Abstract

‘Metropolitan’ sociology has universal pretensions that cannot be realised (Connell 2007). These and other limitations of mainstream sociology are born out through teaching a classical sociological theory course in Hong Kong during 2012. Imparting accessible material meaningfully applicable to analysis of Chinese society led students to scrutinise primary texts and to apply to them material that supplemented, corrected and provided an alternative framework to the received wisdom of western social theory.

Keywords

Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Georg Simmel, accumulation, suicide, orthopraxy, triadic forms, Chinese society

Introduction: sociological theory and its complaints

Like production in general, the production of sociology necessarily occurs in a particular place and time. This fact may be obscured, but is not negated, by the apparently abstract nature of sociological theory. The development of sociology, mainstream textbooks hold, arose through the historical experiences of the French Revolution, the European Industrial Revolution and European and American urbanisation. The intellectual and technical development of sociology through the twentieth century to the present time has similarly been claimed by practitioners in American and European institutions. This background of particular socio-cultural assertion is necessarily associated with given predispositions, preoccupations and limitations that impinge on the form and practice of sociological theory and methods. If the outcomes of a particular intellectual production are assumed to be sensible to matters associated with dissimilar socio-cultural formations then problems arise. This is essentially the conundrum noted by Connell, that ‘modern social science embeds the viewpoints, perspectives and problems of metropolitan society, while presenting itself as universal knowledge’ (2007: vii-viii).

The conventional representation of sociology as sourced in a European and American locale and mindset has not gone unchallenged (see Patel 2010) and postcolonial critiques of mainstream sociology reveal serious limitations (Bhambra 2007; Rodríguez, Boatca & Costa 2010). The particularities of Eurocentric sociology have been intensively discussed in the Chinese cultural region since the introduction of sociology by missionary academics in the early twentieth century (Wong 1979). Debates concerning the sinicisation of sociology in mainland China and Taiwan
(Chan 1993; Cheng & So 1983; Dai 1993; Freedman 1962; Gransow 1993; Skinner 1951; Zhou & Pei 1997) arguably converge with Connell’s project, although only the national case studies of postcolonial Africa, modernising Iran, post-World War II Latin America and post-1970s Emergency India are treated in Southern Theory (2007). The sinicisation of sociology debate has been directed to the need to develop approaches – theories and methods – undertaken in the society in which they are applied. But this can never be achieved by ignoring the dominant sociological approaches transmitted through the asymmetrical knowledge flows that constitute the present state of academic research and pedagogy.

Indeed, the endeavours of Ambrose Yeo-chi King and of Hwang Kwang-Kuo, based in Hong Kong and Taiwan respectively, to develop sociological analysis from a Confucian perspective draw extensively on staple elements of western social science including role theory, phenomenology and realist philosophy of science (Hwang 1987; 2000; 2012; King 1985; 1991). It is not necessary here to consider how successful these and similar endeavours have been. They are particularly adept in explaining guanxi, enduring networks of purposive association, and xiao, filial piety; but unless they do so in a way that also provides concepts that address the structure and animus of similar informal networks among American, Lebanese and Italian social actors and also the enduring sense of family obligation among British, Sudanese and Portuguese social actors they fail to provide a language which explains particular social manifestations and tendencies in terms of general categories. A similar failure gives rise to the complaint against what Connell calls metropolitan sociology (see Qi 2011; 2013). This is not to deny that there may be things that are unique to China.

A less ambitious approach to the limitations of the sociological ‘canon’, which does not compete with or displace the approaches outlined above, is to expose classical theory to the data and orientations it ignores, misunderstands or cannot assimilate and on that basis begin to construct alternate formulations and projections. There is no better place to do this than in the classroom. For the teacher it is an opportunity to learn how far the material they impart can stretch and what they can add in order to achieve what the received wisdom set out to accomplish but failed to produce. For the student it is an opportunity to both become familiar with elements of the historical constitution of sociology and the theoretical approaches of significant sociological innovators and at the same time to develop a critical perspective on classical theory by confronting it with the forms of relationships and social structures which characterise and constitute the society in which they live, the dynamics of which influence their own experiences, opportunities and intentions.

Teaching classical theory in Hong Kong

The observation of Alatas and Sinha (2001: 316), that the ‘critique of the social sciences that emanated from academic institutions in Asia, Africa, and Latin America tend[ed] to remain at an abstract and reflexive level’, is still largely true. Even more telling is their observation that these calls for reformulation ‘have [not] manifested themselves at the level of teaching in the social sciences’. This remains true for the teaching of Classical Sociological Theory. At Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU), one of eight publicly-funded universities in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of China, ‘Sociological Theory I: Classical Theory’ is a second-year course which examines the thought of Marx, Durkheim, Weber and Simmel. A web-
search of 2013 syllabi reveals that the focus on only these four thinkers can be widely found, including in courses at the Universities of Hyderabad, Melbourne and Trinity College Dublin. Variation in classical theory courses seems to be provided by additions to the trinity of Marx, Durkheim and Weber, with Tocqueville added at the University of Toronto and Parsons at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. A number of North American courses add Mead and DuBois as well as Parsons and Merton in addition to Simmel. In the Lahore University of Management Sciences classical theory course Ibn Khaldun as well as Hobbes, Rousseau, Comte and Montesquieu are added to the trinity. Teaching only Marx, Weber and Durkheim in classical theory courses is not uncommon, occurring at the Australian National University, the National University of Singapore, Nanyang University and the University of Papua New Guinea.

Classical Theory is one of a number of courses required in the two undergraduate degrees the HKBU Department offers, BsocSc Sociology and BsocSc China Studies (Sociology Concentration). The course attracts an enrollment of more than 60 students. The majority of the courses taught by the HKBU Sociology Department are similarly typical of sociology curricula elsewhere, comprising a core of introduction to sociology, qualitative methods, quantitative methods, contemporary as well as classical theory and a pool of electives including marriage and the family, popular culture, work and industry, stratification and mobility, health and illness, self and society, sex and gender, urban and regional development, and so on. There are additionally a number of courses on Hong Kong and modern Chinese society, with many of the more general courses focusing on Hong Kong and Chinese material.

It is often said that sociology taught and practised in non-metropolitan areas applies metropolitan theory and methods to local data. Without directly addressing this idea it can be noted that the HKBU Sociology Department comprises academics of diverse origin (7 from Hong Kong, 3 from mainland China, and 1 each from Malaysia, the Philippines and Australia), all of whom are ethnic Chinese with the exception of one Caucasian. The majority have PhDs from the US (8), with others from the UK (2), Australia (2) and Hong Kong (1). While all members of academic staff are highly globalised in their educational experience the students they teach are predominantly local. Of the 62 students who completed the Classical Theory course in 2012 only 4 were not from Hong Kong; one was a foreign exchange student and the other 3 were from mainland China.

English language is a subject taught in government schools in Hong Kong, but the language of instruction in them is Cantonese, a southern Chinese language which shares written characters and much vocabulary with Mandarin Chinese but with significantly different pronunciation, grammar and tonal structure, making the two mutually unintelligible. Only elite secondary schools in Hong Kong teach in English. The vast majority of HKBU enrollments are graduates of the government schooling system. HKBU is committed to the use of English as the medium of instruction, which it is able to achieve in just over 70% of its courses overall, with variation of this percentage between faculties. The Faculty of Social Sciences teaches just over 50% of its courses in English and 36% in Cantonese. In the Sociology Department English is the medium of instruction in slightly less than half of the courses, including Classical Theory.

All students enrolled in sociology courses have English-language competency, but English is in almost every instance the student’s second language. It quickly became clear to the author that
the incessant talking and frequent use of smart phones by students in lectures during the first few weeks of the course were simply to establish by indirect means what the lecturer meant by what he said! Through the assistance of a student helper and a Masters degree student, Chinese characters were added in parenthesis after mention of abstract concepts in the powerpoint presentations for all subsequent lectures. This assisted student understanding and effectively reduced the level of noise in lectures. When students understood more clearly what classical sociology offered they were able to engage with it intellectually, an engagement that subsequently animated tutorial discussion and informed the material presented in lectures.

The Classical Theory course was designed to introduce students to the principal theories of Marx, Durkheim, Weber and Simmel in the context of both their own lives and times and to consider what their theories bring to or raise for an understanding of contemporary Chinese society, including the Hong Kong SAR. Students were required to read primary sources of the four theorists, supplemented with relevant articles and chapters on Chinese society. In what follows will be outlined a summary of the outcome of the interface between the theoretical frameworks of Marx, Durkheim, Weber and Simmel and some aspects of Chinese society that students and I explored as the course unfolded.

Marx

Of the four thinkers presented in the course Marx was the most familiar to students. The representations of Marx and Marxism most available to Hong Kong students are primarily political, derived from local reactions to official Chinese Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought, often through the prism of Christian missionary critique. The Christian influence in Hong Kong is out of all proportion to the less than 8% of the population who are practising Christians. With the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in establishing the People’s Republic in 1949, the majority of missionaries in China fled to Hong Kong and quickly accommodated with the colonial administration of the time to institutionalise their influence in educational, medical and welfare services, an influence which remains highly significant today. It is ironic, therefore, that while the majority of students expressed hostility to the (political) ideas of Marx during the course, of the four thinkers treated Marx was thought to be most directly useful in understanding Hong Kong society.

Marx’s thought was presented in lectures in terms of three sets of theories, namely a theory of historical change (historical materialism), a theory of class society (the labour theory of value and surplus value), and the theory of capital accumulation and the world market. Students were free to use English or Chinese translations of Marx but many reported that they preferred the English as the Chinese are poorly translated and politically ‘doctored’. Data on Hong Kong society reveals growing poverty and increasing economic inequality, with the richest 10% of the population taking up approximately 35% of total income and the poorest 10% accounting for only 2% of the total (Wong & Yuen 2012: 261). While students recognised a correspondence with Marx’s account of class polarisation there was unresolved discussion in tutorials concerning the mechanism of value production and exploitation through appropriation of surplus value. Marx’s sociographic value was therefore more relevant to the students than his theoretical elaboration.
In discussion of capital accumulation and the world market students again found ready examples from their knowledge of Hong Kong society. Marx’s distinction between the concentration and centralisation of capital was readily grasped by students. Impressive tutorial presentations focused on local capitalists with students revealing extensive knowledge of wealthy Hong Kong business families, most notably Li Ka-shing, the richest person in Hong Kong and one of the wealthiest individuals alive today, with interests of global reach in manufacturing, real estate, ports and utilities, technology and retail.

Students found Marx’s framework not only particularly useful for organising data and narratives concerning economic inequality and development in capitalist Hong Kong but similarly useful when applied to China’s transitional economy. A major source of rural protest in China that has become a constant of the transition period is the expropriation by local government of agricultural land for commercial and industrial development, often on behalf of private interests and frequently corruptly and without compensation to the peasants who rely on farmland for their livelihood (Cai 2003; Guo 2001; Walker 2006). Students recognised this transformation of socially collective to individual ownership through frequently violent appropriations as an instance of what Marx describes as primitive accumulation.

While the discussion of primitive accumulation in the final section of Capital is typically regarded as historical and non-theoretical, students saw Marx’s discussion as highly relevant for their understanding of China’s place in the global capitalist system. In the very last chapter, Chapter 33, Marx demonstrates that primitive accumulation is not confined to the historical beginning of the capitalist system but ongoing in his own time, in the Australian colonies, where direct access of early settlers to the means of production in land meant that a working class dependent on capitalist employers was absent and capitalist development stalled. Wakefield’s theory of colonisation, as Marx describes, advised colonial governments to place an artificially high price on land which then limited access to it and prevented the combination of labour and means of production, thus creating conditions of primitive capital accumulation and all that it entails.

Primitive accumulation in the periphery of the world economy (in ‘modern colonies’) has great theoretical significance for an understanding of Marx’s account of capitalist development. It demonstrates that the formation of capitalism at the margins of the system, through a process of primitive accumulation, is responsible for renewal and restructuring of global capitalism even as crises at the centre are endemic. Marx’s point is that these latter do not determine the development of the system as a whole while primitive accumulation occurs in the periphery, where today post-Soviet economies and those of India and especially the People's Republic of China demonstrate the continuing relevance and novel empirical application of Marx’s theory of (primitive) accumulation.

**Durkheim**

Lectures on Durkheim focused on his method and especially the idea of ‘social fact’, his approach to the division of labour in society, his sociology of religion and finally his theory of suicide. More than anything it was Durkheim’s account of suicide that drew the attention of students. Suicide rates in mainland China, according to recent international comparisons, are the
highest in the world, with rural females in the age range of 15-25 years approximately 2.5 times more likely to commit suicide than rural males and over 4 times more likely that urban males and females (Phillips, Liu & Zhang 1999). This pattern is the reverse of the one that Durkheim presents, based on late nineteenth-century European data, in which urban males are the most likely victims of suicide.

Durkheim’s typology of suicide operates in terms of two variables, social integration and social regulation, each of which can be dichotomised as low or high (Durkheim 1970). This framework provides four distinct types of suicide: egoistic (low integration), anomic (low regulation), altruistic (high integration) and fatalistic (high regulation). Durkheim’s account is primarily focused on egoistic and anomic suicide, which he sees as manifestations of highly individualised and normless modern societies, with a briefer discussion of altruistic suicide more typically found in traditional societies. Discussion of fatalistic suicide is confined to a single footnote in Durkheim’s account because he believed that the excessive social regulation with which it is associated would be experienced only by ‘slaves’, ‘very young husbands’ and ‘married women who are childless’ and is therefore of ‘little contemporary importance’ with examples ‘so hard to find’ (Durkheim 1970: 276 note 25).

A remarkable characteristic feature of suicide in China is that no more than 35% of cases are associated with mental illness whereas in the West the rate of mental illness in suicide cases is over 90% (Zhang 2010: 311-12). Indeed, Zhang argues that the conditions of Chinese rural females fit those postulated in ‘Durkheim’s notion of fatalistic suicide’ (Zhang 2010: 311). Resistance to the medicalisation of suicide in China (Lee & Kleinman 2003: 306-8) encourages identification of a social etiology consonant with Durkheim’s approach. But Durkheim’s methodology tends to treat suicide rates as emergent in structural conditions so that there is a statistical probability of, say, anomic suicide, under conditions of rapid economic change. Chinese suicide as a social phenomenon poses a challenge to Durkheim’s approach not primarily in terms of patterns of suicide rates, which can be accommodated by his approach through the category of fatalistic suicide, but in terms of his structural method.

All of the tutorial presentations on Suicide (Durkheim 1970) mentioned Qu Yuan (340-278 BCE), who is reputed to have committed suicide as a political protest against state corruption. Qu Yuan and his patriotically-inspired suicide are memorialised in a long-lasting annual holiday and festival, still celebrated in China including Hong Kong as the Dragon Boat Festival (in Cantonese Tuen Ng). Student discussion reflected the Chinese cultural association of suicide with protest, recognising the agentic nature of suicide, and acknowledging the preponderance of female suicide as a form of resistance to family oppression. These assessments reflect discussion in the literature they drew upon. After surveying a number of cases and considering the conditions leading to suicide in rural China, Wu (2011: 234) concludes that the majority of them ‘are a form of resistance to family politics and domestic injustice’. Understanding suicide as resistance, as it is traditionally regarded in China (Ji, Kleinman & Becker 2001; Lee & Kleinman 2003; Ropp, Zamperini & Zurndorfer 2001; Wolf 1975), led students to challenge the merely structural explanation developed by Durkheim.

Weber
Lectures on Weber emphasised his ideal type methodology, typology of action and legitimation, approach to bureaucracy, and sociology of religion including both the Protestant Ethic thesis and his account of Chinese beliefs. Of the four sociological thinkers studied in the course Weber is the only one who wrote more than brief asides on China (with the possible exception of Durkheim (Durkheim & Mauss 1963: 67-80); commentators would agree, however, that Durkheim on China reveals more about Durkheim than it does about China). Weber’s *The Religion of China* (*RoC*) is similarly more an expression of Weber’s project to demonstrate the singular provision of the conditions for the development of modern industrial capitalism in Protestant Europe than it is a reliable guide to China’s economic, political, administrative and social institutions. Weber’s discussion in *RoC* is a mix of outdated assessments, inappropriate conceptualisations and brilliant insight, with the first two unfortunately outweighing the last.

Weber found a ‘number of reasons – mostly related to the structure of the state’ for the failure of bourgeois industrial capitalism to develop in China from ‘petty capitalist beginnings’ (Weber 1964: 100). He claims that the necessary condition for the failure of modern capitalism to emerge, however, is the absence of appropriate religious traditions. While there is a rational element in Confucianism, according to Weber (1964: 248), ‘Confucian rationalism meant rational adjustment to the world’. What is necessary for the development of capitalism, in Weber’s (1964: 248) estimation, is ‘Puritan rationalism [which] meant rational mastery of the world’. Weber goes on to show that the opposition to orthodox Confucianism provided by heterodox Daoism did not generate the type of tension that might rectify the Confucian default but in fact made matters worse; Daoism both reinforced traditionalism and transformed ‘the world into a magic garden’ (Weber 1964: 200).

The critical discussion of Weber’s argument in *RoC* has focused on his approach to Confucianism (Metzger 1977; Schluchter 1989: 85-116), while his account of Daoism is quite neglected (Barbalet 2014a). Since the 1980s, however, New Confucianism has become a force in its own right in East Asia that has distorted assessments of Weber as well as discussion of East Asian economies and requirements for capitalist development (Barbalet 2014b). An aspect of Weber’s Eurocentric translation of Chinese institutions, treated in the lectures, is the formal aspect of his distinction between Confucianism and Daoism, namely that of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, terms which occupy more than half of *RoC*.

Weber says that the needs and exercise of political rule are important for understanding the antagonistic differences between the orthodoxy of Confucianism and the heterodoxy of Daoism. He therefore characterises the Chinese state as pursuing a set of beliefs, any contravention of which is a heresy to be challenged and removed (Weber 1964: 214). The Chinese state, Weber (1964: 215) says, ‘approached a “denominational” state’ which maintained its rule through ‘the rejection of false doctrines’. A notion of a heresy-exorcising state characterises developments in Christian Europe but has been experienced only once in China’s long history, more than half a century after Weber wrote *RoC*, during the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76. This peculiarly European view of culture and identity, as depending on a person’s beliefs, requires an encompassing apparatus, in Europe a dominant church organised as a national bureaucracy able to maintain control at the parish level, capable of generating and propagating to a subject population a single coherent belief system, absent in China until the 1950s.
Chinese officials, with the singular exception noted above, have never been interested in the beliefs of the religions and movements they opposed. It is only when such forces mobilise against the state, or through their behavior or by expressing strong emotion or attachment are seen as a threat to public order, that the state has attempted to control them (Yang 1961: 193). The imperial state neither legislated for beliefs nor advocated doctrine (Watson 1993: 96). The unity of the Chinese state was achieved not by orthodoxy, as Weber supposes, but orthopraxy; rightness not of belief but of practice. A system of orthopraxy, a ‘set of shared practices or rites’, rather than orthodoxy, a ‘system of shared beliefs’, was ‘the principle means of attaining and maintaining cultural unity’ in late imperial China (Watson 1993: 83-84).

Students enjoyed the excursions into Chinese history and society, and the critique of Weber’s Eurocentric account, provided by an examination of the arguments of *RoC*. Tutorial presentations and discussion were preoccupied with two additional themes, however, one prompted by Weber’s assessment of Confucianism and the other stimulated by the Protestant Ethic thesis, interpreted through the role of Christian organisations in Hong Kong society.

A large minority of the class was surprisingly able to display knowledge of the Confucian classics, although the majority was both ignorant about and indifferent to them. Overlying this division seemed to be a manifest demonstration of the coincidence of cultural and political nationalism in China and also the cleavage, especially among Hong Kong students, between those possessing Chinese national sentiment and those without such sentiment. Even more interesting, however, in the context of discussion of the Confucian principle of filial piety, which occupies sections of Weber’s writing in *RoC*, is the broad agreement among the students that the Chinese sense of family obligation which remains powerful in both mainland China and the HKSAR derives not from a Confucian legacy but from currently operating institutional factors. In particular, students agreed that the educational aspirations of students are not a consequence of the high valuation of education in Confucianism but results from highly competitive labour markets. The associated financial and other sacrifices that parents make for their children’s education was similarly explained by the students in terms of the absence in Hong Kong and mainland China of state expenditure on aged care. Aged parents without means must rely on their adult sons and daughters; hence the widespread parental interest in investing in their children’s education and therefore employability and, by extension, their own future care. The likely class difference in the feeling of obligation to parents based on such institutional, rather than cultural, bases also came out in tutorial discussion, with working class sons and daughters more aware of obligations to parents than middle class students (see Kwan 2011).

In tutorial discussion of Weber’s protestant ethic thesis students displayed an acute understanding of Weber’s argument concerning the role of religious belief in supporting the ethos of capitalism, but impatiently wished to go beyond this cultural and ideational formulation and discuss the role of Christian families and organisations in Hong Kong’s economy. One spirited tutorial presentation outlined the relationship between the Hong Kong New World Development Company, a family business with total assets valued at HK$311 billion, and the Methodist Church. The Company, focused on property development, has holdings in HKSAR, Macau and mainland China. It owns and manages Methodist House, prime real estate property in Wan Chai on Hong Kong Island and headquarters for the Methodist Church in Hong Kong. Another tutorial presentation focused on the lucrative private hospital sector in Hong Kong. The
HK Department of Health lists eleven private hospitals, eight of which are owned by Christian churches.

Simmel

Simmel’s signal discussion of the metropolis and mental life (Simmel 1971a) and his treatment of fashion (Simmel 1971b) were readily grasped by students, and applied to the case of Hong Kong, a major metropolis where shopping and fashion enjoy devotional adherence. In tutorial discussion of Simmel’s formal sociology, in particular his treatment of the dyadic and especially triadic forms (Simmel 1950), some surprisingly insightful innovations were introduced.

Simmel distinguishes between types of triadic forms in terms of the function of the third member; three distinct functions and therefore forms are identified: mediator, who represents the group either by standing above the other parties or being involved with each of them; tertius gaudens (enjoying third), whose support is bid for by the other two members of the triad and thereby turns dissension between them to her own advantage; and divide et impera (oppressor) who in preventing a coalition of the others against her instigates conflict between the other two for her own benefit. Students were able to find many examples of these strategies and triadic forms in Hong Kong political and public life and Chinese history. Additionally, a number of students insisted that the first instance, mediator, is not one form, as Simmel said, but really two.

Mediation, according to the students, may take the form, firstly, of arbitration, in which one settles a dispute between two others. But if the three members of the triad were involved with each other through role compliance then harmonious relations would render arbitration unnecessary, which is a distinctive second possibility. In arguing this way students drew on a particularly Chinese understanding of roles, in which adherence to obligations attached to a role ensures that the relations between all role players are mutually supportive (Hamilton 1990): relations are thus ‘harmonious’, a term with special resonance in Chinese-cultural areas. In this case the third member (which each member is to the other two), through the mediation of their roles and role compliance, constitutes a triadic form which does not depend on any person’s intervention through arbitration.

Simmel does not entertain a triadic form constituted through role adherence as a performance in its own right, but all organisational routine assumes such an arrangement. A sociological focus on the strategy of individuals is parallel with the western construction of persons as bearers of rights and self-referential capacities; Chinese social thought, on the other hand, regards persons as constituted through the obligations inherent in mutually supportive roles. These different scripts can inform a general sociological perspective because they each bring into focus what a mono-cultural lens might fail to notice.

Conclusion

A number of outcomes emerged at this interface of sociological theory and regional knowledge generated by teaching classical sociological theory in Hong Kong, drawing on Chinese sources and current issues. In particular, Marx’s theory of primitive accumulation was confirmed and revitalised, indicating its relevance for capitalist globalisation; Durkheim’s account of suicide
was given qualified confirmation regarding the significance of fatalistic suicide even though the structural etiology of Durkheim’s approach was fundamentally challenged by the agentic dimension in Chinese suicide as protest; Weber’s characterisation of Chinese rule in terms of orthodoxy/heterodoxy was disconfirmed and rejected, even though his sociology of religion stimulated modification and investigation; and Simmel’s tripartite distinction of triadic forms was refined through appreciation of important social distinctions, less visible in the Euro-American cultural milieu than in the Chinese.

Placing classical sociological theory in extrinsic contexts introduces data, cultural assessments and priorities which necessarily challenge and lead to modification in received wisdoms. Teaching classical sociological theory to Chinese students in the Hong Kong SAR, and drawing on studies of Chinese society and history, introduced students not only to the writings of sociological luminaries but also to the practice of sociological theory construction and, more importantly, reconstruction, in which they participated. In this manner intellectual traditions were understood to require and develop through the formative contribution of critical engagement, and could not be seen as merely ossified remnants of a distant and foreign past.

While the critical literature is justifiably concerned with the Eurocentrism of classical sources, student employment of these sources is consistent with the truism of cultural analysis, namely that meaning and context are integral; so a text written in France or Germany in the nineteenth-century will have a distinctive and different meaning in twenty-first century China. More serious than the European origin and American translation of classical theory is its extrinsic role in crowding out local thought and writing. The experience of teaching classical sociological theory in the HKSAR demonstrates the inclination of students to make theoretical sense of their own society and, in pursuing that purpose, to accordingly shape the means given to them in class and in the library.

References


