

What is the mission of social science in China?

— a synthetic point of view from science with humanity concerns

WANG Ding-ding(汪丁丁)

E-mail: dingding@hawaii.rr.com

(*College of Economics, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou 310027, China*)

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What is the mission of social science in China? This is definitely a fundamental question, if not the only one, to ask and consider. For if it is not clear to a school of discipline what its mission is about, the school can only survive by following others' footsteps, but then it will stop being itself.

One approach to such a fundamental question is to be oriented toward an analysis of the sentence structure of the question. In our case, one could ask analytically: (1) What is a "mission"? (2) What is "social science"? (3) What is "China"? Obviously, as it may be, these are not easy-to-answer questions; they beg further analysis. For example, sub-questions under (3) include: By the word "China" do we mean geographically everything in China? Or culturally everything from within China or over the world? Or just politically on Mainland China? And the meaningful sub-questions under (2) could include: To what extent can one branch of study be regarded as a "social science", not a branch of pure science, nor a branch of pure humanity? Can one have a universal criterion for judging that to which one of the three---science, social science, humanity, any branch of study belongs to? Even under (1), there are such important sub-questions as: Over how long a time-range do we talk about a "mission"? To whom is the mission meaningful? Is a mission equivalent to a target? Or to a set of fundamental issues? Or to a line of thinking no one could avoid? Or simply referring to a particular existential situation and impulses generated within?

The time range of the mission I am talking about is the next 100 years. During this period, China will continue to experience the so-called

"social transition"---a relatively dramatic change in a society's economic, political, and cultural pattern of life. Note that the concept of "pattern" here needs a definition. However, mainly because the demographical transition will come to an end, with the aging of the Chinese population, the creativity as well as the ability to induce change in the society will decline; so the social transition that China has been undergoing since the nineteenth century would likely end in this 100-year period, albeit such a great change in the three-century transitional period can only be regarded, in a five-thousand-year long history, as a "marginal change".

Therefore with the existential particularity a study on Chinese society during the next one hundred years can be named as "a study on late transitional phase Chinese society", yet the concept "society" needs a formal definition which will also serve as an introduction to consequent discussions.

There are two basic approaches leading to a formal definition of society (1) based on similarities, or (2) based on relations. The two sets of definitions, obviously differ, but are somehow overlapping, as the following discussion shows.

1. Definition based on similarities: Suppose on a set of individuals X , an observer has established m aspects (for example, location, language, food, skin color, hair color, blood line, ...), and a symmetric mapping $\varphi: X^2 \rightarrow \Omega^m$ with being the set of all strictly non-negative vectors in Euclidean space E^m , where each axis of E^m stands for the degree of "difference" between the two individuals in comparison on a given aspect $i = 1, 2, \dots, m$, i. e., the observer is able to cognize for any two individuals in

comparison $x_1 \in X$, $x_2 \in X$, a vector of similarity \mathbf{s} such that $\varphi(x_1, x_2) = \varphi(x_2, x_1) = \mathbf{s} \in \Omega^m$, particularly, if $\mathbf{s} = \mathbf{0}$, we know that to the observer and for the given set of aspects the identical relationship $x_1 = x_2$ holds. Now, the observer can set up a “norm” of similarity $\zeta \in \Omega^m$, so the following set is well defined: $A \equiv \{a \in X^2 \mid \varphi(a_1, a_2) \leq \zeta\}$. The society by similarities is defined by: $S_m(X, \varphi, \zeta) \equiv \{x \in X \mid \exists a = (a_1, a_2) \in A, x = a_1\}$.

2. Definition based on relations: Given the same set of individuals X , an observer has established on X a set of relations $R \subseteq 2^{X^2}$, i. e., R is a subset of the set of all subsets in X^2 . For example, $r \in R$ could refer to family-connection between any two individuals under observation $x_1 \in X$, $x_2 \in X$, or it could refer to friendship, trade-partnership, or political relationship, and so on. Now, the observer can set up an acceptable level of stability $\alpha_r \in [0, 1]$ for the relation $r \in R$, such that for some element $b = (b_1, b_2) \in X^2$, if the frequency-based observational probability $P\{b_1 r b_2\} \geq \alpha_r$ is satisfied, then individuals b_1, b_2 are said to be related by r with relational stability determined by α_r . For a given vector of stability levels $\alpha \in \Omega^{\|R\|}$, the observer can recognize (observation + judgment) the following relation-specific set defined as:

$$B(X, R, \alpha) \equiv \{b \in X^2 \mid \exists r \in R, \\ P\{b_1 r b_2\} \geq \alpha_r\}.$$

The society by relations is defined by:

$$S_0(X, R, \alpha) \equiv \{x \in X \mid \exists b = (b_1, b_2) \in B, \\ x = b_1 \text{ or } x = b_2\}.$$

It is worth noticing that Durkheim’s “mechanical society” is more or less like a society based on similarities, S_m . And his “organic society” is similar to a society based on relations, S_0 . There could be much overlapping between S_m and S_0 , but there is a critical difference between the similarity mapping φ and the relational set R . Some relations cannot be described as similarity; one example is trade relationship between say, a Chinese and an American. On the other hand, two individuals, say, one from Earth, another from Mars, can be very similar but not related in any sense.

A definition of society is just an outline of domain for social study, not the image of it. To see the image one needs a lens, a particular point of view, a theory, or a social science, to map the domain into abstract field for an understanding of the world. A major field of social science can be viewed from the model of “rational choice”, leading to the extremely important social-scientific concept of equilibrium and the concept of behavioral pattern.

Consider an n -person society S , where each person $j \in S$ is associated with a set of feasible actions A_j , with a choice operator $C_j: A \rightarrow A_j$ defined on a social situation set $A \equiv \prod_{j \in S} \mu_j$, satisfying the following assumptions: (a) Convexity, for any subset Z of A , the value of Z under C_j is a non-empty, convex, and close subset of A_j ; (b) Upper-Hemi-Continuity, for any set series $Z^t \rightarrow Z^0$ in A , and any series $z_t \rightarrow z_0$, $\forall t$, $z_t \in C_j(Z^t)$, it holds that $z_0 \in C_j(Z^0)$; (c) Weak Consistency of Rationality, for any two subsets $\tilde{Z} \subseteq Z$ in A , if $C_j(Z) \cap C_j(\tilde{Z}) \neq \emptyset$, then it holds that $C_j(\tilde{Z}) = C_j(Z) \cap C_j(\tilde{Z})$. It is easy to see that the social situation set A at time t should in an evolutionary way depend upon every social member’s choices before t . For simplicity, let μ_j be a set-valued correspondence on $\prod_{i \in S} A_i$, such that with a given initial situation A^0 , for $t = 1, 2, \dots$, $A^t = \prod_{j \in S} \mu_j(a_1^{t-1}, a_2^{t-1}, \dots, a_n^{t-1})$, where $a_j^{t-1} \in C_j(A^{t-1})$, $\forall j \in S$. A Nash equilibrium is an element \tilde{a} in $\prod_{i \in S} A_i$ associated with a time series $\{A^t\}$ where $\forall t$, A^t is specified as above, and associated with time T , $\forall t \geq T$, $\forall j \in S$, it holds that $\tilde{a}_j \in C_j(A^t)$, i. e., once in it, no person will have motivation to deviate from \tilde{a} . Nash proved that under assumptions (a), (b), (c), there is a Nash equilibrium for the n -person game described above.

Within this rational-choice framework of social study, it is obvious that once there exists a Nash equilibrium, it will become observable, as the observational time $\forall t \geq T$ can last long enough if not forever, so the observer can recognize behavior patterns in the equilibrium social situation \tilde{a} . Only then, can a pattern be named as a “pattern”.

It is also obvious that the existence and

properties of Nash equilibria depend on how the observer specifies A_j , C_j , μ_j , A^0 , $j \in S$. The knowledge involved in specifying, say, A_j , includes economics, political science of property-right, power and legal studies, technology and science regarding the available means to given ends. The knowledge involved in specifying C_j includes psychology of preference and tastes, ideology, education and judgment, cognitive science, medical science and physiology of needs and wants. The knowledge involved in specifying μ_j covers even broader field---sociology, anthropology, moral and cultural studies, history and genealogy of institutions. Finally, due to the famed path-dependency of complex evolution, the specification of initial social situation A^0 requires a comprehension of the whole social life, and thus remains almost always an art of guesswork.

As Nash himself noted, the above rational-choice framework facilitates not only individualistic rational choice but also group choice (e.g., one may let $j \in S$ represents a group of individuals), as long as the sets and mappings A_j , C_j , μ_j , A^0 , $j \in S$ are well specified.

Two implications follow: (1) the rational-choice framework may serve to unify the whole field of social science, for it has two critical advantages over any alternative approach, (a) its assumptions of rationality are considerably weak compared with other disciplines in social science, therefore it could cover the broadest phenomena of social life; (b) it is positive in the sense that a Nash equilibrium is observable, and so is a behavioral pattern, and thus data can be collected and empirical tests of theories are possible. To this extent the rational-choice framework enables a social study to develop into a social science.

And, (2) the rational-choice framework provides strong motivations for investigation into the irrational world of social life. As mentioned above, for example, the correct specification of a choice operator or a social situation mapping requires utilization of cognitive science, psychology, anthropology, and many other knowledge bodies. What role did the God Lono taboo play in the tragedy of Captain Cook's death on the beach of the island of Hawaii on February 14, 1779? Why is the "face problem" so important

in dealing with a Chinese, a Korean, or a Japanese business man? To what extent is the Weberian religious force still important in modern western economies? Questions like these call for in-depth studies of religious experience, symbolic interaction, dreams and mythology, sub-conscious or unconscious world.

Therefore, due to its social nature and positive methodology, the rational-choice framework can be regarded as to cover a large field of study between humanity on one hand and science on the other. As a social scientific study marches too far into the field of pure science, it gradually forgoes a sense of social life, and often gets lost in its seeking for meaningful issues to study. On the other hand, as a social scientific study searches too far into its humanity aspects, it will have to forgo its ability of producing positively refutable propositions. It suffices to adopt a three-dimensional conceptual space to illustrate the in-between-ness of social science(see Fig.1).

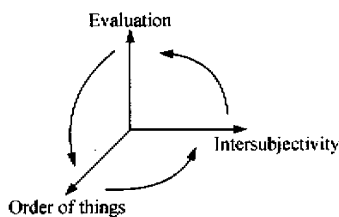


Fig.1 Dynamics of knowledge process

Starting from the origin where the knowledge process begins, its three dimensions stand respectively for (a) "order of things," usually in a knowledge process this dimension is where one begins to recognize the world; it is also a dimension most parts of our science is talking about, and to Hayek no knowledge can sustain without the order of things; (b) "inter-subjectivity," along this dimension, the knowing subjective feels for all kinds of reasons the need to communicate with others, with a permanent and fundamental issue being how to communicate via language or symbolic interaction and turn subjective knowledge into a somehow inter-subjective knowledge with as little misunderstanding as possible, as Hegel long ago pointed out; (c) "evaluation," a humanity-oriented dimension, where the knowledge seeker tends to become a spiritual seeker naturally, in order to solve the life-long

evaluating problem over the whole knowledge body. As a last stage of one cycle of the ever lasting knowledge process, the evaluator tends to go back to “order of things” to re-evaluate everything.

This dynamics of the knowledge process convinces one to believe that all three major fields---science, social science, and humanity, are intertwined in every person’s intellectual life, albeit someone, or many, may not realize this very dynamic nature of human knowledge.

Now my discussion comes to a further clarification on the concept of “China” in its late transitional phase. The existential particularity of “this China”, to my understanding, can be characterized by the intersection of three concepts: (1) the concept of a developing economy; (2) the concept of political transition from a centrally planned to a market-oriented society; (3) the concept of Confucian culture in East Asia history. For the sake of simplicity, Fig. 2 illustrates all three concepts and their intersection---“China” at this historical moment, with a long history line going through it and leading to the future.

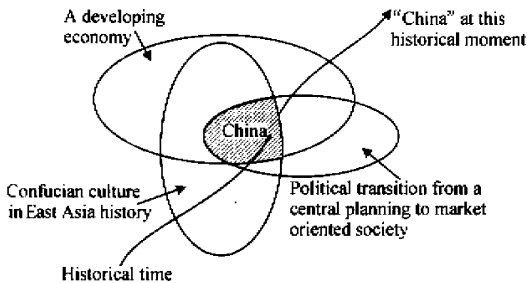


Fig. 2 China at this historical moment

By “a developing economy” it is meant or characterized as an economy in transition from its “traditional state” to a new state where it can meet the growing needs of its population experiencing a demographic transition. For any economy that has remained thousands of years could stay forever in its on-going state---a steady state, or if no change at all, a stationary state, provided its population and knowledge process remain steady. The so-called “demographic transition” occurs when, due to accumulation of knowledge body to a critical level, a population’s death rate falls significantly below its birth rate, resulting

in a relatively long period accumulation of net population increases. Then, somehow due to increased parents’ education and many other complicated interactions, the population’s fertility behavior begins to change, leading finally to a new steady state of both lowered birth rate and death rate. And, a huge population as a result of the demographic transition has been produced, with consequent demands for necessities as well as better lives. Therefore, it is knowledge accumulation that ultimately will permanently disturb any steady state society, pushing it toward a new equilibrium. The fundamental issue facing a developing economy is, to put it in economics jargon: to transform presently available huge labor stock into capital stock before the demographic transition ends, so that the accumulation of capital stock---in the forms of human capital and physical capital, will enable a much smaller labor-stock services in the future to combine with the services of capital stock to support an acceptable standard of life.

The concept of “political transition from a centrally planned to a market-oriented society” needs no more explanation, for its three terms---political transition, central plan, and market society, all need much more clarifications if not accepted simply as what their names are. Therefore I leave the clarification of this concept to a book, and simply name Russia and all countries in the former Eastern Block, as examples of this concept. It is not hard to see that a society in such a political transition is constantly undergoing the ideological struggle between centrally-based authoritarianism and market-based democracy.

Finally, an even more blurred concept is that of “Confucian culture in East Asia history”. However, for my purpose, it suffices to characterize this concept as a culture whose core values are family-oriented, probably due to the historical absence of God or any abstract religion in East Asia. For example, “love”, a core value in this culture, is considered “with different degrees” toward different persons regarding their positions in and to the family. Or as another example, a son covering for his father’s crime is considered “with justice in it”. These two examples shed light on a long tradition of Chinese practice on “guanxi” (personal connections) and authoritarian power of seniority.

These three concepts jointly characterize the existential particularity of Chinese society in its late transition phase. What is left to deal with then is the question itself: What is the mission of social science in China? Before my proposed answer to the question is unfolded in the following discussion, a simple version of it might help the rhetoric. The mission of social science in China is a three-fold task: (1) to provide reinterpretation of social science in Chinese context, such that it is meaningful in the human conditions of China; (2) to develop an academic tradition of social science in Chinese, so that it can merge with the mainstream of the intellectual tradition of China; (3) to maintain the dialogue with other traditions of social science in the world, leading to higher-level comprehension of social-scientific knowledge of which local knowledge in Chinese social science tradition is a special case as is any other local knowledge of social scientific traditions.

The first true understanding of any issue in Chinese social science might be to describe the issue in Chinese context. Referring to this task is what Kant called “practical reason”. Unfortunately many research articles done on China lack such understanding, despite their social-scientific titles. A reader of such an article could not tell if it is discussing an issue raised in Chinese society, or in Indian society, or in American society. To understand any issue in the context of a society’s particular conditions, one needs to go to the phenomenon itself, meaning to suspend and question all theoretical presumptions of understanding. However, in order to be able to suspend and to question any theoretical presumption, one needs to master those theories first. Therefore going to the phenomenon itself slightly differs from Husserl’s “to the thing itself,” in that the former requires a full-range study, understanding, and judgment of social-science theories.

Therefore the first true understanding or the reinterpretation of social science in Chinese context requires one to get involved in a dialogue both with Chinese tradition of social science and with the world academics, leading us to the other two dimensions, (2) and (3), of the three-fold task aforementioned. Of dimension (2) a great difficulty concerns the need for mastering social science in its original context, namely, in the

context of western society via a study of either its intellectual history or an etymology of its central concepts. Without meeting such a need, a Chinese scholar of course could also establish his/her own tradition of social science. But this kind of close-minded tradition will remain closed to itself, and just like a “thesis” without its “antithesis” will become an issue, unable in to a develop into “synthesis”.

There are many subtasks included in mastering social science in its original context, such as what has been carried out ever since the nineteenth century by Chinese scholars in their systematic translation of great books written by western scholars, or the constantly disturbed effort at establishing an open and free academic environment in China, or the recent emphasis on improving economic as well as social returns to academic learning. Yet none has seen remarkable results so far, and to the opposite, the economic reform since the mid-1990s had the its great eroding effect of commercialization in schools and universities in China.

Comparatively, an even more difficult subtask in (2) is for a modern Chinese scholar to understand the Chinese tradition in its cultural, social and intellectual dimensions. This was not a very difficult task in the 1930s when an earlier generation of great scholars in China mastered both their own humanity tradition and to much extent social science in western society. After half a century later, the first task facing modern scholars in China is no longer to study the content of Chinese tradition but to find the Chinese tradition its position in the life-world.

Thirdly in (2) is the subtask of writing social science in Chinese language for Chinese scholars of social science. It is not easy. For any translation of key words from social science in its western context into the Chinese context is more or less like a translation of a whole tradition of ideas, if it is ever possible. Efforts in this task include a long lasting discussion among Chinese scholars about the multi-meaning of the word “economy” in economics, the word “individuality” and “public” in sociology and political science, or the concept of “me” and “I” in Chinese culture.

Finally, my rhetoric relates (3) in the three-fold task to the possible synthesis of the whole field of social science in China (the thesis) and

in the West (the anti-thesis), via dialogue (the logos being shared by men). It should be noted first of all that politically, in the modern world---the globalization of capitalism, any dialogue between a scholar from the Chinese context and a scholar in the western society implicitly is pre-conditioned on somehow unequal terms --- in terms of language power (social science being originated in the West and being more easily discussed or considered in western languages), cultural power (the strong dominance of the western way of life), and often economic power too (such as the economics of “free-market”). For example, I myself do not use English to express myself, but have to write this article in English.

Based on equal terms, a dialogue between Chinese and western context of social science is the critical dynamics in knowledge process and human understanding in both contexts. To the extent that dialogue of such kind improves academic life I introduce here the political dimension of dialogue---against narrow-minded nationalism and arrogant western logo-centrism, and via dialogue introduce the Meadean-Habermasian “performative individuality” and “identity” of Chinese scholars.

Via the dialogue, to my understanding an important element in the new synthesis of social science will be a balance between extremes,

which usually result from changing points of views from one context to another. For example, the Chinese are, due to their long history of belief in the Golden Means, very good at striking a balance of ideas, while the westerners are experts in sharpening basic concepts in analyses, and dialogue enables both complementary to each other.

What is the mission of social science in China? This is a question of performative individuality and identity of Chinese social scientists, a question that calls for individual effort in reinterpretation, developing, and dialogue in social science as a knowledge process of both the individual and the society defined within a group of people based either on similarity or on relationship. To this question no one has to follow others' answers but has to find one's own solution intertwined with one's academic life as well as one's existence in the life-world---a particular context from within one holds dialogue with others. What is the mission of social science in China? A question thus leading to a knowledge process intertwined with each scholar's individual life in the Chinese context specified by transitions from a centrally-planned to a market-oriented society, from a developing to a developed economy, and from a Confucian East-Asian culture to a modern culture in global capitalism.