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Issues of Chinese Economic Sociology

By Laurence Roulleau-Berger

Introduction:

Economic sociology has emerged quite rapidly in China, as if hastened by the country's major economic, social and historical transformations. As sociology was being reinvented in mainland China, economic sociology developed as a branch of the discipline in its right and is now designated as such by Chinese researchers (Roulleau-Berger and Guo Yuhua, Li Peilin, Liu Shiding, 2008). However, Chinese economic sociology has moved away from European forms of the discipline in order to develop within a given context in which it is associated with the construction of a society's narrative, that of a society undergoing massive and simultaneous transformations in the economic, social and political spheres (Sun Liping, 2007; Li Peilin, 2005). While the American founders of economic sociology were certainly an influence on the construction of research objects in Chinese sociology, its boundaries are now defined by questions that differ from those being addressed by the new European economic sociology. The approach to economic sociology that has developed in China has been based, firstly, on a shift away from a Eurocentric perspective and, secondly, on the adoption of an epistemological stance uninfluenced by any form of 'methodological nationalism', to use Ulrich Beck's expression (Beck, 2006). Once sociologists working in the field of economic sociology in China had embarked upon this epistemological exercise, it became possible to say that the boundaries of the discipline are marked out by the following research questions:

- the transition to the market economy and social stratification
- labour markets, segmentation and discrimination
- local markets, property rights and privatisation
- forms of unemployment and "informal jobs"
- new forms of resistance and collective action

■ the emergence of new objects of research.

1. Transition to the "socialist market economy" and social stratification

For most Chinese sociologists, transition and social stratification must be considered together. "The transition to the market system" (Li Lulu, 2008) is a key concept in describing the evolution of China over the 30 years of its economic reforms. Since the economic reforms were launched, Chinese society has become increasingly stratified and diversified in terms of the constitution of the socio-occupational categories, which are grouped by the sociologists of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Beijing) (Lu Xueyi, 2001, Li Peilin, 2002b, Li Chunling, 2005a, 2005b) into four social classes: the upper classes, the middle classes, the working classes, and the inactive, unemployed and partially unemployed. These sociologists emphasize the increasing complexity of the social structure, the differentiation of social groups, the diversification of social trajectories and the inequality of access to social mobility. Inequalities in income are increasingly opening up between the different social classes; incomes are stratifying and the wealth created by investment and the new modes of consumption is accruing to the high-income classes, opening up new gaps between them and the working classes (Wang Shuixiong, 2007).

Indeed, while a class of wealthy Chinese is developing and new political and cultural elites are emerging, the status of workers and peasants has declined; the main obstacle to upward mobility among peasants is more a product of the inability of industrialization and urbanization to create sufficient non-agricultural jobs. Chinese sociologists believe it is intragenerational mobility rather than intergenerational mobility that better explains the structural changes that have occurred since the reforms. They have shown that, while possession of economic capital was a decisive factor in social mobility before 1949 before becoming a negative factor between 1949 and 1980, cultural and economic capital have become decisive factors in the ways in which social mobility is constructed today (Li Chunling, 2008). Economic capital, social capital, cultural capital and political capital are the concepts used to analyze how they combine in various ways in a diverse range of differential trajectories and

non-linear forms of mobility that bear witness to the emergence of a class-based society. Social mobility, it is argued, is characterised more by small movements within the social space and gradual transitions from one position to another than by very pronounced changes. Li Chunling (2008) explains the paradox of the Reform. It has increased the opportunities for mobility and at the same time made the boundaries between social groups clearer, with the elites maintaining their position, for example. This paradox seems peculiar to Chinese society and requires Chinese sociologists to work simultaneously on the process of differentiation and on that of social fragmentation, whereas in French and, more broadly, European sociology, they were investigated successively.

Li Lulu, for his part, has shown how, in the transition to the planned economy, the social structure was being reproduced on the basis of the changes on the economic system and institutions and in the relationship between state and market. His starting hypothesis is that social inheritance has played a determining role in the restructuring of social relations, in the development of the market economy and in the weakening of the state's role in constructing systems of redistribution that produce very active and permanent processes of social reproduction in Chinese society. He explains how the process of maintaining social privileges and acquired positions takes place on the basis of hidden restructuring strategies. Li Lulu puts forward the hypothesis that social reproduction is a dualistic process based, on the one hand, on the established power imposed by the state and its institutions and, on the other hand, on the imposed social and symbolic supremacy of dominant groups, which causes social relations based on dominance to be internalised. This theory echoes Bourdieu's theory of genetic structuralism, although the forms of reproduction and social domination are analyzed as being situated in a social context in which established power and symbolic dominance are constructed on the basis of cultural, social, institutional and political orders linked to the history of Chinese society.

Finally, Li Peilin (2008), Lu Xueyi (2002), Li Qiang (2002) and other sociologists emphasize the different forms of social fragmentation that are emerging in a context characterized by the synchronous processes of economic transition and structural transformation. They identify an initial fault line between the cities and the countryside, a second one between blue-collar and white-collar workers, but more specifically between the *nouveaux riches*

and blue-collar workers, and a third between those who work in the market economy, which gives them access to recognised employment statuses, and those who are forced into informal employment in the illegal or even criminal economy. In this regard, sociological analyses converge around the idea of a very marked fragmentation between cities and the countryside which, it is argued, had created a dualistic socio-economic structure before the reforms, particularly by means of the *hukou* system, which in itself constituted a principle of social differentiation that produced two systems of different statuses that could not be superimposed on top of each other. Li Qiang (2005) subsequently showed how this urban/rural dichotomy is going to break up to some extent as a result of increased migration and contribute to the emergence of an urban underclass made up of these low-skilled migrants who enjoy a status in their villages and then lose it once they move to the cities.

2. Labour markets, segmentation and discrimination

In their efforts to shed light on the major economic changes associated with the social transition, sociologists take as their starting point the emblematic form of socialism known as *danwei*. The notion of *danwei*, or work unit, did not emerge until the late 1970s; it denotes a specific characteristic of Chinese society (Li Hanlin, Li Lulu, Wang Fenyu, 1995; Li Lulu, 1993), namely a mode of organization based around the workplace in which, until the second half of the 1990s, work units were responsible for improving living conditions through a policy of public works, the fight against unemployment and the implementation of health programmes. The *danwei* was a system of economic organisation that created social cohesion and underpinned a social structure dominated by the state, which decided on the ways in which power was to be distributed and resources allocated to workers depending on their level of qualifications, seniority and working time as well as their political attitudes and social behaviour (Lu Feng, 1989; Li Hanlin, 1993; Li Hanlin, Li Lulu, Wang Fenyu, 1995; Li Peilin, Zhang Yi, 2000; Li Hanlin Li Lulu, 2003). It has been analyzed as a locus of state domination and, at the same time, for the adaptive strategies developed by Chinese workers in autonomous micro-spaces beyond state control and surveillance (Li Meng, Zhou Feizhou, Li Kang, 1996).

The *danwei* emerges as an economic and social form inherited from the former socialist system that was to weaken during the transition period and fragment into several different economic institutions, such as private companies, joint ventures, rural enterprises, TVEs etc. Analysis of the *danwei* was to remain a relevant research object in economic sociology, but sociologists were increasingly to focus their attention subsequently on the construction of Chinese labour markets. This form of enterprise was to become increasingly autonomous from the state and its outlines are becoming increasingly difficult to define. It is obvious that the *danwei* cannot be compared with any contemporary economic forms in Western Europe.

Chinese sociologists were to go on to show how the *danwei* gradually weakened as a result of the reconfiguration of the Chinese labour markets that started with the reforms of 1978. After all, until the economic reform of 1979, the Chinese labour market could be defined primarily as an apparently homogeneous state-controlled market whose rules, conventions and regulatory standards were produced, set forth and put into practice by the Chinese government. From the early 1990s onwards, the issue of labour market formation became a subject that attracted attention from many researchers. From the mid-1980s onwards, labour markets were to be differentiated and segmented in a context in which a form of capitalism coexisted with what remained of a planned economy; they were also to be differently constructed from region to region (Li Peilin, 2002b, 2005; Chen Yingying, 2005).

From the late 1990s onwards, Chinese sociologists, who were becoming increasingly aware of the question of networks, first revisited Polanyi's Great Transformation theory then that of Burawoy, which was based on the Second Great Transformation and is concerned with the changes in the market in contemporary Communist societies. Shen Yuan (2006) subsequently advanced the hypothesis that China was at the meeting point between these two major transformations. Labour markets, conceived as economic institutions with their origins in this dual Great Transformation, are described as social constructions linked to a communist order; they have produced significant structural changes and led to a restratification of society. At the same time, the effects of globalization on the Chinese economy are creating new forms of economic coordination in labour markets and the reconfiguration of labour markets is viewed as

closely linked to the rapid and very dynamic process of social stratification currently taking place in Chinese society. Thus the process of social stratification reflects the various forms of segmentation that are emerging in labour markets. These analyses of the segmentation and reconfiguration of labour markets also make mention of the impacts of technical, technological and organisational changes on the flows of goods, products and people in rural and urban spaces (Qiu Zeqi, 2008).

From the 1990s onwards, American theories on labour market segmentation, particularly the dual labour market hypothesis (Piore, 1980), were widely deployed by Chinese sociologists seeking to account for the changes that had taken place. Li Qiang (2002), Li Peilin (2002c) and Li Chunling (2005b) advance the hypothesis of a Chinese labour market split into two, with a primary market for well-paid, skilled workers, who enjoy good working conditions and social protection, and a secondary market, in which poorly paid, unskilled migrant workers come and go as they find temporary employment, usually with bad working conditions. However this theory is reinterpreted and adapted to the Chinese context, with three ideas being incorporated into the existing theory:

- firstly, the *hukou*, a specifically Chinese political arrangement, actively contributed to the dualisation of labour markets;
- secondly, despite everything, a 'migrant worker elite' develops in segmented labour markets, which then becomes established in urban areas;
- thirdly, secondary labour markets provide broad access to what Chinese sociologists call "informal jobs" (without contract or temporary, part-time, seasonal, flat fee, etc.), which now account for half of all urban jobs and are characterised by instability and irregularity (Zhang Yan, 2009).

Thus the figure of the migrant worker, the *nongmingong*, has become a truly emblematic one for sociologists seeking to understand the processes of reconfiguration, segmentation and precarisation taking place in Chinese labour markets, as well as raising the wider question of domination, discrimination, violence and resistance in Chinese society.

Some authors (Guo Yuhua and Shen Yuan, 2008) use the concepts of hegemony and despotism to analyze industrial relations in Chinese labour markets, especially those between employers and the *nongmingong*, and to shed light on the ever increasing flexibility that produces situations of social downgrading based on the very strong forms of control and violence that exist in labour markets. In order to understand how Chinese sociologists come to talk of hegemony and despotism, it is necessary to give an example of a situation faced by the *nongmingong*. In a survey conducted by a group of researchers (Shen Yuan, Guo Yuhua, Lu Huilin, Fang Yi, 2009) from Beijing University and Tsinghua University among hundreds of migrant workers working in Shenzhen with pneumatic drills and who had contracted lung cancer because of a lack of health protection, three factors were identified as contributing to these 'lethal' work situations:

- no attestation of employment and therefore no health benefits or obligation on the employer's part to pay hospital costs;
- a low trust relationship between the *nongmingong* and the contractors, who hire them through so-called *guanxi*, who in turn exploit the workers at their will, rendering them completely dependent;
- the complicity of local government with employers in non-compliance with laws on working conditions.

When the *nongmingong* from one village did not want to do the work for fear of dying, other workers from another village took over from them, despite full knowledge of the situation. The researchers spoke of a "deadly relay race".

Several Chinese sociologists have shown how, with the decline of socialist institutions, a process of decollectivisation and individualisation is taking place that is depriving certain categories of workers, among them the *nongmingong*, of social, legal and economic rights. The notion of access to citizenship is then deployed in order to analyze discrimination in labour markets. The situations of discrimination and domination are seen as resulting from a conflict or clash between the old socialist regime and the new capitalist regime: in the midst of a process of transition in which the influence of communism is still present, the capital, power and control asso-

ciated with a capitalist regime come together in a specific way.

3. Local markets, property rights and privatization

From this same perspective, various sociologists have shown how fundamental it is to distinguish local markets from domestic markets and rural markets from urban markets if we are fully to understand how the dual process of economic transition is taking place in China. Following the decollectivisation of the early 1980s, there is one phenomenon in particular in the process of transition that has profoundly transformed rural areas that is of crucial importance to any attempt to understand the social construction of local markets. This is the development of non-agricultural rural enterprises, known as township and village enterprises (TVEs). This phenomenon has been extensively studied. TVEs are collectively owned industrial enterprises that came into being in rural local markets during the first phase of the economic reforms (1978-1992). Over the past decade, because of growing competition from large urban firms and financial difficulties, these companies have been forced to diversify their ownership; whether they have become collective enterprises, share-based cooperatives, limited liability companies, private enterprises or individual enterprises, they all have been drawn into the trend towards privatisation (Aubert, 2006). According to Xiaoye Zhe and Chen Yingying (2006), the boundaries between different ownership regimes and their modes of regulation are increasingly difficult to define, but collective ownership rights in particular have to be thought of as relying on social relationships and the market, or even on a confused tangle of social relationships (Zhou Xueguang, 2006). Other sociologists (Shen Jing Wang Hansheng, 2006) have raised the issue of property rights as a site of interaction between individuals and contexts; from this perspective, collective property rights are seen as an intermediate structure between the "top" and "bottom" strata of rural society.

Analysis of the evolution of these township and village enterprises shows that, from the mid-1990s onwards, they played a decisive role in the establishment of a market economy by virtue of the particular structure of their ownership rights. They made an important contribution to the development of industry and of the countryside; up to 1990, they were subject to close scrutiny as central actors in the first phase of the reforms. They

are regarded as having absorbed a high share of the surplus agricultural labour force; however, their absorptive capacity did eventually reach its limits, at which migration to urban areas began. Shiding Liu (1997) was to speak of villages that developed into industrial villages during the process of industrialization. Yusheng Peng (2000) uses the term "local transitional markets" to describe these arrangements between disparate economic forms that gave rise to hybrid organisations during the transition. Some collective ownership regimes were to be replaced by state ownership, while others evolved into private ownership. Shiding Liu (2006) advanced a theory of the system of ownership rights based on the typically Chinese concept of "possession" which, in its narrow sense, denotes the use or exclusive control of an economic purpose on the part of an individual or group. It has three dimensions: the form of exclusivity of possession, the scope for choosing the mode of possession and the time limit on possession. The possession of resources only becomes a property right if it is recognized in a given social context that produces recognition norms.

However, Chinese sociologists believe that the notion of local market cannot be reduced to rural enterprises but can take other forms. For example, Liu Shiding (2002) demonstrated the specificity of Chinese local markets by taking the example of an alliance between a large market, the Baigou market, and a large number of family enterprises in order to show how rural family businesses can maintain their organisational structure by establishing very dense social networks and remain competitive by operating in a large market; what is revealed here is the complexity of a local market that is independent of the national market and able to producing its own norms, conventions, rules, and modes of movement for both goods and people. Drawing on the same example, Shen Yuan (2002a, 2002b) analyzed the influence exerted by local politicians on the organisation of this market space and the construction of various forms of agreement and disagreement between local authorities and the local market. This in turn raised the question of the forms of economic coordination required between different categories of spaces and actors.

Another phenomenon that emerged in the process of transition towards the market economy and the industrialisation of rural areas in China is the "spontaneous groupings" of small and medium-sized enterprises from the same industrial sector in certain rural zones established by local farmers for the purpose of setting up such

enterprises (Li Guowu, 2008). These industrial groupings have been created not by injections of foreign capital but rather by the efforts of rural Chinese linked by relational networks, the local environment and an entrepreneurial spirit to establish industrial activities in their areas. Chinese sociologists have studied the part played by entrepreneurs' social embeddedness in the development of a type of economic organisation, described as "transitional", that is linked to local history and to the productive worlds associated with the new Chinese economy. Research in economic sociology on entrepreneurs in China has highlighted the production of a plurality of economic orders and types of entrepreneurs operating within coordination regimes that facilitate entrepreneurial activity in a variety of productive worlds. The economic sociology of entrepreneurs - to use an expression coined by P.P. Zalio (2009) - has developed by taking account of local contexts, the various provinces of China and the national and international context. Chinese sociologists have also considered the ever greater presence of Sino-foreign joint ventures and foreign firm, which are transforming the modes of labour market structuring in China, by focusing on the processes of integration and rupture within the Chinese society to which they have given rise (Liu Yuzhao, Ping Wang, Ying Kewei, 2007, Xin Tong, 2007), and on the discriminations suffered by Chinese workers in these foreign firms (Liu Shiding, 2009).

4. Unemployment and 'informal jobs'

The issue of "informal jobs" and unemployment is being investigated by many sociologists today. Access to stable employment is no longer guaranteed in Chinese society at a time when mass unemployment is emerging in China's cities and a public sector undergoing restructuring can no longer absorb the workforce or guarantee it social protection. Chinese sociologists have shown how the phenomena of unemployment increase the vulnerability of the low-skilled populations who are forced into situations of marginalisation and social disaffiliation (Guo Yuhua, Aishu Chang, 2005; Xi Guihua, 2006). Indeed, since the early 1990s and the downsizing of state enterprises, the growing importance of the private sector and the slowing in the growth of rural employment, various forms of unemployment have emerged; sociologists have identified various categories of unemployed people, such as the *xiagang* (workers laid off by their company but who receive subsidies, do temporary work and continue to benefit from the social protection provided by their

work unit) (Tong Xin, 2002, 2006). Moreover, rapid economic changes in China have also led to increased migration on the Chinese mainland and sociologists are interested in the social and economic downgrading experienced by migrants. Academic debates are also being held on how to define jobs in the informal sector, in which migrant populations are heavily represented.

In addition, a new category of unemployed person has appeared that has attracted considerable attention from Chinese sociologists: young people in urban areas aged 16 to 29, a group that is no larger than the *xiagang*, now constitute the majority of the unemployed (Sun Liping, 2003). The first 2004 survey on youth and employment by the Bureau of Labour and Social Protection shows that the unemployment rate for young people aged between 15 and 29 was 9%, higher than the average of 6.1%. Among these young people were those in possession of an urban *hukou*, those without qualifications and those who had left the school system with an upper secondary school leaving certificate or even lower. Unemployment is also affecting university graduates. The number of graduates increased from 1.07 million in 2000 to 4.13 million in 2006, or 13% of an age cohort each year. According to a survey by a group of researchers from the University of Beijing, the employment rate for graduates leaving education was 33.7% in 2005. Employment conditions for young graduates are constantly deteriorating: until the late 1990s they were regarded as a social elite whose degrees granted them access to stable employment in state enterprises and public institutions.

For Chinese sociologists (Liu Yuzhao, 2009), this situation is the result of a misalignment between the training system and employment system, the effects of the *hukou* on modes of access to employment, social policy changes and the effects of monopolies in certain segments of labour markets. This new economic situation has also created various forms of poverty that are difficult to define and that coexist with forms of urban poverty that are largely the result of the presence of migrants in Chinese cities. Chinese sociologists are now developing research into the construction of inequalities and inequities in what they call "modern economic life" and into ways of conceptualising economic growth and inequalities in a socialist context. Some have made a distinction between processes of 'collective exclusion' (Li Qiang, 2000, 2001, 2002) and processes of individual exclusion in order to explain how an underclass is

emerging in the new Chinese society. The issue of access to employment has become a very important academic challenge for Chinese sociologists.

What sociological approaches do Chinese sociologists favour when it comes to analyzing the process of access to employment? Approaches in terms of networks, social ties and social capital are the ones mainly deployed in Chinese economic sociology. The family and social networks are conceived of as playing a central role in the process of economic socialization, de-socialization and re-socialization. Granovetter's theory was adopted in France from the 1990s onwards, as it was in China during the same period. Granovetter's theory (1974, 1994) of the strength of weak ties, which is directly related to Fei Xiaotong's theory of the *chaxu geju*, has indeed been drawn on in many studies in economic sociology. However, while Granovetter had advanced the hypothesis that social networks and markets could interpenetrate each other by demonstrating the strength of weak ties, Chinese sociologists seem rather to adopt the notion of strong ties and to attach less importance to the idea of weak ties; for example Bian Yanjie advances the hypothesis of the "strength of strong ties" in determining young people's access to employment and Zhong Yunhua (2007), for his part, confirms the hypothesis ties are weak in the private sector and strong in the public sector. In some recent studies, finally, the nature of the ties is conceptualised as "gendered" when it comes to accessing labour markets (Tong Xin, 2008). In their approach to analyzing the construction of networks and social ties, Chinese sociologists have not really adopted Bourdieu's concept of social capital, nor that of Putnam (2000); rather they draw on Coleman's work, in which capital is seen from a non-deterministic perspective as a resource for actors (Bevort, Lallement 2006). Indeed, they are still concerned with the reciprocal obligations and expectations that depend on the degree of mutual trust in relations, informal modes of information transmission and action norms.

5. New forms of resistance and collective action

A new area of research was opened up in the early 2000s, the focus of which is new forms of resistance and mass mobilization in the Chinese society as exemplified by the resistance movements among peasants, workers and city dwellers linked to the middle class. These are new forms of collective action involving groups that have

adopted an adversarial stance towards the state, local government and private actors in the emerging civil society.

Some sociologists (Tong Xin, 2002, 2008) focus on analysing the new forms of collective labour action in Chinese society that have emerged in response to the privatisation of state enterprises and which are expressions of conflicting economic and political interests. These studies are concerned with the ways in which collective labour action is constructed in a time of transition. They show how workers in the *danwei* had internalised the idea that a strongly interdependent relationship existed between themselves, the enterprise and the state and how the reform led to the breakdown of this relationship, leaving workers feeling cheated and the victims of inequality and injustice. The industrial action that followed the Reform is seen as reflecting a struggle by the "dominated" for social recognition, a struggle based on class consciousness and a shared socialist culture. It is clear from these studies that, while these forms of collective mobilisation can be likened to social movements, the collective actions taken by workers in the traditional state sector emerge as a phenomenon unique to China, which makes them highly contextualised, particularly when it comes to the claims made by workers against the various types of property regimes.

Other researchers (Shen Yuan, 2007) have opened up a field of research concerned with the way in which a citizens' movement linked to property rights developed on the basis of the demands for civil and political rights made by the Chinese urban middle class. Shen Yuan examines the question of the creation of a civil society; in doing so, he draws on Gramsci's Marxist theory and alludes to the approach to the public space developed by Habermas (1992). The analysis of citizens' movements on property rights reveals the tensions and conflicts within the public space that have led to the increasingly organised campaigns by urban dwellers from the emerging middle class. Examination of the question of property rights in urban areas shows how struggles and rivalries have developed within the urban space between different categories of city dwellers in possession of economic, social and political goods and other city dwellers who have fewer resources at their disposal. Above all, however, middle-class city dwellers emerge as producers of collective competences in situations of resistance linked to new forms of economic and political domination.

Chinese sociologists have shown how the forms of domination in Chinese society are simultaneously diversifying and producing new forms of individual and collective action that reflect strong demands for meaning and recognition at a time when those who were protected by the state are losing their status to become "dominated". The hypothesis here is that these new forms of collective action are an expression of conflicts between different levels of recognition, the former being related to the first socialist system and the latter to the post-reform period.

6. "Emerging" objects in economic sociology

Chinese economic sociology is developing and becoming more complex. We have identified three "emerging" objects that raise new research questions: the relationship between democracy and the market, the financial markets and the "economics of singularities" (Karpik, 2009).

In Chinese economic sociology, the notion of market is also associated with that of democracy. For example, the concept of political market is becoming increasingly important as a means of investigating the extent to which the forms of political action espoused by an authoritarian government and those adopted by local government, which contain elements of democracy, are becoming hybridised. Thus Long Sun (2008) shows that, in standard political market theory, only politicians or parties that offer the voters policy manifestos in order to attract support are taken into account. However, in the case of elections in the Chinese countryside, the political market is marked out by the influence and power central government exerts over local government and the degree of control it exerts over elections in rural China. For Sun Long, these elections are mere democratic exercises that do little to advance real democracy. In their examination of the relationship between democracy and market, several sociologists have focused attention on various forms of corruption, especially at the level of local governments, which they see as obstacles to the democratic process (Wang Shuixiong; Sun Liping, 2006).

The question of the relationship between market and democracy is also addressed through the financial markets, which are seen as emerging objects associated with the transition process, in which they are a key institution. After all, the major economic changes that have taken place in China are a considerable inducement for soci-

ologists to work on the financial markets. The first generation of American sociological studies of the financial markets carried out during the 1980s is giving way to a generation of European (Godechot, 2009) and Chinese studies. It is becoming clear how politicised China's financial markets are. Some research (Liu Shiding, 2008), for example, shows how Chinese companies are subject to a "dual taxation" regime established by central and local government. This regime is characterised by divergent norms and a process of double taxation that generates tensions between the various levels of political governance at which mechanisms for detecting tax avoidance and imposing sanctions have been put in place. The Chinese financial markets are a privileged locus for efforts to understand the construction of social relations and multidimensional competition: on this point Chinese sociologists concur with French sociologists such as Olivier Godechot (2009).

In some pioneering research on the media, such as that by Zhou Yihu (2008), we can also see how the disjunction between the market and democracy is analyzed, taking as a starting point the growth in the financial autonomy of the Chinese media, which has not increased their political independence but, on the contrary, strengthened power of the state over the media market. This research advances the hypothesis that soft forms of state hegemony are being established that are increasingly discreet, regularized and institutionalized.

Finally, some Chinese sociologists have developed the notion of a 'market of singularities' in which judgments, both personal and impersonal, are the mechanisms that give rise to economic coordination regimes (Karpik, 2009). We can point, by way of example, to the first thesis to be produced at the interface between the sociology of art and economic sociology. It was written by Yan Jun of the Department of Sociology at Beijing University and is entitled "*Art? or money: the Industrial Ecosystem of an Oil Painting Village and the Economic Life of the Artists in the Contemporary China*". Yan Yun analyses the relationship between the value of artistic work and the price of works on the art market. The value of artistic work is defined as resulting, on the one hand, from the interaction between styles, reputations and artists' social capital and the norms and conventions prevailing in the various art worlds and, on the other hand, from the action of a variety of actors in the worlds of art and their social and economic practices. This pioneering research shows how, in China, the singularity of

artistic creation is thought to lie in the uncertainty as to its quality, as it is in the work of Lucien Karpik (2007), father of the economics of singularity in France.

Conclusion

The broad outlines of Chinese economic sociology do not overlap precisely with those of the new European economic sociology. The process of producing knowledge in economic sociology in China varies depending on the academic trajectories of Chinese sociologists embedded in a given context and history. While the emblematic concept of embeddedness developed by Polanyi and subsequently taken up by Granovetter in his famous article '*Economic Action and Social Structure: the Problem of Embeddedness*' played a central role in the construction of American and European economic sociology, Chinese sociologists departed from this approach in order subsequently to investigate the notion of embeddedness and its new emblematic figures as it relates to the transition process and social stratification (Li Peilin, 2002; Li Youmei, 2005), to the question of property regimes (Li Lulu, 1997; Liu Shiding, 2006), to the emergence of a new working class and to the recent emergence of phenomena connected to unemployment (Sun Liping, 2003; Shen Yuan, 2006). And whereas the processes of major economic and social change in Europe have been spread out over a period of 50 years, they have been telescoped in China, which has forced Chinese sociologists to conceptualize the questions of embeddedness and disembeddedness differently, taking as their starting point analysis of the plurality of economic orders. Granovetter's analyses have subsequently been drawn on widely and discussed in connection with the Chinese tradition of the **guanxi**. Finally, an approach based on economic institutions and the new forms of collective action has enabled Chinese sociologists to explain the fragmentation and recomposition of Chinese society. Initially, the influences of American sociology played a major part in defining the boundaries of Chinese economic sociology. Gradually, however, the discipline has gained its independence in a specific societal context and 'specific' forms of sociological knowledge have been developed by encouraging the construction of new research objects, such as the relationship between markets and democracy, financial markets and the 'economics of singularity'.

Translated by Andrew Wilson

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Laurence Roulleau-Berger is a French sociologist (CNRS), member of the Institute d'Asie Orientale. She has recently co-edited (with Guo Yuhua, Li Peilin and Liu Shiding) a handbook on contemporary Chinese sociology (*La nouvelle sociologie chinoise*, Presses du CNRS, Paris, 2008).

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