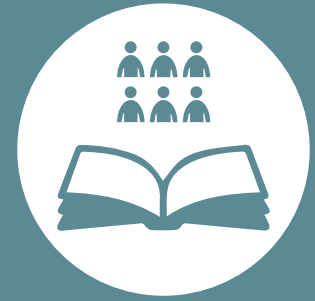


Lee, C.K., & Shen, Y. (2009). China: The Paradox and Possibility of a Public Sociology of Labor. *Work and Organizations*, 36(2): 110–125.



Chapter 12

SOCIOLOGY DISCOVERED

Our final chapter looks at where the book has taken us in our attempts to discover sociology and gets us thinking about how we take sociology ‘into the world’. As we discuss in this chapter, one of the ways that sociology looks to affect change in society is by using our research to advocate for marginalised groups in society – to be on the side of ‘the underdog’ (see Becker 1967). This advocacy approach to sociology usually involves being critical of social structures, engrained processes, organizations, governments and even people! Sociologists of education, for example, have been critical of the British education system in reproducing class inequality (e.g. Reay 2017) while medical sociologists have expressed scepticism towards the huge amount of power that the medical profession and the pharmaceutical industry hold (e.g. Illich 1975). In contemporary Western societies, sociologists enjoy a high degree of freedom to be able to publicly express these critiques without fear of reprisals from the State. In fact, many sociologists aim to share their critical research findings in very public arenas such as in the media or by writing popular books which will be read by people outside of academia. But sociologists in other contexts do not have the same degree of freedom to be critical and advocate for change for the underdog.

Lee and Shen talk specifically about Chinese sociology which is constrained in its capacity to be critical by the ‘extraordinarily resilient and domineering state’ (page 111). They trace the ways that the Chinese government has ‘a tight grip on ... sociology’ (page 116) in defining what are considered appropriate sociological questions and in guiding how sociologists should make sense of their findings in ways which are not critical of the State. Lee and Shen specifically focus on sociology of work and the ‘triangular relationship among the Chinese state, Chinese sociology, and Chinese labor’ (page 111). This is a very politically sensitive area so Lee and Shen document the ways Chinese sociologists have to tread carefully to avoid receiving ‘warnings’ from government officials or even being dismissed or demoted (page 113).

They argue that the Chinese government has curtailed sociologists’ ability to capture and represent workers’ struggles by mandating that sociologists of work can only focus on a narrow range of research topics and can only share research findings which aren’t politically sensitive. So, while sociologists of work *are* able to conduct research, they are limited to fairly descriptive research questions. For example, Chinese sociologists of work are banned from using Marxism as a theoretical

framework for exploring workers' experiences. This is because Marxist ideas have a complex relationship with the Chinese state ideology. On the one hand, the Chinese Communist government is wedded to Marxism, but on the other China is increasingly operating a capitalist economic model which Lee and Shen argue (2009: 114) 'makes a total mockery of any pretence of China's commitment to socialism or communism'. For many people in China, then, Marxism is entangled with state coercion, dictatorship, and indoctrination and the government are keen to avoid igniting debates about these topics.

But Chinese sociologists of work being unable to use Marx to understand workers' experiences severely limits their abilities to be critical. In the Western sociological tradition, Marx's work has been foundational to understanding the organization and experiences of work. Harry Braverman's (1974) book *Labour and Monopoly Capitalism*, for example, extends Marx's ideas to argue that the separation of 'hands-on' work (as carried out by workers) from the production process (as designed by employers and capitalist organisations) embeds managerial control over workers which leads to alienation. Moreover, in their history of the sociology of work, Halford and Strangleman (2009: 816) argue that Marxist critiques have 'exercised powerful effects in shaping the field of research on work'. Chinese sociologists' inability to use Marx in their work means two things. Firstly, it excludes Chinese scholars from a whole critical research field. Secondly, it limits their capacity to bring about change for workers – to advocate for the 'underdog'. So, while Western sociologists of work have continually drawn attention to the exploitation of workers under capitalism, Chinese scholars 'do not offer any analysis of the structural or institutional reasons ... for super-exploitation in China. As a matter of fact, they almost never invoke the term exploitation' (Lee and Shen 2009: 114).

Lee and Shen's article isn't based on empirical research findings. Instead, the sociological writing in the article itself acts as a method – a way to draw attention to a little-known story or problem, and to show how Chinese sociology is slowly becoming more 'public' through initiatives at Shen's university (Tsinghua University, Beijing). They talk, for example, about staff and students at Tsinghua University offering legal, skills, and language training for migrant workers as well as training Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) who campaign for improved workers' rights. The training workshops that the sociologists provide allows NGOs and other campaigners to network and discuss shared concerns but also enables sociologists to hear about developments and changes in working conditions.

This kind of exchange between Chinese academics, workers, and campaign organizations is similar to what is called 'public sociology' in Western contexts. Public sociology is an approach or style of sociology which focuses on issues that are of public and political interest and where research is shared widely and publicly rather than just with other academics (Burawoy 2005). Public sociology goes beyond just engaging with the public (i.e. non-academics and non-sociologists) as research participants but working *with* people to shape research, interpret findings, communicate our theories and try to make change – to advocate for the underdog.

Public sociology isn't a particular method but, rather, an approach to *how we do* and *what we do with* our sociological research. But, in the same way that methods can

be critiqued (as we've been exploring in these blogs), public sociology as a style has also been questioned. Charles Tittle (2004) goes as far as suggesting that public sociology is an arrogant endeavour and one that endangers sociology's legitimacy by removing our claims to objectivity in favour of advocacy. The arrogance of public sociology, he suggests, stems from the assumption written into public sociology that all sociologists agree on what is 'right' or 'just' and that the public is going to listen to our views on this! In other words, do we all agree who 'the underdog' is, do we all agree on how we should help them, and will anyone pay attention to our beliefs?

This debate about public sociology takes us right back to one of the very core questions about sociology – whose side are we on? Lee and Shen are clearly on the side of the exploited workers in China and are using their sociology to improve the lot of this marginalised group.

QUESTIONS:

1. Lee and Shen's article draws attention to the challenges faced by Chinese sociologists which sociologists in the West do not experience. Given this, might their article itself be considered a form of standing up for the 'underdog'?
2. Do you want to be a public sociologist? Why?
3. Whose side are you on?

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