

Rethinking independent sociological knowledge system through the lens of disciplinary localization

SOCIOLOGY

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In building an independent knowledge system for Chinese sociology, the localization of the discipline and independent knowledge production are closely intertwined and mutually reinforcing. Efforts to localize sociology drive innovation in knowledge-production paradigms by transforming local experience into theory. In turn, the cultural contexts and practical demands confronting scholars engaged in autonomous knowledge production require sociological theories and methods to be adapted to local conditions. Yet entrenched assumptions about what localization entails have made it difficult for the discipline to produce distinctively Chinese theoretical forms that command broad recognition within the academic community. Zheng Hangsheng, a professor from Renmin University of China and a pioneer of “theoretical self-consciousness” in Chinese sociology, worked with his academic team to advance the “disciplinary localization theory.” They systematically elaborated on the meaning and aims of sociological localization, explicitly proposing a path for the development of sociology with Chinese characteristics based on “constructing the local” and “transcending the local.” Drawing on this theoretical perspective, this article reflects on the history of sociological localization in China and the epistemological constraints affecting knowledge production. In doing so, it seeks to develop a scientific understanding of the internal mechanisms, patterns of development, and practical pathways involved in building an independent knowledge system for Chinese sociology.

Over the past century, the localization of sociology in China has passed through three broad stages: transplantation and translation, dialogue and adaptation, and theoretical self-consciousness. During this process, the discipline has moved from the one-way importation of sociological theories toward an approach that combines the assimilation of international research achievements with the reconstruction of a local knowledge system. Yet this process has long been constrained by tensions between center and periphery, tradition and modernity, and experience and theory. These tensions have produced epistemological limitations in knowledge production, including an imbalance in the structure of knowledge power, a disconnect from the logic of everyday life, and the inadequate development of middle-range theories. Together, these problems have weakened the discipline’s ability to explain empirical realities. A searching analysis of these dilemmas helps define the problems the project must address and provides the core impetus for building an independent knowledge system for Chinese sociology. From the perspective of the disciplinary localization theory, this project requires three forms of “transcen-



Humanistic orientation provides the benchmark for building an independent knowledge system for Chinese sociology.
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dence”: moving beyond the simple transplantation of Western theories, the blind pursuit of pragmatism, and superficial interpretations of local experience. These three dimensions represent corresponding paradigm shifts in epistemology, axiology, and methodology, redefining sociology’s problem domains, conceptual tools, and explanatory frameworks. Meeting these demands requires researchers, at the epistemological level, to clarify the basis for the legitimacy of local knowledge; at the methodological level, to establish a two-way pathway between empirical abstraction and theoretical validation; and from an axiological perspective, to affirm the fundamental purpose of sociological research: serving social progress and human well-being. Only through coordinated progress across all of these dimensions can the localization of Chinese sociology break out of the cycle in which “concepts proliferate, but systems fail to take shape,” and generate middle-range theories—and even broader theoretical frameworks—with both explanatory power and cumulative potential.

Reflective critique defines localization as an epistemological requirement. At the epistemological level, localization constitutes the most direct dimension of the broader sociological localization agenda. Local knowledge generally embodies a rational dialectic between universality and particularity. Objectivity is the foundation of its academic legitimacy, but this does not entail pursuing the illusion of “absolute value neutrality.” Zheng’s standard of objectivity has two interrelated implications. The first is empirical verifiability: Theories must be grounded in systematic observation and empirical analysis of local social phenomena. The second is practical testability: Theories must withstand repeated testing in social practice and be continually refined and revised.

As a methodological choice, localization requires research to be grounded in local realities. The “disciplinary localization theory” holds that Western sociological

methods are both rigorous and inherently limited. Their highly standardized research paradigms can provide useful models, but because they are rooted in Western social experience, applying them mechanically may render the methods ineffective and produce distorted conclusions. Chinese sociology must therefore pursue methodological innovation through a “reassessment” of relations between China and the West, a “reinterpretation” of relations between past and present, and a “refinement” of the relationship between theory and practice. In concrete terms, this involves two priorities: transforming and deepening applied research, and improving the depth and quality of qualitative research across temporal and spatial dimensions.

Practical self-consciousness provides the axiological basis for localization. Guided by Marxism as its theoretical foundation, it takes local social realities as its object of interpretation and the advancement of Chinese society as its fundamental objective. It is simultaneously a theoretical inquiry into “what is,” a value-oriented concern with “what ought to be done,” and a rational judgment about “how it should be done.” This integrated, threefold character makes practical self-consciousness both a crucial link between academic inquiry and social improvement and an axiological foundation for sociological knowledge production. To fully grasp its distinctive local significance, practical self-consciousness must be critically examined within the global genealogy of knowledge. Arising from the dialectical interaction between “structure and agency,” it allows theoretical and practical rationality to be integrated within specific social settings.

The localization of Chinese sociology entails both interpreting meaning and weighing values, and therefore demands sustained theoretical reflection and systematic inquiry. To reconstruct the underlying mechanisms through which an independent knowledge system for Chinese sociology can be built, research-

ers must move beyond established ways of thinking. Drawing on the theoretical implications of the “disciplinary localization theory,” they must examine such dimensions as subjectivity, relationality, and humanistic orientation.

Subjectivity is the epistemological premise for building an independent knowledge system for Chinese sociology. The localization of sociology is rooted in a form of subjective knowledge production grounded in Chinese society and encompassing individual subjectivity, social subjectivity, and object subjectivity. Driven by individual subjectivity, sociologists immerse themselves in fieldwork. Social subjectivity provides the foundation and direction for the exercise of individual agency and the interpretation of empirical objects, while the empirical realities that emerge from the field continually feed back into theoretical innovation. Together, these three dimensions form the chain through which independent knowledge production transforms Chinese experience into Chinese theory. First, sociologists’ individual subjectivity provides the agentic foundation of knowledge production. Second, social subjectivity gives knowledge production historical depth and cultural breadth, providing a wider setting and clear value orientation for the exercise of individual subjectivity. Finally, object subjectivity reveals the potential of Chinese experience to generate theory.

Relationality provides the methodological foundation for building an independent knowledge system for Chinese sociology. First, it finds expression in a critical transcendence of Western research traditions. Chinese sociology must integrate objective analysis of social phenomena with inquiry into the subjective world, bridge macro-level structures and micro-level meanings, and connect social facts with human values, thereby establishing an “integrative inside–outside perspective.” Second, relational analysis can be sustained only when it is grounded in the distinctive character of Chinese

society. As a research context, China combines thousands of years of continuous civilizational development, complex and diverse regional cultures, and a rapidly evolving process of modernization. Forcing Western theoretical frameworks onto this context can obscure the richness of local experience and lead to a predicament of “theoretical colonization.” The key to overcoming this challenge lies in bringing experience and theory into a harmonious, mutually reinforcing relationship, expressed through three forms of interaction. First, experience serves as the foundation from which theory emerges. Second, theory must be reflexive, and theoretical construction must transcend the empirical world in two directions—internally, by clarifying its epistemological premises through self-reflective critique, and externally, by overcoming contextual limitations through universalizing theoretical construction. One major obstacle to theoretical innovation in Chinese sociology is the absence of a motivation to produce knowledge as an “end in itself,” along with a spirit of ultimate inquiry—a determination to pursue fundamental questions all the way to their conclusions. Third, the symbiotic relationship between experience and theory is dynamic and nonlinear. Finally, relationality can bridge the divide between individualism and holism. The vision of a “community of human life” upheld by the “disciplinary localization theory” treats social order and individual subjectivity as “two interrelated aspects” of sociological inquiry, creating the basis for their enduring integration.

Humanistic orientation provides the axiological benchmark for building an independent knowledge system for Chinese sociology. A humanistic awareness of values requires a people-centered approach to knowledge production, ensuring that original knowledge ultimately serves the people’s pursuit of a better life. By integrating cultural roots with critical reflection on modernity, humanistic orientation generates an academic discourse grounded in practice, with a stronger capacity for civilizational dialogue and a deeper commitment to social concerns. It thereby provides both an axiological standard and an ethical foundation for building an independent knowledge system for Chinese sociology. The liberation of the “human” and the inheritance of “culture” are two sides of the same process. To achieve their dialectical unity, sociologists must be both philosophers in the field, capturing the pulse of the times through the lived practices of the people, and “messengers” of civilization, revitalizing cultural traditions through dialogue between past and present and between China and the West. Only then can sociology truly become a discipline that pursues scholarship for the people.

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