

C. K. Yang

Sociology in China and the Encounter of Civilizations

The Life of C. K. Yang and its Historical Context

YANG CH'ING-K'UN, known in the West as C. K. Yang and among his friends simply as C. K., lived and worked during one of history's greatest intercivilizational encounters: that between China and the West. I am using the term *intercivilizational encounter* in the strict sense the sociologist Benjamin Nelson uses it:

Sociology is at a turning point in respect to the horizons it is obliged to confront and the perspectives and methods it is obliged to adopt in order to make sense of the perplexing and tumultuous sociocultural processes of our time. We dare no longer suppose that these processes can effectively be gotten at by confining ourselves to settings which are local, parochial, or instancial. . . . We are obliged to see that many of the most important phenomena of processes and productions of our time are occurring across the world, and they are occurring most intensely in those levels and those settings which have been least systematically studied by sociologists or anthropologists. I refer to the *societal level*, the *civilizational level*, and the *intercivilizational settings and encounters*. (Huff 1981)

Indeed, Yang's life was shaped by the encounter between China and the emerging modern world in the twentieth century, and his sociology and his institution building contributed in important ways to advancing this encounter from confrontation to understanding. This fact places Yang's sociological work at the center of change in the discipline of sociology.

Sociology was born in the West in the mid-nineteenth century, and by the turn of the twentieth century its basic concepts had been formulated. In the last century it focused heavily on the study of Western national societies. Today, it is obliged, as Benjamin Nelson said, to become a social science of global scope. Sociologists must work from a global frame of reference, and their studies must create knowledge linking the world's civilizations. Yang was a pioneer in this effort.

He was born in Canton, the city now known as Guangzhou in 1911, a year of revolution. The Manchu dynasty fell, the Chinese Republic was proclaimed, and Sun Yat-sen was elected president. China began to leave its feudal past behind. Yang was born into a traditional and patrician household of considerable wealth. His father owned the wholesale fish market of Canton, as well as extensive real estate and farm land. As the son of a wealthy and traditional family he was tutored at home in Confucian learning, but he reached out for more education. He decided to enter Yenching University, a move his father, who had hoped his son would follow him in the family business, strongly opposed (Schluchter 1983).

Young Yang, we are told, was a rebellious youth. He had seen the arrogance of British colonialists and the deprivations of poverty in China. He saw indentured laborers marching in chains and once witnessed a British gunboat fire on a crowd. The experiences of his youth made lasting impressions on him, and though later he transcended them, he remained firmly committed throughout his life to the idea of China and its place in the world.

While at Yenching University he was much impressed by the visit of the sociologist Robert Ezra Park. Park represented a sociological generation that had learned from the classical masters. He was a student of Georg Simmel, the great German sociologist and contemporary of Max Weber. There are reasons to believe that Park was a powerful influence in Yang's career choice and his decision to come to America. It is important to note that Yang lived only one generation of scholars away from the founding generation that created the framework of sociological theory.

Yang completed his bachelor of arts degree in sociology at Yenching University in 1932 and his master's two years later, in 1934. While at Yenching, he

and China's other great sociologist, Fei Xiao Tong, studied and lived together, forming a life-long friendship. Yang came to the United States the year he graduated. Soon thereafter Japan attacked China, marking the beginning of many years of war in China, Asia, and, later, the rest of the world. In 1939, the year World War II began in Europe, Yang completed his doctorate in sociology at the University of Michigan. And on December 10 of the same year he married Louise Chin, who became his companion for life. They had two sons, Wallace and Wesley Yang. He and his family stayed in the United States until 1948.

He moved his family to New York to become the editor of the *Chinese Journal* in New York City. His choice of this assignment reflected not only his dedication to serving his people but also, perhaps, the influence of Robert E. Park, who began his own graduate studies after working as a reporter for eleven years. Yang was an adventurous journalist, promoting the interests of the Chinese community in New York and, especially, campaigning against crime that was victimizing this community. Several times he was threatened by criminals he exposed. He began his academic career as an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Washington in Seattle, where he taught from 1944 until 1948.

He was asked to join the faculty of Lingnan University in Canton in 1948, and he served as an associate professor and head of the sociology department. It was from that vantage point that he witnessed the early phase of China's transition to communism. True to his commitments to sociology, he chronicled the changes occurring in the early phase of the revolution, and it was during this time that he collected the material for several important books. Doing field-work during the revolution was no doubt courageous. It may well have been motivated by his sociological conviction that no significant change could come to China without revolution, a conclusion Weber himself had reached long before. His work may also have been inspired by another influential figure in his early academic life: the anthropologist Robert Redfield (son-in-law of Robert E. Park).

Sociology was under some suspicion by the early 1950s in China, and in 1951 he and his family returned to the United States, where he became a research associate at the Center for International Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and in 1952 at Harvard.

Yang moved to Pittsburgh in 1953 to serve as associate professor of sociology at the University of Pittsburgh and became a full professor in 1958. He wrote prolifically during the 1950s and 1960s, and his books *A Chinese Village in Early Communist Transition*, *The Chinese Family in the Communist Revolution*, and *Religion in Chinese Society* appeared during that period.

Yearly during the 1960s Yang visited what he termed “the outer fringe of the Asia mainland, namely Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan.” “I noted the woefully backward state of the field of sociology in Hong Kong,” he wrote at the time, “and I started to help a local college in setting up field investigation centers as a first step to direct their attention to examining indigenous social facts in the light of sociological knowledge that they were studying from books, mainly Western sociology books with their theoretical base in the Western civilization, particularly North American civilization, which holds wide discrepancies from facts of other societies such as Hong Kong.” (The “local college” mentioned here was Chung Chi College, now part of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.)¹

Yang was also a student of American society even though most of his writing centered on China. He was aware of the “enormity of America’s industrial might,” as he called it, and that Pittsburgh was right in the center of its industrial capitalism. In the 1960s Pittsburgh’s riverbanks were lined with steel mills, and the night sky glowed red from the fires of their furnaces; it was the classic symbol as well as reality of heavy industry.

Yang took a leave of absence from the University of Pittsburgh in 1964 to join the faculty of the Social Research Center at the University of Hawaii. It was here he began plans for an ambitious program of intellectual cooperation between China, Japan, and the United States, linking social science colleagues at the University of Hawaii and the University of Pittsburgh with leading scholars in Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

In late 1965 the founding vice chancellor of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, C. M. Li, called Yang to enlist his help in developing the sociology program at the then fledgling university. Yang asked me to be his partner in this venture, and in January 1966 we traveled to Hong Kong to meet our colleagues in the sociology department.

Charles H. Peake, then vice chancellor for academic disciplines at the University of Pittsburgh, readily understood the benefits of partnering with the Chinese University of Hong Kong and specifically with C. M. Li. He supported the establishment of a formal program of cooperation between the two universities. Yang spent much effort in designing the cooperation program and managed much of it himself. These years were Yang’s most creative period in building the academic bridges linking scholars across the Pacific.

A critical event in the emerging partnership was a travel seminar to Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong that Yang organized in February 1967 and that Peake and I participated in. It deepened Peake’s and my understanding of Asia and his commitment to the international studies program.

In 1968 the University of Pittsburgh's University Center for International Studies (UCIS) was founded; it was designed to be the central, integrative framework for all the international programs and centers of the university. Yang was the leading advisor in matters Chinese to the leadership of UCIS and of the university. UCIS and the department of sociology were the institutional anchors of the interuniversity linkage between the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the University of Pittsburgh, but the university's chancellor, Wesley W. Posvar, took a direct and personal interest in this program as well. The Lingnan board of trustees and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund decided to help the Pittsburgh–Hong Kong partnership. In subsequent years, many young scholars from the Chinese University of Hong Kong came to the University of Pittsburgh for their graduate education, and many Pittsburgh faculty served in Hong Kong. In fact, today several of Hong Kong's universities have University of Pittsburgh alumni among their top leadership, in part due to this program.

Yang returned to Pittsburgh from Hawaii in 1968 and served as professor of sociology at both Pittsburgh and Hong Kong. He actively participated in planning the future of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and in planning the international profile of the University of Pittsburgh. In 1971 Yang was among the first social scientists from America to be invited to visit the People's Republic of China, a turning point both for Yang and for Chinese-American relations. Reflecting in 1972 on his ambitious plans for research on China, he wrote:

All the foregoing efforts seemed to come to a halt when I unexpectedly received the invitation from Peking to visit China in October 1971. It seems to be a project that has priority and urgency over all the rest of the things I have been doing. I made my China trip in October–November 1971. The consequences were anything but expected: innumerable requests for speaking, for communication in the mass media, for consultations, and for publications by publishers. For the period between the end of November and the present, I hardly could keep my feet on my home base in Pittsburgh, with developments in the future still to be conjectured. But there is little doubt of the significance of whatever effort I can make to present the realistic China as it exists under the Communist rule to the American public, and to the students in 1,000 classes (John Lindbeck's figure) carrying on Chinese studies in the country. To formulate and to convey an accurate image of China with its massive population, extensive territory, and highly strategic political significance in the present era has overriding significance beyond many of the projects that have occupied my attention up to now.²

Yang was appointed Distinguished Service Professor of Sociology by the University of Pittsburgh in 1972, and in that year he made a second visit to the People's Republic of China. In 1974 the Chinese University of Hong Kong awarded him an honorary doctorate. In 1979 Professor Fei Xiaotong invited Yang, Wesley Posvar, Jiri Nehnevajsa, and me to Beijing to deliver the first lectures on American sociology; these were the first such lectures since the Chinese government had closed down professional sociology in 1952.³ The lectures focused on applications of sociology and the field's usefulness in modernization. The time was a turning point in China. The Cultural Revolution had come to its end with the arrest of the "Gang of Four." Deng Xiaoping, who had become China's leader, decided to open China to at least part of the world. Our lectures were an element in this opening. In this context, Vice Premier Yao Yi-lin officially invited our group, led by Fei Xiaotong and C. K. Yang. He endorsed the project of reestablishing sociology in China's universities, stating on Chinese national television that China's modernization effort needed professionals educated in the discipline of objective recording and analyzing facts and that for this reason sociological training was important. A period of engaged institution building followed for Yang. He retired from the University of Pittsburgh in 1981 and became Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus. He died on January 10, 1999.

C. K. Yang's Sociology

A Global and Comparative Perspective

Yang traveled the world, and his travels were part of his sociological self-education. He traveled through all of China and Mongolia and made two field trips to the People's Republic of China in the early 1970s. He visited many other countries in Asia as well: Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Burma, India, Iran, and Lebanon. In Europe he traveled in Greece, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Holland, England, France, Spain, Portugal, and the former Soviet Union. For him, sociology was a world enterprise, albeit a woefully incomplete work in progress. He read widely and engaged other sociologists on a range of issues. But the study of China and the building of an authentic Chinese sociology were the center of his intellectual commitments.

Building on the Sociological Traditions

Yang joined the main traditions of sociological theory: he built on the foundations laid by Max Weber and his conception of sociology as the science of social action. He carefully read Weber's works in pursuit of the answer to why economic rationality, modern capitalism, had originated in the West. Yang's study of Weber's work on China was a fundamental component in the development of his sociological thinking. In Yang's introduction to Hans Gerth's translation of Weber's *The Religion of China* (Weber 1964) he stressed the significance of Weber's insistence on understanding the "dynamic disposition of a religion toward the socioeconomic order" (p. xliii). He agreed with Weber's conclusion that significant change could not come to China without a revolution.

Yang respected the work of Talcott Parsons and drew on his systematic study of the theory of action, which built on Weber, of course. He also used Parsons's general idea of the "social system" as a guiding principle to understanding the dynamic interconnectedness of institutions, groups, and their cultures. It served as a broad framework for Yang's monumental study of religion in Chinese society, as did the carefully selected "pattern variables" of *diffuseness* and *specificity* that helped him in structuring the work. Although Parsons wrote an insightful foreword to Yang's book *The Chinese Family in the Communist Revolution* (Yang 1959), Yang was not a "Parsonian." He developed his main vision of sociology from the work of what came to be known as the Chicago school of human ecology, community studies, and studies of relations among groups. Again, the perspectives of Robert E. Park and Robert Redfield came into play, as well as the heritage of Weber. His own background as a well-grounded scholar in the Chinese tradition was influential as well. In fact, he mastered two high traditions of scholarship: the ancient traditions of China and the young tradition of sociology.

Yang was challenged by Weber's interpretation of religion in China. Weber focused on Confucianism and Taoism, treating them as major cultural religions. Yang, however, revised this image in his celebrated book *Religion in Chinese Society* (Yang 1961). His analysis was the first to go beyond the study of specific religious doctrines, describing instead religious activity throughout Chinese society. He used Parsons's *pattern variables of specificity versus diffuseness* as the conceptual framework, which allowed him to study *specific* religious institutions separate from the *diffuse* religion that pervaded society. The focus of Western scholars, seeking analogies to the well-delimited Christian-specific

institutions of the church and clergy, had overlooked the significance of diffuse religion in China. He was able to show that religion in its diffuse form permeated Chinese society. This work enabled him to contribute to the ongoing debate about Weber's explanation for China's long history of stagnation.

A scholarly consensus has emerged on at least a few points in this debate. Confucianism and Taoism as such did not exhaust the spectrum of Chinese religion, as Yang showed. Weber's belief that China did not advance in the process of rationalization because of the persistence of magical thinking—viewing the world as a *Zaubergarten* (magic garden)—was somewhat of an exaggeration. In fact, the development potential of Chinese intellectual accomplishments had been seriously underestimated.⁴ However, although China was, for a long period in history, technologically ahead of Europe, the fact remains that China did not develop modern science in the strict sense of that modern institution.

Yang was much concerned with Weber's understanding of the role of cities in the process he calls rationalization. Weber's thesis is that the European "free cities" were unique in the world and were enclaves of freedom within the fabric of feudal domination; they were economic hubs as well as military and political powers in their own right. Yang sought to examine the actual history of Chinese cities. Subsequent work showed that there were, indeed, significant economic centers in China but not like the politically and militarily autonomous "free cities" of Europe.

Yang's Practice of Sociology

Observing Social Reality Directly

Yang insisted on observing social reality through direct, personal contact with it. He respected the skills of journalists and instilled this respect in his students. In his early work in Hong Kong and later in Pittsburgh he insisted that those doing fieldwork and community studies learn how to observe and record social facts. He was passionate about grasping social reality "live," much in the spirit of Robert E. Park and Robert Redfield, whom he admired. He was a careful investigator, always looking for quantifiable data in addition to his qualitative understanding, and his vivid and accurate village studies reflect his exceptional ability to observe and analyze.

Making Sociology Useful

Another principle of his sociology was that it be made useful. He discovered that community studies, studies of demographic facts, could be of great practical use locally. For instance, in Pittsburgh he advised city planners and made recommendations about planned roads and tunnels that would be obsolete before they were even begun. He wanted sociology to be useful in Hong Kong and China as well. His Kwun Tong study was a project dear to his heart and useful for Hong Kong. The study investigated how the many immigrants with peasant background would adapt to the very different, emerging urban social reality. The development of this industrial satellite of Hong Kong fascinated him. Similarly, he immersed himself in the planning of the study of “hawkers,” as the street vendors in Hong Kong were called. Hong Kong’s government tried to persuade the “hawkers” to move into neat marketing buildings. But to the annoyance of the government, they did not leave their street marketing. Different policies would have to be created. It was this spirit of applied sociology that informed his efforts to rebuild sociology and social anthropology in China beginning in 1979. He did see sociology as essential to China’s path of modernization.

Correcting the West’s View of China

Early on, Yang saw that Western sociologists’ view of China was inaccurate and needed to be corrected. His first publication in English, *A North China Local Market Economy* (Yang 1944), was a brief but path-breaking work. In his foreword Herbert Blumer wrote, “The study fills a significant gap in our knowledge of native Chinese economy and adds to our knowledge of Chinese rural life. . . . Little has been known of local trade and its institutionalization in the form of the ‘periodic’ market. . . . From the meticulous accounts given by Dr. Yang of the kinds and quantities of goods sold in the market one can see the limited economic world of the people and can perceive the confines placed on their structure of living.” This excerpt from *A North China Local Market Economy* clearly illustrates Yang’s style as a sociologist:

A periodic market is composed of a group of sellers and buyers meeting in a fixed place and at regular time intervals. The place may be a village or a town. The length of the time interval differs with local conditions. . . . Outside of the market date, a market village or town is usually quiet and peaceful. . . . There may be several stores

on the street corners, or even scores of stores lining its main street, but business is exceedingly slow. The doors of some of them are half closed or even entirely closed. Streets are deserted save for a few sauntering loiterers. The barking of the dogs and the crowing of the chickens, together with the occasional rumbling of a passing cart and the shouting of the driver to the animals, break the silence now and then. The scene is cool and calm, and life is slow paced. Such is the general appearance of the town or village and the narrow sphere of its social and economic services to the surrounding territory. . . . But on the day when the market meets it is like the dead come to life. Shortly after dawn breaks over the horizon, farmers, craftsmen, and professional traders, each taking their vendible articles in hand, on back, on packing animals, in wheelbarrows, on carts, begin to stream in from roads, from paths, from all highways and by-ways that lead to the market site. . . . Meanwhile, buyers also start to pour in from all directions. Approaching noon, both sellers and buyers are collected in great multitudes. The quiet and lonely village or town is drowned in the din of high market voices, turning it into a roaring scene. The usually empty streets are packed with whirling and milling crowds. The sleepy and stoic faces of the peasants wake up and are animated with excitement in haggling and bargaining. . . . Toward late afternoon, the heat of the day is over, and the busy market is drawing to its close, until one sees only a few lonely souls wearily packing their remnants in the dusky shadows of an empty street. (Yang 1944)

Insisting on Historical Context

A fourth principle guiding Yang's work was his rule to apply a thoroughly historical perspective to his sociological investigations and reflections. This may have been rooted in his classical Chinese education and his deep familiarity with Chinese history and literature. He sensed early on, for example, the importance of markets and cities. About his study of the town of Foshan, he wrote,

In addition to the contribution [this study makes toward] understanding Chinese society, such a study holds significance for the general theoretical framework of urban sociology on a comparative basis. A well-known theme in this direction came from Max Weber, claiming that the *economic* city is peculiar to Europe alone, leading to the development of industrial civilization. Elsewhere in the world, Weber claimed, cities were only administrative centers with very limited significance in economic production. My study seeks to prove the contrary: that economic production centers have long existed as one of the many types of cities in Chinese civilization, and the explanation of the absence of industrialization in the Chinese social history may not be explained by the Weberian theme.⁵

Although he did not complete this study, another imaginative foray into Chinese history did yield results. It was the study of “mass actions” in nineteenth-century China. This research program was a quantitative study of mass unrest and social movements during the late Ch’ing period (1796–1911). The data were extracted from the “Veritable Records” of the Ch’ing emperors and yielded information about more than six thousand incidents, primarily riots and battles of rebellion; it yielded a picture of social movements and unrest that brought about increasingly drastic changes in Chinese society. Yang appears to have written only one paper on this work (Yang 1975). Here is how he summarized the study’s main (preliminary) findings:

In all major phases of analysis the data clearly converge on the political institution as the primary sector which failed to maintain the traditional social order and thus bred social unrest. The predominance of suppressive measures and the prominence of government military success had only questionable effectiveness in stabilizing the traditional socio-political order. Suppression and victories in one decade did not forestall the further rise of mass action incidents in the next decade. . . . The ineffectiveness of suppression as a means to quell unrest is also emphasized by the internal deterioration of the ruling class of late Ch’ing China. It is important to note from the . . . statistical information that the ruling class and its supporting elements supplied the bulk of leadership for incidents of social unrest. In this sense, government suppressive actions may well be viewed as an internal strife or civil war among the rulers and their henchmen. (Yang 1975, 208)

Sociology for Modernization

When in 1979 Yang accepted the invitation of Professor Fei Xiao Tong of the Chinese Academy of Social Science to help reintroduce the disciplines of sociology and social anthropology to China, a decisive moment had occurred in Chinese modernization. Yang enlisted me and our colleague Jiri Nehnevajsa to devise a program to assist in Fei’s assignment. We decided to offer a series of overview lectures at the Chinese Academy of Social Science on the role of sociology and social research in the United States. I had done much work on social systems for knowledge creation and use, and Jiri Nehnevajsa was a well-established sociological survey researcher with expertise in technology assessments and planning for change. We called the program “The Sociology for

Modernization” rather than “sociology of modernization,” which we saw as a descriptive enterprise.

The many strands of Yang’s sociological vision came together in this, his last major project, which we and many others helped him carry out. And it was an undertaking of genuine service. Sociology for the modernization of China, while built on the experience of sociology in the West, would become an endogenous enterprise in China and would help it master the difficulties of the social transformation that needed to be addressed.

Much has changed in China, in the world, and in sociology since that time twenty-five years ago. There is a new phase of modernization in progress now, a phase of modernity called by some “reflexive modernization” or “phase II modernization.” It is characterized by global interconnections, rapid technological and economic changes, and the emergence of entirely new modes of communication and, indeed, of institutions. This phase of modernity has altered the web of social relations, the role of the nation-state, and the modalities of social identities. Sociology is not only affected by but also a part of these changes. There is now a strong sociological profession in China. It plays a role in the challenges China is facing today. And it plays a role in the world. For China, as for other parts of the world, the rapid changes brought on by globalization pose challenges that sociology for modernization can help to deal with. I believe that the vision C. K. Yang had for sociology in China can also serve as a guide for its future.

Building Bridges Between East and West

China was Yang’s birthplace and his cultural home, yet the United States had accepted him, respected him, and granted him citizenship. He was a Chinese patriot, but he was also an American patriot. Being a person of dual but sincere loyalty is a difficult feat, but he accomplished it. He saw both cultures with clear eyes and understood intimately how each viewed itself and the world. His sense of history was keen, and his commitment to building bridges between China and the United States never wavered.

Yang’s effort to rebuild sociology in Hong Kong and later in China required not only telling China’s story of change to America but also creating opportunities for Chinese scholars and students to study sociology. It also required finding ways to adapt sociology to the Chinese reality, and he created programs

both at the University of Pittsburgh and at the Chinese University of Hong Kong for this purpose. Many of Yang's Chinese graduate students are now significant figures in Chinese sociology. And many of his American graduate students are significant figures in Chinese studies and international education in the United States.

Yang's Legacy as an Institution Builder

Yang knew institutions and understood their dynamics, and he used this knowledge to enhance the institutions he served. The high profile the University of Pittsburgh enjoys today in international scholarship owes much to his pioneering work in the 1960s and 1970s. He recognized early in the development of the Chinese University of Hong Kong that bringing the initial three colleges together to create one university would be a crucial step in the university's success, and as a senior advisor in all matters of sociology, he pressed for the realization of the central university approach.

Yang's institutional thinking was much concerned with time and demographics. He knew that rebuilding an academic discipline would take time and that even highly gifted graduate students would need years to become recognized scholars and professors in their own right. He understood the importance of budgets and the commitment of university leaders, without which nothing would flourish. So he stayed with the overall project of the Chinese University of Hong Kong for as long as he could, enjoying the immense satisfaction of seeing it evolve into one of the world's leading research universities.