What It Means to Be a Sociologist in China

Interview with Jean-Louis ROCCA

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In this interview, sociologist and sinologist Jean-Louis Rocca describes the development of Chinese sociology since its rebirth in the early 1980s. He also discusses the changes that have taken place in Chinese society by analysing representations of the middle classes.

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***La Vie des Idées* – Could you describe the current state of sociology in China?**

Jean-Louis Rocca – One of the first points to highlight when characterising Chinese sociology is the question of generations. We should not forget that Chinese sociology is relatively new, since sociology in China had completely disappeared; it did not re-emerge until the early 1980s in a climate of openness, intellectual expansion and reflection, but also one of lingering suspicion. At that time, objectively speaking, sociology was more challenging. It presented a greater threat to the authorities than it does now, although it intervened less in the political field itself. People who took part in the rebirth of sociology had experienced the Cultural

Revolution. They had been sent to the countryside as part of the Down to the Countryside Movement (*xiaxiang*). So these were self-taught people who could read, and who had always been passionate about ideas and what was happening in society. They did not read sociology books, since by definition these did not exist, but rather philosophy books, or literature, related to social issues – whatever they could find in the 1970s, when censorship was absolutely radical, and people could not access books in foreign languages. Those people benefited – in the late 1970s for some, in the early 1980s for others – from the reopening of universities and the opportunity to sit university entrance examinations. They often belonged to a relatively high social class. They were the sons of teachers, journalists, managers, blue-collar workers – professions with a high status at the time. They began their university studies fairly late in life, having already acquired practical life experience. They had all suffered greatly, were highly politicised, and started practising sociology from a critical viewpoint, in the sense that they needed to understand what had happened and what was happening at the time, but also to help create a new Chinese society, which was a difficult thing to define in the early 1980s.

Today, things are more clearly defined: there are exploited workers, emerging middle classes, wealthy people, and the question of representation. All of this is known. Chinese sociology brings originality because every society is unique. Nevertheless, the general framework of Chinese society in twenty or thirty years' time, and its trajectory, can already be glimpsed. That was absolutely not the case in the 1980s. There had been no break with socialism. Some simply advocated a reform of socialism along with a continued role for the state within companies. On a moral level, freedom was restricted. Students were not allowed to go out together or marry. Sexual relations were strictly controlled, and homosexuality was taboo. Society was in a 'no man's land' situation. The important thing for that generation was to understand what was happening and to play a role in society's decision-making process. Elderly sociologists (such as Fei Xiaotong) and anthropologists were thus brought out of retirement, and some Americans were discreetly brought in to teach. Small groups of researchers set up sociology departments at major universities – the University of Sun Yat-sen in Guangzhou, Peking University, the Renmin University of China in Beijing, etc. – up until the late 1980s, while there was still an undercurrent of suspicion towards their subject, as there was with all the social sciences.

***La Vie des Idées* – How did sociology come to play an official role in the 1990s?**

Jean-Louis Rocca – After the events of 1989, suspicions deepened because sociologists had taken a firm stance. There was a witch-hunt at the Academy of Social Sciences and in universities, which was limited by the action of some sociologists who managed to curb the repression. The situation did not return to normal until 1993-1994. In the 1980s, the sociology of religion reappeared. Researchers worked in the fields of criminology, urbanisation and rural issues, studying translations of classic works of American and French sociology, and reading extensively.

In the mid-1990s, everything changed radically when the status of sociology shifted from that of a legal, but politically dangerous, science in order to become – to exaggerate slightly – a semi-official one. The first half of the 1990s was certainly the most important period since the 1978-1979 decision to implement a new policy, because reforms were being stepped up and the system was being reviewed from scratch. The public industry was liquidated, the socialist welfare system destroyed. Contracts were introduced, but this also enabled the spread of informal employment across the country. Today, probably more than half the inhabitants of large cities in China work in the informal sector. The phenomenon of rural exodus and urbanisation, taking place on a colossal scale, is changing the order of Chinese society in every respect. People are now faced with a radical change of pace in terms of education systems, frameworks and standards of living – which now means larger apartments, car ownership, the chance to get around more easily and travel abroad. To simplify things, China developed from a slow-moving, 19th-century society to a post-modern, 21st-century society in a matter of seven or eight years. This is a crucial factor. Governments (this happens at lower levels as well, even in small cities) have started to question things they did not previously understand, and tackle many problems they never used to address in the past. They did not receive appropriate training. France has the École Nationale d'Administration (ENA), which is supposed to educate not only good civil servants but also intelligent people who are able to solve problems. However, that belief and training do not exist in China. The people in power today grew up in the 1950s and during the Cultural Revolution. They had a socialist education, with a socialist vision of the state, and often studied engineering. They have almost no experience of foreign languages or what is happening outside China. They have been smart enough to rely on the expertise, technocracy, or rather the alliance of intellectuals and technicians, in order to address these social issues.

Chinese sociology is now considered to be a useful science for understanding social problems. Researchers, experts in social issues, are consulted when a problem arises, and they have become used to challenging leaders on a number of issues they consider vital to the future of China. They are still anti-establishment, but in a setting that is quite different. In the 1980s, they were excluded from power and considered suspect. Since the mid-1990s, they have been anti-establishment within the system itself, playing their own role in political struggles between central and local governments, between police administration and economic governance, between social policy and foreign trade policy, and so on. They have become an integral part of political and intellectual struggles. Today we are witnessing an explosion of sociology in the sense that more and more universities are creating sociology departments, including industrial and technology colleges. All fields are broadly affected. For recruitment purposes, experts in the field are divided into specialists in social psychology, social welfare, and so on. These sociologists speak out in newspapers and government seminars. They are highly present, and the situation may be compared to what was happening in France in the 1960s and 1970s, and the important role that was given to sociologists as social technicians.

***La Vie des Idées* – What is unique about sociology researchers and research in China?**

Jean-Louis Rocca – Their history creates a unique situation. These researchers are anti-authoritarian, and hit where it hurts; however, they are also practitioners and doctors, at least partly so, even if the government does not follow their advice to the letter. Besides, they do not all agree and the government could not follow them all. A large share of sociology research is therefore highly theoretical. Sociologists try to stimulate debate with new concepts that are almost always imported. Some are currently arguing in favour of creating concepts that are specific to China (*bentuhua*), but such attempts have not led to anything very interesting or original. Chinese sociologists are, therefore, always on the lookout for new analyses, new concepts and experiences that may already be known elsewhere. They focus more on adapting these to China than on creating new concepts. The other aspect, one that is also highly developed, concerns practical research. This is a positive point for sociology because it justifies the fact that it is listened to and is part of public debate, but there is also a danger that society will focus on matters that are determined by the authorities or by renowned sociologists who have decided that one particular subject must be discussed before another. This creates a rather moral, policy-orientated sociology. Some ideas, and a certain number of principles of social justice, must be defended. Recently, there has been talk of "bad

capitalism" for China in comparison with others; also "bad governance", social justice, and violated rights. This moral and moralising aspect confuses research, because it strives above all to show why the situation is the way it is and how things can be resolved, and to remove obstacles to a Chinese style of good governance. Very little work is being done on issues of basic research, based on empirical research in different social environments; on determining problems that were not necessarily considered fundamental before; on research into social phenomena and "non-vulnerable" social groups, to use the terminology of the major international organisations. Very few people are working on the wealthiest classes; research is done into the middle classes, but always with a view to creating a true middle class capable of absorbing migrant workers (*nonmingong*). Research is always carried out with the aim of defending a particular form of social justice, and is always linked to China's future.

To add to all this, it should also be noted that sociologists are numerous, but that the majority study Chinese society. They are only interested in China, and in general are not proficient in foreign languages. Researchers can read in English but much prefer Chinese translations, which raises doubts about the quality of what they are reading; furthermore, they cannot express themselves well in other languages. And yet, the fact that they only study China deprives them of the chance to fully understand the theories they are using. Almost all Chinese students who go abroad to study do research on China, rather than on the country or region in which they have come to study. They rarely opt for a comparative approach, which would force them to invest in the society in which they are living. Therefore, there is a very wide gap between experience gained abroad and the situation in China, which are poles apart. As such, there is a very high level of assimilation of foreign theories and analyses today. Nevertheless, without concerted action designed to guide Chinese students towards research work in France *on* France, there will never be any Chinese sociologists who have had a French experience enabling them to then make better use of the tools they have acquired in order to study Chinese issues. Unfortunately, the French government initiated action in that area but is now abandoning it. This problem of going back and forth, and of the Sinicisation of issues, is extremely important for sociology, and for other fields as well. A great deal of analysis and research is being carried out, and much of it is of high quality. However, the over-abundance of texts and articles, which are copied, re-issued and plagiarised (for example, 200 articles can be found on the Chinese middle classes), creates a feeling of weariness, even if some are excellent. The scale of production and publication is a problem. It is linked to the advancement of Chinese universities, which are based on the American model

– a situation that brings many advantages but has the drawback of forcing university students to publish their work, whatever the results of their research might be.

***La Vie des Idées* – Your current research focuses primarily on the Chinese middle classes and, in particular, on the underlying imaginative element of discourse on the middle classes, does it not?**

Jean-Louis Rocca – I am of those who, in the tradition of Weber, Foucault, Elias and Bourdieu, believe that discourse and facts cannot be separated, and that a fact only exists from the moment of discourse, which transmits that fact to others in a communication event. This issue of the middle classes in China is interesting for me, firstly because a great deal is said about it. This means that there is a problem of interests, and of both material and immaterial needs, linked to representations and people's imagination. This question exists, even if we have trouble seeing its outline on an objective level. I take a highly constructivist stance with regard to this phenomenon. When studying the Chinese middle classes, I refer primarily to *White Collar* by Wright-Mills, which is about the birth of the modern American middle class, and to Boltanski's *Les Cadres*, which retraces the history of the idea of a middle class. The phenomenal growth in income is a material, visible and easily observable phenomenon. More and more people in China buy an apartment and a car, go to restaurants and send their children to study abroad. This huge growth in earnings has affected a large section of the population, including the migrants who come to the cities, even if they are exploited; part of this growth affects a population whose standard of living was already adequate in the 1980s, and rose further in the 1990s. At the same time, there has been an increase in the level at which the Chinese population is being educated, with a sharp rise in the number of people with a university degree and a high cultural capital. The diversification of employment is also unquestionable, with more and more people being employed in the service sector and food industry, but also in the high-tech sector and communications companies, or as journalists and teachers. We are seeing the emergence of a stratum of people who, while they are not necessarily rich nor belong to a particular nomenklatura, have achieved relatively high levels of responsibility. It should be noted that this includes people who do not necessarily display all these characteristics. For example, some academics have considerably lower incomes than non-graduates or employees in traditional sectors. It is by no means a homogeneous group, but it is united by the fact that it lies within a kind of average-sized bubble as regards certain criteria. Below it lie the urban working classes, who have not had the knowledge or ability to get back on their feet after the changes that took place in the work unit system, which

previously took full responsibility for the people, including migrants. Above it are situated very wealthy people, businessmen and billionaires.

***La Vie des Idées* – What can we gain from analysing discourse on the middle classes in China?**

Jean-Louis Rocca – Discourse enables us to explain what is happening in Chinese society, particularly with regard to economic issues. When we hear what the government or researchers have to say on the subject of the middle class, we realise that they consider the creation of a middle class to be of great importance, because it will boost the economy. Indeed, the middle class is supposed to consume more and better than others (buying products with a higher added value), and more intelligently (these people save up and have a consumer plan). This should allow China to solve a major problem – its dependence on the external market – by building up a domestic Chinese market. Given that it is not based on well-defined elements, the middle class is supposed to be driven by unconscious patriotism and thus buy Chinese products. Its style of consumerism should lead Chinese society towards a better situation. The middle class is also seen as socially useful in terms of civilising China, in the Eliasian sense of the term. Nowadays, many people believe the Chinese to be insufficiently modern or civilised. They continue to spit on the ground and do not really know how to eat or drink foreign produce. They need to develop lifestyles and behaviour that conform to the imagined idea of civilisation and modernity. The middle class is the testing ground for that development. Psychologists therefore devote themselves to studying the psychology of the average. Scores of newspapers have surfaced, publishing a variety of advice on styles of consumerism, wine, table manners, relationships between men and women, parents and children. This class is expected to play a positive role because it is a modern, open, but serious social class, made up of people who have their feet on the ground and who do not act erratically.

The political role of the middle class constitutes another strong element in this discourse, firstly with regard to the bases for the legitimacy of its social success. There is currently a problem of anti-wealth discourse and suspicion towards wealthy people. They are believed to have used their power (connections) or illegal means in order to become rich. Becoming wealthy is considered suspicious. This does not imply that people are jealous – on the contrary. It is the other way round: social success through talent, hard work, and continuous self-appraisal is highly valued. A discourse has therefore developed on the issue of

the legitimate success of the middle class. The example that is frequently cited is that of the young person from a modest background who studies determinedly to pass the *gaokao* university entrance examinations, gets a place at a good university, finds good internships and gets himself noticed in order to obtain a good position, complementing his knowledge with evening courses and lectures. This is a very powerful image in people's minds. On the other hand, the question of representation and political protest represents a major challenge. It is known everywhere and at every level that China needs a system of representation, but is not yet ready for elections. Many Chinese people are still peasants and not sufficiently educated. This elitist analysis of elections advocates establishing an electorate before holding elections. There is a marvellous parallel to draw with what can be read about France in the 19th century, François Guizot in particular. However, it is through elections that an electorate is established and, at the beginning, people are not entirely sure what democracy is. Village elections are considered acceptable in China, because the 'chief bumpkin' is elected and minor local issues are resolved, but affairs of state cannot be understood by ordinary people. That social class must first be educated and reasoned before representative institutions can be established.

Why the middle class? Because it is considered to be confrontational and in favour of the law, the rule of law, and social equality; it is also ready to defend its interests while remaining reasonable. This ideology of reason is the path taken by the Chinese government. However, there is a divergence: China cannot have a policy that is solely intended for the middle class, because there are other interest groups. Nevertheless, we can see a certain appropriateness, particularly at discourse level – a certain convergence in the government's will to solve problems. The most symbolic political war currently being waged is that of property owners against developers. There is nothing revolutionary in this, no demand for social change, simply a defence of one's property against encroachment by the government or those with economic interests. We can therefore make a comparison with what happens in France when a public statement is made announcing that the construction of a new road will require ten houses to be knocked down, provoking different responses and reactions from the occupants.

We might wonder about the discrepancy between this discourse on the useful middle class and other points of view and other discourses, particularly that of researchers. The problem here is people's references. We always refer to the experiences of other countries, but often without really knowing what we are talking about. For example, people often quote

Wright Mills, but only to say the opposite of what he used to say. For him, there was a political atomisation of the middle class. That is where non-politics prevails, in the Arendtian sense of course. It says nothing about political change or about a major questioning of the foundations of society; on the contrary, it has a similar idea of what the modern state is in almost all countries. On the issue of consumption, problems have arisen concerning people's approach to saving money. In China, people consume very little and save a great deal. However, the moral idea of legitimate social success can also be challenged. We are well aware that a high percentage of university graduates come from cities, not because they are in any way superior but because there are quotas that enable those who live in cities to get into university more easily. The urban middle classes are privileged, and it is often minute differences in circumstance or personal choice that set them apart from those who end up settling for an easy life.

I am trying to counteract this discourse with a number of other discourses, phenomena, stories and facts. If we had waited for educated, politically engaged voters to appear in France and Germany, as many Chinese claim, we would have had to wait until the 1960s or even 1970, and nowadays the elections might even have to be cancelled since fewer and fewer people vote, and those who vote do so mainly for domestic reasons alone, in order to increase their income. I also believe this discourse contradicts itself, because the precise definition of this middle class poses a fundamental problem. We give it characteristics, but what is actually congruous and coherent about this group of people? At the end of the day, not a great deal. As in other countries, it includes badly-paid civil servants (who are sometimes corrupt but receive benefits and have a very simple lifestyle), migrants who have succeeded in business, city dwellers who have attained a certain standard of living because they have benefited from a number of advantages (for example, some women in Beijing take early retirement and have an income of around 1500-2000 yuan a month – which is quite a lot – and also take small jobs on the side), magazine editors, university professors, managers of small high-tech companies, and so on. What do they have in common in terms of education, lifestyle, political interest or even political commitment? Some are close to the elite class or belong to it – academics, for example, who are part of the intellectual 'bourgeoisie' even if they deny it. The kind of social protest that tends to build up is not very confrontational. I am trying to move away from this discourse, to refrain from defining *a priori* a middle class, nor to create a universal middle class with clear characteristics, but rather to take as my point of departure a certain reality, certain practices and foreign experiences.

***La Vie des Idées* – What other subjects does your research focus on?**

Jean-Louis Rocca – I am also working on the issue of modernisation, which is linked to the question of the middle classes. China wants to be like modern societies, even in the political field. Everyone says that democracy must be established in China, that this is a necessity. The debate in fact concerns the technology of democratisation. Everyone agrees on the main problem with Chinese society: it needs greater democracy, representation, and expression of interests and dissatisfaction. The will to bring about political modernisation is very strong. The question of how to do it is more complex. Modernising morality is also crucial. Everyone wants to eat, have clothes, enjoy life and bring up his or her children like any other modern person. There is a desire to achieve social modernisation at a structural level – that of the social strata – in Chinese society. People want a modern society with a rugby ball shape, with an average population and very few rich and poor. They are looking at implementing public policies and social protection in order to reach that social ideal. There is also the question of cultural modernisation: the Chinese want Beijing and Shanghai to be cultural cities. A huge number of theatres, museums and architectural structures have been built, which does not contradict the major return to tradition and Confucianism that is currently taking place. Every modern society ponders its identity. China, like France, India or Japan, has laid claim to its own identity. Japan is a country that is both ultra-modern and traditional. Both elements are expressed and reinvented in a specific context. In China, people are seeking elements within Confucianism that can be adapted. Nobody claims that women should be completely dominated by men, or children by their parents, or that there has to be a return to the Warring States Period (from the 5th to the 3rd centuries B.C.). Instead, certain elements are being highlighted that can be applied in a company context, such as paternalism, and the benevolence of the employer who behaves like a good man – a *junzi*. There is no struggle between tradition and modernity. Modernisation implies an individualisation of the cultural and social practices of a nation, but it also takes place at an individual level. Today, every Chinese person must perform as an individual. When they look for a job, they must show that they stand out from the rest. This does not mean they can do whatever they feel like. It is a question of finding certain elements that are acceptable to society because they are conceived as being subjective, and abandoning the rest (nobody speaks or dresses like Confucius, and women do not wear *qipao* – traditional dresses – except on special occasions). Their lifestyle should reflect some kind of individuality. This dialectic of standardisation and subjectification is now at work in China, as in any country going through this phase of modernisation. All my research deals with these issues: lifestyles, middle classes, protest movements. I am

endeavouring to identify which elements of this collective imagination are copied from abroad yet have characteristics that are nevertheless Chinese, since their context is profoundly different from those of Europe, Korea, Taiwan or Hong Kong. What takes place in those regions or countries is of little value when it comes to understanding Chinese society. Within China's borders, the phenomenon varies considerably depending on where one is, and for the moment I am interested in major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, whose populations total around 40 million inhabitants.

Further reading:

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