. Thus, Sun Liping and Guo Yuhua looked into the collection of cereal quotas sold to the state (*dinggouliang*). In a period of transition, what resources would officials at district and village levels mobilise in order to collect the amount of grain required from the peasants? Ma Mingjie studied the intervention of a Party secretary in the economy of a district in the northeast of China and illustrated the mobilisation techniques that the official used to “force the peasants to become rich”. Ying Xing and Jin Jun retraced the collective action of *shangfang* (appealing to higher levels in the administrative hierarchy to resolve an injustice) that had been pursued for over ten years by peasants moved off their land by the building of a hydroelectric power station.

Shen Yuan

Born in 1954, Shen Yuan’s first academic field was philosophy (a Master’s degree at *Renmin Daxue* (People’s University) in 1986). From 1989 to 1999, he was a researcher at the Sociology Institute of the Academy of Social Sciences where he took the successive posts of Director of the Bureau of Scientific Research (1989-1997), head of the editorial office and Deputy Editor of the review *Shehuixue yanjiu* (Sociological Research) (1997-1999). In 1998, he was awarded his doctorate, for a thesis entitled “Commentary on research into the market by the new economic sociology”. At present Deputy Director of the Sociology Department of Tsinghua University, his fields of research are economic sociology and the sociology of work organisations. Among the research projects that Shen has taken part in, we should mention the research programme on social justice, in collaboration with the *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique* (CNRS), as well as a research project on rural markets in north

China. Pursuing his thinking on the special features of the industrialisation process in north China (production based on home workshops in rural areas), his present work is devoted to the *nongmingong* in north China and the special character of their participation in the world of work (migration from one rural area to another, finding work in peasant homes). Strongly influenced by Alain Touraine and his method of sociological intervention, the programme is aimed in particular at intervening in work relations between peasant-producers and peasant-workers, the right to self-determination, the right to work, and the right to take part in public affairs).

Three of Shen's articles have been published in French: "L'affaire du tirage au sort. Principes de justice et d'équité des commerçants d'un marché du Nord de la Chine" (The draw affair: principles of justice and equity among traders in a market in North China) in Isabelle Thireau and Wang Hansheng (eds.), *Disputes au village chinois. Formes du juste et recompositions locales des espaces normatifs*, Paris, Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2001, pp. 205-247; "Naissance d'un marché" (Birth of a market) in *Etudes rurales*, "Le retour du marchand dans la Chine rurale", Nos. 161-162, January-June 2002, pp. 19-36; "Histoire de marques" (On brand names and trade marks), with Liu Shiding, *ibid*, pp. 67-76

- 4 In these three case studies, the emphasis was on the description and the detailed reconstruction of events. The researchers based themselves on a qualitative methodology, close to anthropology, using participant observation⁸ and in-depth interviews; they sought, before any analysis, to "relive" these events, to take account of the interactions between the various participants. The attention paid to such interactions helped to throw a new light on power relationships. Sun Liping and Guo Yuhua thus described how, in the course of grain collection, local officials combined "force and good words" (*ruan ying jian shi*), that is to say, using the state's formal methods backed by informal resources to achieve their purposes. Ying Xing and Jin Jun showed that society might also, in certain conditions, mobilise formal resources, such as the *shangfang* procedure. Ma Mingjie, analysing the process of reactivating the basic structures of power, drew attention to the fact that political power exerted locally did not flow automatically from the existence of organisational structures. By stressing the necessity for meticulously observing the effective practices of the central authorities and by showing the complexity of relations between the state and society in present-day China, the writers proclaimed their willingness to distance themselves from the two paradigms that at this time dominated research on China. The first, known as "the theory of state centralism" (*guojia zhongxin lun*)⁹, favoured the analysis of the structures of domination and the apparatus of the state and the Party, and stressed a total control, exerted from the top down, by the political authorities over society. In reaction to this totalitarian paradigm a different view was developed from the 1980s onwards: a view favouring the study of society and popular culture, and emphasising the predominance of phenomena of social resistance; it led, in its most radical form, to the image of a traditional peasant society that was scarcely touched by the central power or the state structures. As Sun Liping pointed out, this "indigenous" view (*bentuxing*) had a significant echo in the China of the 1990s; Chinese anthropologists of this period threw themselves into the "seeking the temple movement" (*xun miao yundong*)¹⁰. Confronted by these two paradigms, the studies presented in this report and the results reached by the writers appeared as real and key cases, which were to challenge the categories and the frameworks of sociological thinking.
- 5 In the first two cases, it was the analytical opposition between a strong state holding a monopoly of official resources and a weak society with only informal resources

available to it that came under empirical attack. In the same way the third case invited us to switch our scrutiny to the effective functioning of structures.

- 6 Even though, confronted by these two paradigms, the method proposed in this special report was presented primarily as a "research strategy", as a means of access to another level of reality and not as a new paradigm, it was nevertheless based on a different view of the central power. It is in the daily life of the Chinese peasants that sociologists must look for manifestations of domination and must uncover the secret mechanisms of power. This position, strongly influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, focuses attention, not on static structures, but on practices and interactions envisaged in a dynamic way. The emergence of this position must be seen as an attempt to grasp the economic and social transformations that China has been experiencing over this period of time. Sociologists, confronted by a particular context of transition towards a market economy, but with the political structures unaltered, place at the heart of their enquiry the reconstruction of relationships between the state and society. But in order to fully understand the enormity of these changes, their enquiry into present-day power relationships must inevitably include a historical study of the dominance exerted by the central political power since 1949. One attempt to answer such questions was made by the project to discover the oral history of the countryside.

A rival to official history, the oral history project

- 7 At the beginning of the 1990s, Sun Liping and his students at the Sociology Department at Peking University launched an oral history project. For those taking part there were twin objectives. One was to gather oral sources on the social changes that had overtaken the Chinese countryside in the second half of the twentieth century; the second was, by describing and analysing social life in the countryside, "to discover and interpret the cause of these changes"¹¹. Why, when the country is entirely preoccupied with the future and with economic modernisation, did they embark on such a project? The project arose from an awareness of a lack of "popular sources" on the daily life of the peasants and how it had changed over the past fifty years. As Sun Liping explains: "When we began describing social processes, we realised that we didn't have access to any sources to assess these experiences. So, at the time, we saw the oral history method as a means of gathering such sources. To give an example: the system that apportions individual responsibility for the land means that the fields are shared among individual people. In the libraries, there must surely be more than a thousand studies on this subject. But if you want to know precisely how the share-out took place in a village, or what exactly was shared, or which conflicts broke out during the sharing process, you can't find any replies to such questions in the books. Some of them deal with the situation in a village, but don't describe the practical process of sharing out the land. In these circumstances, we decided we would turn to oral history as a way of collecting non-official sources within society, so as to understand them and to preserve them"¹².
- 8 Taking a new approach to an official history, a history of the Party or of the Revolution¹³, the sociologists decided to use in-depth interviews with peasants and village officials who had personally lived through these transformations, to harvest a different, more "authentic" history and to "plug the gap" that exists in this field¹⁴. It was an ambitious plan, both in the length of the historical period being covered, half a century, and the need to understand these transformations across the whole of the Chinese territory. Six villages—one each from the north east, the north, the north west, the south east, the south and the centre south of China—were chosen as case

studies and the project was divided into six historical periods: the agrarian reforms, the co-operative movement, the people's communes and the Great Leap Forward, the movement for socialist education, the Cultural Revolution and, lastly, the policy of reform and openness¹⁵. Here we should point out the originality of this enterprise and of the writers' field of investigation: at a time when sociology in China was mainly committed to research into modernisation and its effects, and when the main approach was that of social engineering, the oral history project opened up a new field for research, namely, the revolution. By taking the path of oral memory, the task was to discover the direction of the Maoist Revolution and its impact on Chinese society.

- 9 Fang Huirong, in her memoir¹⁶, looked at the exercise of communist power during the period of agrarian reforms. Focusing her attention on the movement for "pouring out grievances" (*suku*), her central argument was that the penetration of communist power into the countryside had not taken place from the starting point only of economic measures (the redistribution of land to the peasants) but also of the peasants' relationship with the past and with other people.
- 10 Without going into Fang's dissertation in detail¹⁷, we will highlight two essential points, beginning with the attention she drew to the link between social investigation and the central power in communist China. Carrying out the agrarian reforms meant dividing the peasants among the various social classes¹⁸ established by the Party. How was this division to be effected? Going back over the survey carried out by the work teams (*gongzuo zu*) sent on several different occasions to the village that she was studying, Fang showed that these relationships were part of a power relationship: the investigators responsible for determining to which class the individual members of the new society belonged were to practise a new form of investigation, founded on suspicion and the search for proof, and one that would be widely used during successive political campaigns. Fang laid stress on the contradictions between the investigators' demands and the peasants' memories; but on extending her argument we are led to question the practices of the sociologists. In a China where social survey rhymes with authority, how can the investigators avoid being seen as representing those in power? How can they escape from this peculiar relationship, that between the investigators and the investigated? In the selection of terrain and in the method of enquiry these methodological precautions will be the object of specific attention.
- 11 The heart of Fang's study concerns another aspect of the role of the research teams in the village, that of mobilising the peasants to "pour out grievances". By dint of an exhaustive study of the narrative method adopted by the peasants, she showed how the collective denunciation of suffering imposed a new meaning on the past and contributed to building up an opposition between the "old society" and the "new society" in the representations of the peasants. "More powerful than ideological training"¹⁹, this denunciation of suffering gives us the first key to understanding how communist power penetrated the regions. In another article²⁰, Sun Liping and Guo Yuhua extended the study of the denunciation of suffering and showed how those in power were stealing that former practice for their own use, using it to shape the category of social classes and also to create the idea of the state as an embodiment of the "people" (*renmin*) or of the "masses" (*qunzhong*) in peasants' minds. The writers pointed out that the relationship built was far removed from one built historically in the West: it was not as a citizen (*gongmin*) that the individual was linked to the state but as a member of a social class composing the people.

- 12 Using the example of the agrarian reforms, the writers of the oral history project illuminated the influence of communist power over Chinese society. This influence was exerted not only through economic measures or by recourse to force and propaganda but also in a more "subtle" and "secret" way through the production of a real *habitus*, imparting a new vision of the world and new principles of division. These discoveries led sociologists to redefine not only their practices but also the subjects for their research: "It was at this time that we were really confronted by 'communist civilisation'", Sun Liping and Guo Yuhua declared²¹.
- 13 The oral history project was an important step in the intellectual development of the researchers; it marked too the start of a collective research undertaking. It was during this period that Sun Liping invited Guo Yuhua and Shen Yuan (who were at that time researchers at the Academy of Social Sciences) to join the project and take part in the discussions. The founding of the sociology department at Tsinghua was a further step in the careers of these researchers, encouraging them to blend their differing forms of intuition into a properly constructed theoretical framework. But before outlining these new orientations we must first describe the founding of the department and the project for which it was founded.

Guo Yuhua

Born in 1956, Guo Yuhua specialised in the study of folklore and traditional customs at Peking Normal University. She was awarded a doctorate in 1990, after completing a study of popular funeral rites in China. She then joined the Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Social Sciences. In September 2000, Guo visited the United States for a post-doctoral year at Harvard University's Anthropology Department, before taking up an earlier appointment as professor in the Sociology Department at Tsinghua University. She has taken part in numerous research programmes in China ("Changes in the social and cultural life of the peasants in Yangjiagou in north China", Chinese Academy of Social Sciences; research on the "third sector" [associative sector] in China, China Youth Development Foundation) or in collaboration with institutions abroad (research on social justice, *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique* (CNRS); the project, "Food culture and social changes", Harvard University). Among her ongoing projects, we should mention a research programme on the functioning of the social security system for laid-off employees of state enterprises, a sociological intervention project carried out with Shen Yuan on workers' rights, as well as a study on the impact of globalisation and local reaction to it, based on the case of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO) in China. Among Guo's most recent publications, we should cite the following: editorship of the book *Rites and Social Changes* (*Zhongguo shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe*, 2000); "The movement for denouncing suffering: an intermediate production mechanism for the notion of the state among the peasants" (with Sun Liping, *Zhongguo xueshu*, No. 4, 2002); and also an article published in French: "D'une forme de réciprocité à l'autre. Une analyse de la prise en charge des personnes âgées dans les villages du Hebei" ("From one form of reciprocity to the other. An analysis of the undertaking to accept responsibility for old people in the villages of Hebei") in Isabelle Thireau and Wang Hansheng (eds.), *Disputes au village chinois. Formes du juste et recompositions locales des espaces normatifs*, Paris, Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2001, pp. 39-78.

Sun Liping

Born in 1955, Sun Liping is one of the first students to have been trained in sociology in China since it was revived as a discipline in 1981 at Nankai University in Tianjin). From 1982 onwards, he taught in the Sociology Department at Peking University; then, in January 2001, became a professor in the Department of Sociology at Tsinghua University. During the 1980s, his research mainly focused on the question of the modernisation of society (The Modernisation of Society, Huaxia

chubanshe, 1988). From the 1990s onwards, Sun devoted himself to reflection on the changes within China's social structures and the emergence of new social groups. His analysis of the polarisation of contemporary Chinese society, and in particular the concept of "social fracture" (*shehui duanlie*), had a significant impact in China that went beyond the purely academic (see particularly his two articles: "Tendencies and potential crisis in the short and medium term of China's social structures transition", with Li Qiang and Shen Yuan, *Zhanlue yu guanli*, No. 5, 1998; and "New tendencies in the development of China's social structures since the mid-1990s", Department of Sociology, Tsinghua University, 2002).

Turning his attention today towards the sociology of transition, Sun, in addition to other work, is directing three research projects. The first is a programme of oral history on the social changes that have taken place in the Chinese countryside since the mid-twentieth century; the second is an analysis of the relations between the state and the peasants in the contemporary Chinese countryside; and the third is a research programme focused upon the transition from the work unit system to the construction of the community, a programme aimed at analysing the process whereby a "total" society (*zongtixing shehui*) becomes a "post-total" society (*hou zongtixing shehui*).

Sun Liping's main theoretical output includes: "Process-event analysis' and the relationship in practice between the state and the farmers in contemporary China" (*Qinghua shehuixue pinglun*, No. 1, 2000); "Sociology directed towards practices" (*Jianghai xuekan*, March 2002); and "The sociology of practice and the analysis of the practical process of market transition" (*Zhongguo shehui kexue*, No. 5, 2002). Several articles have also been published in French: "*Les armes faibles des forts. L'usage des normes sociales informelles dans l'exercice du pouvoir*" (The weak weapons of the strong. The use of informal social norms in the exercise of power), in Isabelle Thireau and Wang Hansheng (ed.), *Disputes au village chinois. Formes du juste et recompositions locales des espaces normatifs*, Paris, Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2001, pp. 249-286, and "*Forcer le peuple à s'enrichir!*" (Forcing the people to become rich!), with Ma Mingjie, in *Etudes rurales*, "*Le retour du marchand dans la Chine rurale*", Nos. 161-162, January-June 2002, pp.165-182

The role of the sociologist

- 14 The Sociology Department at Tsinghua University was officially founded in May 2000, after several months of preparation²². The department is a small one, composed of a dozen researchers; it was born, in part, out of the university's wish to develop a social sciences faculty. But for the researchers who took part in the foundation of this new institution, the challenge was to create a new academic environment. Shen Yuan, now Deputy Director of the department, recalls: "We wanted to create an academic environment that was alive, an academic environment capable of facing up to the complexity and the richness of social life. ... We were hoping to have the capacity to tackle the real problems of Chinese society, but at the same time we wanted to be able to establish a constructive dialogue with contemporary social theory. At the time, we had the impression that this ideal could not be realised in the other departments; and that we would be obliged to found a new department ... in which we could pursue research projects in common, in which we could debate and exchange our ideas"²³.
- 15 Why did Shen stress the necessity to "tackle the real problems of Chinese society" while maintaining "a constructive dialogue with contemporary social theory"? And why would he seek to combine the two? Sun Liping offers the first answer in going back over the recent history of sociology in China: "The 1980s was essentially a decade of 'indigenisation' (*bentuhua*) ... we didn't know what the common aim of research in this discipline was; we had no idea what stage of development it had reached; what concerned us more were the problems of Chinese society. If Chinese sociologists didn't

resolve them, we wouldn't be able to enter the twenty-first century! What's more, research was taking a very official direction ... socialism, and then came the twenty-first century. But in the 1990s, the situation of Chinese sociology started to make progress and, more fundamentally, there was a change of identity ... Originally, Chinese intellectuals said, "I must take charge of this society." Well, the change of identity is like this: I now have knowledge available to me; I recognise the existence of a community of knowledge, of which I am one element"²⁴.

- 16 Thus, in the 1980s and 1990s, sociologists in China were going through a process of specialisation and professionalisation. The 1990s in particular witnessed a new generation of researchers stepping into the spotlight; they had been trained specifically in sociology, whether abroad or in mainland China. For them, sociology was more than just a "tool" for resolving the problems of Chinese society; it was a scientific discipline with its own agenda, its own standards. Thus, it became an objective in itself to develop this discipline in China, within the framework of an international scientific environment. This phenomenon was also accompanied by the gradual relaxation of ideological supervision. This change is particularly noticeable in the vocabulary used by sociologists: Marxist phraseology is used far less in sociological writing; also, in the choice of subjects, the prescriptive style that marked the research of the 1980s gave way to a technical or neutral viewpoint²⁵.
- 17 Yet, the transition from traditional intellectual to expert was not achieved without raising questions about where sociological research was heading. Sun Liping and Guo Yuhua dwell on the dangers of this specialisation, Sun summing them up thus: "In the course of this process [of specialisation], another tendency could be observed, namely, a diminishing awareness of the real problems of Chinese society or, more fundamentally, a complete loss of it. Researchers carry out studies in China; then they take a small part of this material, the least important part, and use it to seek an international dialogue." To which Guo adds, "The other tendency is 'to stir Western concepts into all the sauces', by [systematically] incorporating fashionable concepts into their research²⁶."
- 18 Criticism of the role played by the "scientist" has developed, in reality, on several levels. Firstly, critics point to the risk of a drift towards formalism, towards legitimising common sense opinions by dressing them up as abstract scientific concepts²⁷. Also questioned are the import of concepts produced in the West and their use to describe a Chinese context. "We have this problem today with Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu", Sun explains. "They created concepts and theories that corresponded to certain problems in their time, to a certain context. If we merely pick up their concepts, it is quite useless²⁸." The problem of using sociological theories in the appropriate context arises all the more seriously when research is carried out into political issues or in response to a demand by the public authorities. That is the case, for example, with the research into the urban communities that have multiplied over recent years in China, financed mainly by the public authorities following the policy of building communities (*shequ jianshe*). As Shen Yuan points out during a reading seminar²⁹, "Research on communities comes directly from the United States: we have been influenced by it. However, the notion of 'community' as it's used today in China has nothing to do with the communities observed by sociologists in the United States".
- 19 Such reflections show that it is the link between science and ideology, between sociology and power that is being questioned. It is to this spirit of reflectiveness that

Guo Yuhua appeals during a class on rural sociology³⁰. Reminding students of the need to combine theoretical thinking with attention to the problems of Chinese society, she insists on the particular “vocation” of the researcher who must constantly adopt a reflective attitude towards power relationships: “Why should we think about the resistance of the peasants? The most widespread argument within the government, among researchers or city-dwellers, is the need for social stability—a view that considers the peasants in terms of their numbers. By adopting this argument, we adopt the viewpoint of the dominant class. We ought to be on the side of the peasants”.

- 20 But taking the viewpoint of those being dominated must not lead us to becoming their “spokesmen” (*dai yan ren*) because, as Guo Yuhua explains to her students, to set oneself up as a spokesman is to develop a “paternalistic relationship” with the peasants and to move into politics.
- 21 One can see in this advice given to student-researchers in the department a particular sensitivity to the sociologist’s mission and the unrelenting care to avoid power relationships. In practice, how can one realise this ideal? Aside from methodological precautions, the problem raised by Sun Liping, Guo Yuhua and Shen Yuan lies squarely with constructing the subject for research. Through this questioning, they are initiating an overall reformulation of the issues and aims of Chinese sociology.
“Communist civilisation”: a new subject for research
- 22 Extending their earlier thinking, Sun Liping, Guo Hua and Shen Yuan are developing within the Tsinghua Sociology Department a line of research directed towards “social transitions” (*shehui zhuanxing*). Behind this general title, the real aim is to open up a re-evaluation of the changes to communist systems, in particular of “market transition” (*shichang zhuanxing*) in China and the social changes accompanying it. How did the market appear to people in China at the end of the 1970s? What are the relations between the state and the market? While questioning of the appearance and the development of the market is not new and has already been the subject of their research³¹, the new department will be a favourable setting for carrying out an in-depth assessment. A special course has been opened that is to enable the student-researchers to peruse the whole range of literature on this question³². This would include the classical literature on socialism, especially from the economic and social point of view, with writers such as Polanyi, Mannheim and Schumpeter; and also the material on the transition stages of communist regimes in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe³³, as well as articles on the Chinese experience³⁴. This course is designed, on the basis of this course of reading, to pursue an investigation into the nature of the communist system and its changes, and above all to examine what is specific to the Chinese case.
- 23 In several articles³⁵, Sun Liping makes a comparison between Eastern Europe’s market transition, analysed by the Budapest School, and the process China is going through. His thinking is structured on two levels: an empirical level looking at the characterisation of these different transitions and a theoretical level that, starting from the empirical difference observed, looks at the analytical tools specific to each process. Sun advances several elements. Firstly, he points out that the particular attention directed by the Budapest School to structural changes and the question of the elite, as with its use of large-scale surveys, accords with the form the transition has taken in these countries. Indeed, the transition was preceded by the collapse of the political system and its dominant ideology. That in turn opened up the possibility of an

economic change led by the state, within a legal framework, with a very strong intervention by the new economic and intellectual elite. Yet, Sun remarks, in China this process is going forward in the context of a stable political regime; thus the economic changes will take place according to two strategies: bringing the reform measures into the official ideology (take, for example, the formula of the “socialist market economy”) or, secondly, the “non-debate”. This special feature will in its turn have repercussions on how social life unfolds: as Sun Liping sums up, “It all comes down to ‘doing things without saying anything’, or to ‘adapting to circumstances’”³⁶.

- 24 This special character of the Chinese case requires us to find new tools for analysing it. That is what Sun Liping is proposing by developing the concept of the “sociology of practice”, which he defines thus: “Invoking a sociology that faces up to practice is not the same thing as stressing the practical nature of sociology in itself as a scientific discipline; nor is it the same as pointing out the possible use of sociological knowledge in everyday life. Invoking a sociology that faces up to practice means to confront social events in their practical forms, that is to say, taking practical situations as a research subject for sociology. So what is practice? What are the practical forms of social events? Speaking generally, practical situations are the concrete functioning processes of social factors”³⁷.
- 25 Here may be found the insights that had been developed in the special report of the first edition of the Tsinghua review, devoted to relations between the state and the peasants, in particular the attention paid to the practical forms of events. Yet, in the course of thinking about the transition to the market, an important change took place: the transition from the concept of “process-event analysis” to that of “sociology of practice”. No longer is the aim merely to propose a “method” or a “research strategy”, or again a “style”; rather, it is to create a new sociological approach, or a new “research formula”, presented as an organised whole and offering a new model for the analysis of social phenomena and an adapted methodology³⁸. The heart of this approach lies in the clear definition of a new subject for research (*yanjiu duixiang*): the “functioning logic of communist civilisation” (*gongchan zhuyi wenming de yunzuo luoji*).
- 26 But how should we understand the concept of “civilisation”? While the term has the advantage of being relatively “neutral” from a political point of view, it refers also to the idea of a “total social fact”, which includes at the same time the political, economic, social and cultural dimensions. Shen Yuan offers us a first definition of it³⁹: “Chinese society also belongs to communist civilisation. Communist civilisation is a complex community: it includes a whole range of institutional arrangements (*zhidu anpai*), but also a number of ways in which individuals can act. It also includes all sorts of ideologies. All of that comes together in everyday life. We shall observe the formation of a “manuscript” (*wenben*), but also the norms for action that are present in people’s minds. We say that all these things together form a complex totality that is communist civilisation. Its formation, its development, its changes, we define all these as the subject for research for Chinese sociology”.
- 27 We can see in this first explanation that the term defines a complex totality that includes “institutions”, that is to say, ways of organising social life and the sharing of resources, whether from an economic, political or social point of view (We may think, for example, of the planned economic system and of the particular form that it imposes on the distribution of economic resources, or of the *danwei* system with its particular forms of organising work and social life, or again of criteria for social classification, and

so on). But the term also encompasses individuals' logic for action, as well as a whole range of beliefs and views of the world. We must also point to the emphasis laid on changes to this communist civilisation. Shen Yuan specifies that how it emerged, developed and changed must all be studied. So the research programme extends over a long historical period, which includes the period of the reforms.

- 28 Initiated by the oral history project and the investigation into relations between the state and society, the research formula proposed by Sun Liping, Guo Yuhua and Shen Yuan has shifted the questions about the link between sociological knowledge produced in the West and Chinese society. It is not the opposition between Western knowledge and Chinese culture that is advanced but rather the gap between the sociological knowledge arrived at out of an enquiry into capitalism and the communist experience into which Chinese society has been plunged.
- 29 Shen Yuan⁴⁰ says that defining this subject for research enables them to overcome the problems of Chinese sociology by offering a general framework for analysis: "It's an important step forward. We shouldn't imagine that all Chinese sociologists know what they are studying. When they begin, they don't have a total concept. They say, 'I'm studying the family', or 'I'm studying the factory'—but they don't know that the family or the factory are systems produced by communist civilisation. They will go and carry out surveys and conduct interviews while having no awareness of that. ... Their main problem is that they can't see the wood for the trees ... But the family or the factory that are studied, if you don't first make them part of an enquiry into communist civilisation, well, you're making a serious mistake ... The biggest mistake made in Chinese sociology is that it hasn't defined the subject for research. When we mention communist civilisation, [that means that] we can study it from different angles. This can help us to explain how to use Western theory to confront the problems of China. Otherwise, the problem is insoluble".
- 30 While the "great masters of sociology", as Sun Liping recalls, Marx, Durkheim and Weber, despite their different approaches, were enquiring into the same subject, capitalism, the problem facing today's sociologists in China is that of communism and the society that characterises it. From this point of view, the enquiry described here is not presented as a "new sociology" but rather as a return to the great questions with which classical sociology was concerned⁴¹.
- 31 And this thinking is for Sun a field of research in its own right, within which would be included studies about China and also more generally about all the societies that have experienced or are experiencing communism: "We may begin from very different places, from culture, history, social networks, relations between the state and society, communities, *xiagang* (laid-off workers from state enterprises), from social security or from migrants: perhaps what everyone does will be different, but what is very clear for us is that the research must be integrated into a field of knowledge about communism and its changes"⁴².
- 32 This new field of knowledge may even represent, as Shen Yuan wishes, a "new source of inspiration" for sociology and, more generally, for the social sciences⁴³: "This source of inspiration has been blocked for a long period, partly because of the Cold War ... But now the situation is different; we can study it more calmly; these different experiences can contribute towards producing concepts that the social sciences will be able to use in a universal way".

- 33 For these academics, what is at issue is not strictly scientific. A generation that has lived through the full rigour of the Maoist era and the period of the reforms can now, starting from this sociological rethink, go back over its experiences and understand them. Shen again: "While our thoughts have gradually been developing, the whole of the history and culture of this nation-state has gone through a great transformation [the policy of openness and reforms]. We have lived through the earlier period [the Maoist period]; we have also lived through the later period. People older than us have above all lived through the earlier phase, which is why, with regard to the process of change in the later phase, their attitude is primarily one of complaint: they do not understand it. Members of the generation following us, when they understand things, will have had contact above all with the later phase. For them, the earlier phase will already be a far-distant period of history. It isn't necessary to understand it. From primary school, where we first started to understand, until 15 to 16 years old, when impressions of the world were formed, we knew only the communist system. Later, starting at 17 to 18 years old, we witnessed the process of change, a change so profound that history has known nothing like it. We are the generation that lived through this change"⁴⁴.
- 34 The appeal, "We must rapidly catch up", that Deng Xiaoping threw out to the sociologists in 1979 seems over these past twenty years to have been answered (by taking a different route, obviously, from that which Deng envisaged). Chinese sociology has not only won the confidence of the authorities but has also endowed the international scene with innovative and high-quality pieces of work. Of the latter, the direction proposed by Sun Liping, Guo Yuhua and Shen Yuan is probably one of the most original and accomplished at the theoretical and methodological levels. By basing their research on "communist civilisation" and its changes they are opening a new path for Chinese sociology. Not only are they transforming the initial project for a socialist sociology, as desired by the central power, into a sociology of communism, but they are also helping to renew the debate on the connections between sociological theories produced in the West and those produced in the Chinese context. No longer do we have two cultures in opposition but, with this connection, we note two distinct historical trajectories, one marked by capitalism, the other by communism. The emphasis placed on qualitative studies, on meticulous observation of the events and practices of daily life while maintaining an advanced theoretical approach, contrasts also with the present-day tendency for Chinese research to pursue quantitative studies. But while this looks like pioneering work within this youthful Chinese discipline, the question of how it will be received is still to be answered. Now that the country is entirely (or almost) facing towards the future and towards modernisation, now that the "experts" have the wind in their sails, what place remains for a reflexive school of sociology that scrutinises the past while seeking to understand the present?

NOTES

1. Sociology was introduced into China from the end of the nineteenth century; and its popularity reached a peak in the 1930s and 1940s with a proliferation of surveys and research projects both in urban and rural areas. At the start of the 1950s, after the foundation of the People's Republic of China, the discipline was suppressed in universities and research institutes. In 1957, the movement against right-wing elements violently denounced it as a bourgeois science and condemned its representatives, who had appealed during the Hundred Flowers campaign for sociology to be revived. The act of re-creating the discipline took place in March 1979, with Deng Xiaoping's "We must rapidly catch up" speech, followed by the appeal by Hu Qiaomu, President of the new Academy of Social Sciences, to recreate institutions and re-embark on research. Sociologists such as Fei Xiaotong were rehabilitated and charged with re-establishing the discipline.
2. See in particular: *Shehuixue tongxun* (the internal review of the Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Social Sciences), No. 1, 1981; and Wang Kang, *Xue bu ji-Shehuixue zai Zhongguo* (Collection of essays-Sociology in China), *Tianjin renmin chubanshe*, 1983, 206 pp.
3. The problem with the specific identity of sociology in China arises in the 1930s and 1940s, with the appeal for the discipline to become more Chinese (*Zhongguohua*), launched by some sociologists, such as Wu Wenzao and Sun Benwen. The question reappears at the start of the 1980s, posed by Fei Xiaotong, leading a debate in the United States, and also in Taiwan and Hong Kong. After that it flared up recurrently in the debates within the discipline. For a recent example, see the discussions on this theme during the Senior Seminar of Social Theory organised by the Department of Sociology of Peking University, October 28th to November 2nd 2002.
4. We have borrowed this expression from Jean-Michel Chapoulie: see his article, "*La seconde fondation de la sociologie française, les Etats-Unis et la classe ouvrière*" in *Revue Française de Sociologie*, No. 32, 1991, pp. 321-364. His interest is to emphasise, not the general "theories", but the "research processes themselves", that is to say, "that essential stage of research which extends from choosing a type of documentation and a way of dealing with it to the final editing of the published evidence" (p. 322).
5. Reviews in China are still largely controlled by the central power. For reviews "within the system", that is to say, publications that have the official status of "academic review", the classification criteria derive from an administrative hierarchy: at the top of the tree are the "generalist" reviews, published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, such as the review *Zhongguo shehui kexue* in the social sciences field. Then come the specialised reviews of the same Academy, such as the review *Shehuixue yanjiu* of the Academy's Institute of Sociology. Also at the same level are the generalist reviews of local social science academies, such as the review *Jianghai xuekan* of the Jiangsu Academy, as well as the generalist reviews of the universities, such as the *Beijing daxue xuebao*. Lastly, one finds in the administrative system reviews under the direction of institutes or associations supervised by ministries and commissions. In addition to this official system, a number of reviews appeared from the 1980s onwards "outside the system". Not being certified by the state, they resorted to the procedure called *yì shù dài kàn* (using the book to replace the review) in order to be published. In practice, that consists

in finding a publishing house that will agree to publish the review in the form of a book. That is how the review of the Sociology Department of Tsinghua University was published. While it is still early to measure the full effects of this new review, one can nevertheless point to the interest excited by the first few issues among sociology lecturers and students in Peking.

6. *Qinghua shehuixue pinglun*, No. 1, May 2000, Sociology Department, Tsinghua University. Thus, the summary in English introduces the articles that make up the special report: Sun Liping, "'Process-Event Analysis' and the Relationship in Practice between the State and the Farmers in Contemporary China", pp. 1-20; Sun Liping and Guo Yuhua, "Wielding Both the Stick and Carrot: Process Analysis of Informal Operation of Formal Power. A Case Study of Levying *dinggouliang* at Town B in North China", pp. 21-46; Ma Mingjie, "Manipulation of Power and Manipulative Mobilization. A Case Analysis of Forcing Villagers to Become Rich", pp. 47-79; Ying Xing and Jin Jun, "The Process of Problem-Making in the Collective Action of *shangfang*—the Story of Migration for Constructing a Hydropower Station in Southwest China", pp. 80-109.

7. The Chinese term used by Sun Liping is *guocheng-shijian fenxi*.

8. Sun Liping and Guo Yuhua give this description of their research work: "In the course of this survey, we conducted interviews with the district and village officials who took part in this process, and carried out a participant observation during the collection process for cereal quotas in the two villages of Lu and Xu. Several months afterwards, we returned to district B, and conducted supplementary interviews with officials and villagers in the village of Lu (p. 24)." Further on in their article, they explain that participant observation of the work of the officials was made possible thanks to the relations of trust established with them.

9. Sun Liping also uses the expression, "zhengti lun moshi" (model of the theory of totality) to describe this paradigm. See Sun Liping, "'Guocheng—shijian fenxi' yu dangdai Zhongguo guojia—nongmin de shijian xingtai" ("Process-Event Analysis" and the Relationship in Practice between the State and the Farmers in Contemporary China), *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.

10. See Sun Liping, *ibid*, p. 17.

11. See Liu Xin, "Remember to Forget: Critique of a Critical Case Study", *Qinghua shehuixue pinglun*, December 2002, Sociology Department, Tsinghua University, note to p. 390. In this note, Liu Xin reproduces the original text of the writers' intentions for the oral history project. This text serves as introduction to all the memoirs connected with the project.

12. Joint interview with Sun Liping, Shen Yuan and Guo Yuhua, November 12th 2003, Centre for Research on Contemporary China, Tsinghua University.

13. See Fang Huirong, "'Wu shijian jing' yu shenghuo shijie zhong de 'zhenshi'—Xicun nongmin tudi gaige shiqi shehui shenghuo de jiyi" ("Non-Event State" and "Truth" in the Life World: The Memories on Social Life of Xicun Peasants During the Period of Land Reform), in *Zhongguo shehuixue*, No. 2, Shanghai, *Shanghai renmin chubanshe*, 2003, pp. 282-371. The article was published for the first time in Yang Nianqun (ed.), *Kongjian. Jiyi. Shehui zhuanxing* (Spaces. Dissertations. Social Transitions), Shanghai, *Shanghai renmin chubanshe*, 2001. In the first part of his dissertation, the writer analyses the method of historical narrative of a book published in 1976 recounting the history of the village she is studying. Although based on local history, the presentation of local events is invariably linked with national history in an evolutionist perspective.

14. See Liu Xin, *op. cit.*, p. 390

15. Twenty years of surveys and research are planned. (Liu Xin, *ibid*, p. 391). Among those dissertations already finished, we may cite: Fang Huirong, *op. cit.*, Master’s degree dissertation, Peking University, 1997; Jin Jun, *Jingying luoji yu caimin luoji-dui dahe dianzhan nongmin changqi jiti shangfang de ge’an yanjiu* (Logic of the elite and logic of the stricken-Case study on the collective grievances expressed over a long period by peasants about the hydroelectric power station on the Yangtse), Master’s degree dissertation, Peking University, 1998; Li Kang, *Xicun shiwu nian: cong geming xiangzou geming-1938-1952. Heidong cunzhuang jiceng zuzhi jizhi bianqian* (Fifteen years in Xicun: from the Revolution to the Revolution-1938-1952. The changes in the mechanisms of the basic organisations in the village of Heidong), Master’s degree dissertation, Peking University, 1999; Chen Xiuying, *Suku, rentong yu shehui chonggou-dui “yi ku si tian” de yi xiang xintai shi yanjiu* (Pouring out grievances, identity and social reconstruction-Historical research into mental attitudes on the subject of “remembering yesterday’s suffering to appreciate today’s happiness”), Master’s dissertation, Peking University, 1999; Ying Xing, *Cong “tao ge shuofa” dao “bai ping li shun”: xinan yige shuiku yimin qu de gushi dahe yimin de shangfang gushi* (From “Give me a reason!” to “the reasoned exposition of arguments”: history of an area of migration near a reservoir in the south west and history of the grievances expressed by people along the Yangtse), doctoral thesis, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2000.

16. Fang Huirong, *op. cit.*

17. For an excellent critical review of this dissertation, see Liu Xin, *op. cit.*, pp. 308-395. Liu Xin’s critical review is published both in Chinese and in English.

18. The four social classes were: the landowners, the rich peasants, the middle-income peasants and the poor peasants and day-labourers.

19. Fang Huirong, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

20. Sun Liping and Guo Yuhua, *Suku: yi zhong nongmin guojia guannian xingcheng de zhongjie jizhi* (Pouring out Grievances: A Mediated Mechanism for the Shaping of the Peasants’ Idea of the State), conference entitled “Research on China: questions and methods”, co-organised by the Centre for the Study of China of the University of Berkeley and by the Centre for Research on Contemporary China of Tsinghua University, December 2001. The article was published in 2002 in the review *Zhongguo xueshu* (No. 4), then in *Zhongguo shehui kexue wenzhai* (No. 2, 2003).

21. Interview with Sun Liping, Shen Yuan and Guo Yuhua, November 12th 2003, Tsinghua University.

22. To be more exact, it was re-founded, because, in 1926, a sociology department had been founded at Tsinghua headed by Professor Chen Da. It was suppressed in 1952 with the reorganisation of university studies. See the department’s website: <http://www.tsinghua.edu.cn/>

23. Interview with Sun Liping, Shen Yuan and Guo Yuhua, November 12th 2003, Tsinghua University.

24. *Ibid.*

25. As an example, we may cite the development, from the start of the 1990s, of a field of research into the new social stratification in China. Giving up Marxist typology in terms of social classes, some sociologists started enquiring into the formation of new social strata and into the new criteria for social stratification. Among numerous references, see in particular Li Qiang, *Dangdai Zhongguo shehui fenceng yu liudong* (Social stratification and mobility in contemporary China), *Zhongguo jingji chubanshe*, 1993; “*Zhengzhi fenceng yu jingji fenceng*” (Political and economic classification), *Shehuixue*

yanjiu, 1997, No. 4, pp. 32-42; Li Lulu, *Dangdai Zhongguo xiandaihua jincheng zhong de shehui jiegou ji qi biange* (Social structures and their transformations within the process of modernising contemporary China), Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1992 ; "Lun shehui fengceng yanjiu" (Commentaries on research into social stratification), *Shehuixue yanjiu*, 1999, No. 1, pp. 101-110; and the last report of the Academy of Social Sciences, Lu Xueyi (ed.), *Dangdai Zhongguo shehui jieceng yanjiu baogao* (Report on research into the social strata in contemporary China), Shehuikexue wenxian chubanshe, 2002.

26. Interview with Sun Liping, Shen Yuan and Guo Yuhua, November 12th 2003, Tsinghua University.

27. Reading seminar (*dushu hui*) devoted to *The Sociological Imagination* by C Wright Mills, and led by Sun Liping, Guo Yuhua and Shen Yuan, Research Centre on Contemporary China, Tsinghua University, March 5th 2003.

28. *Ibid.*

29. Session of January 2nd 2003

30. Course in Rural Sociology, Tsinghua University, November 22nd 2003.

31. See in particular the research directed by Shen Yuan in the market in Baigou: Shen Yuan, "L'affaire du tirage au sort. Principes de justice et d'équité des commerçants d'un marché du Nord de la Chine", in Isabelle Thireau and Wang Hansheng (ed.), *Disputes au village chinois. Formes du juste et recompositions locales des espaces normatifs*, Paris, Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2001, pp. 205-247. Shen Yuan, "Naissance d'un marché", in *Etudes rurales*, "Le retour du marchand dans la Chine rurale", Nos. 161-162, January-June 2002, pp. 19-36. Shen Yuan and Liu Shiding, "Histoire de marques", *ibid.*, pp. 217-262.

32. From September 2002 to June 2003, a course on "Social Transitions" was given by Professor Yang Kaiyun.

33. Among the many relevant writers, we could mention Janos Kornai, Ivan Szelenyi, Peter Murrell, Akos Rona-Tas, and David Stark.

34. Among the writers studied were in particular Jean Oi, Andrew Walder, Victor Nee, Lü Xiaobo and Elizabeth J. Perry.

35. See in particular: Sun Liping, "Maixiang dui shichang zhuanxing shijian guocheng de fenxi" (Directing oneself towards an analysis of the practical process of market transition), *Shehui zhuanxing yanjiu tongxun*, No. 1, September 2002. This article was presented for the first time in December 2001 at the conference "Research on China: Questions and Methods", co-organised by the Center for Chinese Studies at Berkeley University and the Centre for Research on Contemporary China at Tsinghua University; "Maixiang shijian de shehuixue" (Sociology oriented towards practice), *Jianghai xuekan*, March 2002, and "Shijian shehuixue yu shichang zhuanxing guocheng fenxi" (The sociology of practice and the analysis of the practical process of market transition), *Zhongguo shehui kexue*, No. 5, 2002.

36. Sun Liping uses the concept of "biantong", which is difficult to translate. For a more precise description, see the article, "Zuowei zhidu yunzuo he zhidu bianqian fangshi de biantong" (To adapt to circumstances as a way of functioning and a way of changing the system), *Zhongguo shehui kexue jikan*, No. 21, 1997.

37. Sun Liping, "Maixiang shijian de shehuixue", *op.cit.*

38. For more details, see Sun Liping, *ibid.*

39. Interview with Sun Liping, Shen Yuan and Guo Yuhua, November 12th 2003, Tsinghua University.

40. *Ibid.*

41. This return to classical sociology is expressed, for example, in the concept of “communist civilisation”, echoing that of “capitalist civilisation” developed by Max Weber.

42. In this spirit, new fields for research will be opened up. Sun Liping and his students are thus looking into the transition from the system of the work unit (*danwei*) to the system of the community (*shequ*), what is at stake being to grasp the logic of this process and its different procedures. A programme for research on *xiagang* workers (laid-off workers from state enterprises) in northeast China is also in progress. Shen Yuan is pursuing his researches on the market in Baigou and the production system based on home workshops. He has started a programme for sociological intervention that aims to analyse and to change the work relationships between peasant-producers and peasant-workers. But the development of a new field of knowledge takes place equally by means of an effort of reflection over the whole range of Chinese sociological research produced since the discipline was rehabilitated. A project to republish the most important research is in progress, in cooperation with the University of Shanghai.

43. Interview with Sun Liping, Shen Yuan and Guo Yuhua, November 12th 2003, Tsinghua University.

44. Shen Yuan, *ibid*.