The Movement to Indigenize the Social Sciences in Taiwan: Origin and Predicaments

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Toward the end of the 1920s, sociology began to be institutionalized as an academic discipline. The first national sociological association in China, the Chinese Sociology Association (Zhongguo shehui xuehui 中國社會學會; CSA), was formed in Shanghai in 1930. The development of sociology in China was interrupted first by the Japanese invasion in the late 1930s, and then by a prohibition in 1952, after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took control of mainland China. In 1951, some sociologists were exiled to Taiwan with the Guomin dang 國民黨 (Chinese Nationalist Party; GMD) government and started their own version of the CSA in Taipei. With the GMD’s permission, and with resources endowed by the United States, a revival in the teaching of sociology commenced in the late 1950s in Taiwan.1 By the 1980s, sociology courses in Taiwan had gradually overcome the constraints of political ideology and the suspicions of the authorities because of the softening of authoritarianism. Since the 1990s, sociology has been a widely taught and researched subject in Taiwan’s higher education.2

As with other social science disciplines, sociology originated from the Enlightenment, the problems associated with the collapse of feudalism and the transformation of society pushed by the growth of industrialization and capitalism in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. The formation of its assumptions and problématiques have been heavily influenced by the social and historical trajectories and
concerns of the evolving worldviews of the European powers and, since the World War II, those of the United States.³

Sociology is conventionally defined as the scientific study of society. As such, one may wonder just what kind of society or which particular society this field of study is all about. Likewise, when preparing to teach sociology, one may wonder just what kinds of knowledge about (which) society(ies) should be taught to students.⁴ In 1999, a group of Taiwan sociologists published a textbook for undergraduate teaching: Shehuixue yu Taiwan shehui 社會學與台灣社會 (Sociology and Taiwan Society).⁵ Drawing its primary sources from the many available sociological studies on Taiwan, the textbook was promoted as the first bentu 本土/ bentuhua 本土化 (indigenous/indigenized) sociology textbook in Taiwan; and in the opening page of the preface the editors proclaimed their “indigenization.”

It is most regretful that we have always relied on original textbooks from Europe and the U.S., or their translations, for our elementary sociology teaching materials. Students have learned cases and illustrations, and concepts and theories derived from Europe and the U.S. The end result is that students could not comprehend social realities of “bentu” society, nor could understand those concepts and theories that may seem not to be part of their life experience. . . . The purpose of this textbook is to enforce bentu education. It attempts to use many sociological research findings about Taiwan and, through their incorporation in this book, to lead students not only to understand general concepts and theories in sociology, but also starting from this bentu society, to understand bentu society and the growth and development of Taiwan’s sociology studies.

The publication of this first “indigenous” textbook in the field of sociology in Taiwan represented only a very limited aspect of the practical needs in teaching, not to mention the more abstract and theoretical dimensions that had been discussed regarding the need for indigenization. Moreover, this modest progress and limited achievement took place after at least 20 years of serious thinking and enthusiastic debate.

The term “Sinicization” (Zhongguohua 中國化) later qualified or substituted by the term “indigenization” (also “localization”; bentuhua 本土化) is a prominent keyword standing out in the development of sociology in Taiwan.⁶ For instance, in 1982, the CSA organized a forum titled “Sociology in China: Problems and Prospects” to discuss issues concerning Sinicization.⁷ In 1991, to commemorate its anniversary, the