

Contemporary Debate on the Communication of Public Sociology in China

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Abstract

Public sociology, emphasises expanding the disciplinary boundaries of sociology and bringing sociology into a conversation with public or non-academic audiences. It strives to make sociological knowledge understandable and relevant to a wider audience, moving beyond specialized academic language. Since the notion of public sociology was proposed by British sociologist Michael Burawoy in 2004, it has triggered a heated debate around the world. In China, aiming at the issue of the communication of public sociology, many scholars participate in discussions, and their standpoints mainly include supportive, oppositional, and neutral standpoints. This study analyzes their viewpoints respectively and provides certain interpretations on the basis of the development of Chinese sociology. Through analyzing the contemporary debate around local communication of public sociology, this study expects to provide a reference for its communication or spreading in China without losing the considerations of local context and corresponding challenges, thereby advancing the development and progress of society in the future.

Keywords: China, communication, contemporary debate, Michael Burawoy, public sociology

1. Introduction

The discipline of sociology originated in Western Europe in the mid-19th century, then it was introduced in China between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century (Li, 2019). Unfortunately, in mainland China, it was forbidden for nearly 30 years due to historical reasons: “it was officially banned from classroom instruction and scholarly research shortly after the 1949 Communist revolution that founded the PRC” (Bian & Zhang, 2008: 21). After a near 30-year silence, until Chinese Reform and Openness in 1978, sociology began to reconstruct in mainland China and some Western sociological works had a chance to enter in China. The “reestablishment of the Chinese Sociological Association in March 1979 marks the rebirth of sociology in China”, and before this, “China didn’t have any real sociologists”, even Chinese best-known sociologist Fei Xiaotong, also found that he is “unqualified to teach the subject anymore” because he “had been out of touch with sociology for more than 20 years” (Bian & Zhang, 2008: 21).

Apparently, the starting and development of sociology in China is far behind that of some Western countries; meanwhile, to a certain degree, it has also progressed in the 21st century. This is no exception for the spreading of public sociology in China. With the concept of public sociology having been introduced in China by Shan Tiping in 2006, it has aroused heated discussions among relevant Chinese scholars, especially since his series of speeches in China (e.g., 2006 in Beijing, 2007 in Shanghai, 2005 and 2017 in Hong Kong). Some of them agree with this point of view and believe it is an irresistible trend, especially taking them root deeply into complex Chinese social reality. Some hold the opposite opinion, they criticized that public sociology is detrimental to sociology as well as regarding the huge difficulty of Chinese actuality. Some people found that it was an open-ended question and maintained a neutral standpoint. They utilized some sociological theories or thoughts from famous sociologists (e.g., Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx) for their arguments.

From the global scope, there actually exists a situation that the “exclusion” or “minimization of the theoretical knowledge and methodological contributions of important sociologists engaged with publics, doing sociology, and working outside the canon” (Abraham, 2022). From the viewpoint of this study, publicity has always been the goal for sociology to pursue, despite the challenges China confront is apparent as well. Meanwhile, it cannot be neglected that despite contemporary China receiving a certain baptism of sociological knowledge, the impact of China’s national conditions should be considered as well. Actually, “the public use and application of sociological ideas, methods, and findings have always been part of the discipline of sociology”, however, “the perceived value of public sociology to the discipline has varied given the context and geographic location” (Nichols, 2017: 313-314) and “dependent on the character of the political field and its relation to the university” (Burawoy, 2014: 149). Regarding China, its political field is “far more treacherous”, and its universities are “far from being a safe haven” (Burawoy, 2014: 149). Bian and Zhang (2008: 25) also mentioned that “China’s public space has effectively been under the control of a Communist party-state”, even though there are “a few influential sociologists” who “have identified and analyzed various social and political problems in the media”. In fact, in China, public sociology starting exert its role in creating “environment” movements around 2008 (Bian & Zhang, 2008: 25). Viewing these, this study aims to provide insights through the lens of the academic discussion about the communication of public sociology in China based on Chinese context, and offer certain value for domestic or broader countries’ public sociological studies and its communication as well as social development and progress.

2. Relevant Concepts

Sociology has a wide range of studies, including the micro-level of the agency or interpersonal interaction, to the macro-level of the social system or structure. Its research objects involve social stratification, social class, and social law. Burawoy (2005b) highlighted that being conscious of two questions is important: (1) Knowledge for what? This question involves the differences between instrumental knowledge (the knowledge that seek or develop means, solve problems, or unravel puzzles for a given social or disciplinary goals/problems - for finding out specific solutions) and reflexive knowledge (in contrast with instrumental knowledge, such knowledge involves the discussion, debate, or dialogue about society’s goals/objectives - for finding out what values people, as the social directions, should insist on); and (2) Knowledge for whom? This question involves the differences between the academic audience and the extra-academic audience. In view of these, he listed four-field sociology/sociological knowledge (see the following Table 1), including professional, policy, critical, and public.

Table 1. Michael Burawoy’s Four-Field Sociology/Sociological Knowledge (Source: Burawoy, 2005b & 2007a)

Knowledge Types	Audience Types	Knowledge for Whom?	
		Academic Audience	Extra-Academic Audience
Knowledge for What?	Instrumental Knowledge	Professional	Policy
	Reflexive Knowledge	Critical	Public

Professional sociology/sociological knowledge, aims to promote the “pure” academic scientific research programs that mainly take place in the realm of academia (e.g., academic journals, professional associations, textbooks) and is consumed by sociological scholars or other academics (Burawoy, 2005b & 2021b). Policy sociology/sociological knowledge, offers its service to clients (e.g., corporations, governments, schools, churches) or respond to the research needs of these clients (Burawoy, 2021b). Critical sociology/sociological knowledge, calls into question the fundamental assumptions of consecrated professional knowledge (Burawoy, 2021b), and critical sociologists utilizes “their academic positions to criticize the state, markets, or other institutions that are often not questioned or problematized as part of the status quo” (Nichols, 2017: 314). Public sociology/sociological knowledge, contrasted against professional sociology, is a more public, applied, or clinical sociology that primarily happens outside of the academy and is consumed by non-sociologists (Burawoy, 2005b).

For public sociology, it is closely related to civil society (Hanafi, 2022; Shan, 2006), which can be regarded as the distinctive object domain of sociology (Holmwood, 2007). It, as an orientation toward the sociological practice, engages the public beyond the academy or brings sociological findings to audiences outside of academia (extra-academic audiences) in conversation about matters of political and moral concern (Burawoy, 2005b). Therefore, it has also been referred to more specifically as an approach sociologists use to participate in

public discussions about social issues as “public intellectuals” (Burawoy, 2005b). In Burawoy’s view, public sociology is and has always been a significant component of the subject. It looks for as its audience not merely other sociologists, but broader communities of discourse (Burawoy & Van Antwerpen, 2001). Burawoy (2004) emphasized that it is for both sociologists and the public, and for contributing to the knowledge of society, which tries to reorient the discussion that people have among themselves and the discipline. It aims to bring sociology to the public beyond the academy, advancing the mutual conversation about issues that influence society, and placing the values that persist under a microscope. Its central aim is “to correct - that is, to make better, social conditions for the betterment of humanity” (Schneider & Hanemaayer, 2014: 5). The points public sociology considers involve debate over social movements, and civil society (Morton et al., 2012). It is oriented toward primary problems at present, especially attempts to address them with the means of social science, and in a manner often informed through historical and comparative angles.

Burawoy (2005b) also classified two types of public sociology: (1) “Traditional public sociology”: traditional public sociologists make one-way explanations to the public based on their own values and ethical considerations; they write for a broader audience, but the public is largely passive and not actively involved in the research process; (2) “Organic public sociology”: organic public sociologists directly communicate with relevant associations or engage with communities; they actively engage with and collaborate with specific publics, such as social movements, to address issues relevant to those groups. In Burawoy’s (2005b) point of view, sociologists and/or relevant educators, they should not just critically offer thorough explanations of social phenomena (that is, following “traditional public sociology”), and also actively create the public to which the sociological findings pertain (that is, insisting “organic public sociology”).

For the reason for popularizing public sociology, Burawoy (2005b: 6) mentioned the phenomenon that “sociology and the world have moved in opposite directions: sociology has moved left and the world has moved right”. Burawoy (2004) has lamented the professional narrowness of sociology, its apparent evacuation of the public domain and its retreat from the public into the university (Agger, 2000; Jacoby, 1987; Seidman, 1994). The phenomenon that gradual narrowing of concerns’ objects, which can be exemplified by the specialized divisions of labour and the professionalization of the subject with the increasing growth of universities (Holmwood, 2007). This creates an aspiration that sociology should engage the world, which, even though, seems like a paradoxical thesis in an ever more difficult time. To some extent, the relationship between citizenship and social science necessarily puts a limit on sociological requirements of knowledge in terms of both what can be claimed and its legitimacy or rationality. However, it would not damage sociology as an expert practice that generates distinctive and important forms of knowledge about the social world (Holmwood, 2007). The profession should do more of what it has started to do, including conveying the civil truths people need to hear. Sociologists should work in and for the public.

3. Method

The method this study mainly used is literature analysis method. Viewing that the topic of this study focuses on status quo of the debate around the communication of public sociology in China, it is suitable and necessary to acquire relevant concepts, arguments or statements from existing literature, including academic journal articles, books, degree theses, and so on.

4. Contemporary Debate on the Communication of Public Sociology in China

There is “vigorous debate about the role and value of public sociology” (Rank, 2017: 74), which is no exception in China since Burawoy’s renewed ideal of public sociology was proposed in 2004 (Burawoy, 2005a). Around the issue of the communication of public sociology in China, some Chinese scholars hold a supportive standpoint, while some insist on an oppositional standpoint, and some have a neutral standpoint.

4.1 Supportive Standpoint

Many Chinese scholars claim that public engagement should be regarded as the major subject matter of sociology. Wang (2013: 6) once argued that “most domestic scholars affirm the close relationship between public sociology and the public”, and they “do not deny the inherent public nature of public sociology”.

Some scholars approve of the communication of public sociology in China, viewing that building and defending civil society can lead to the success of sociology, meanwhile, rich the functions of sociologists. In their points of view, sociology shifts from the “aristocratic” professional circle to civilians and displays its “publicity”, which is the future direction of sociology in China. Li (2023) emphasized that such “people-orientedness” can “lead the sociological discourse system to work together” (18), “breaking down the boundaries of existing narrowly defined professional fields”, and “promoting the integration and interconnection of various branches within the

disciplinary system” in response to social development and change (20). Besides, in these supporters’ views, in this communication process of sociological knowledge, Chinese sociologists could transform from professional intellectuals to both professional and public intellectuals. For social scholars themselves, they are also responsible for continually turning academic discussions into public issues. As Chen (2019b: 25) pointed out that “sociologists are not just club members within academia, they are also citizens with social responsibilities”. In the field of public sociology, they have a responsibility to participate in public dialogue so that the social communities people live in can exist and develop in a better way (Bo, 2010; Mills, 2000; Wang, 2013).

According to such scholars’ viewpoints, the academic evaluation mechanism ensures the technicality of sociology, whereas there is little mechanism for its publicness, which needs to be improved in the construction of sociology as a discipline. Contact with the public not only imparts added relevance to the sociologists’ works, but also produces new thoughts for further research. Therefore, it is indispensable and significant to spread public sociology in current Chinese society. It will advance the development of other branches of sociology, or even other subjects. In fact, the four kinds of sociology are complementary and interdependent in an ideal way. Although there is a certain antagonistic relationship between them, each of them needs based on the development of the other. If merely insisting or giving up any one of them, that may put this subject into a trap. Their development, respectively and collectively, would facilitate the stability of economics or politics to a certain degree.

Some scholars agreed with the communication of public sociology in China, combining with the considerations of the demands of Chinese reality related to subject development and social practice (Zhou, 2023) in the local background. For example, Wen (2008: 232-233) alleged that from a realistic level, the Chinese market compressed three types of commercialization (commercialization of labour, currency, and land/natural environment) from around 1978 to 2008, which has greatly pressed the “social” space; therefore, for such a “weak society” that encounters severe challenges in 2000s, it is strongly urgent to call for public sociology and construct a civil society for future development rather than being “anti-public”. It is necessary to achieve “a sinicized sociology” (Zhang, 2018: 17) or “a sociology with Chinese characteristics” (Chen, 2019a: 95; Chen, 2024: 17; Hong, 2018: 16; Li, 2023: 20; Zhao & Zhao, 2008: 13). It is significant to develop a Chinese sociology that both adhere to the “scientific nature” of seeking truth from facts and the “humanistic nature” of the values advocated by the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind, based on Chinese own social and historical context (Chen, 2024: 17).

Referring to the current situation of public sociology in China, since the Reform and Openness when Chinese leaders gradually realized the significance of social science in Chinese modernization, many Chinese sociologists have participated in various fields. However, Chinese sociology has not been widely brought into public life. It mainly belongs to the academic domain and there is a lack of sociality in contemporary society, which highlights the importance of public sociology. Viewing that public sociology is a complicated task in China, many scholars hold the view that it is essential for Chinese public sociologists to work harder to come out of their ivory towers (a field-in-itself) and enter the public domain (a field-for-itself) that mentioned by Burawoy (2009), as well as combining foreign experiences with local situations. As Burawoy (2007b) argued, sociology is not only a science but also a moral and political power; thus, it is necessary to intervene in social issues, getting rid of abstract conceptions and making sociologists’ discourse more life-oriented, which is a wise choice for contemporary China. Public sociology brought public discussion into academia (Cheng, 2010; Wu, 2012), which gave sociology a public orientation including public crisis management (Chen & He, 2009; Zhang, 2006). Public sociology also provides valuable insights into government governance and social development, through taking public/citizen participation as a central position, and directing interaction between the government and the public (Wang, 2013). Publicity is a necessary dimension and the legal basis of sociology, no matter what type of society. It has been a long-term practice devoted to exploring the possible problems of social order, trying to solve the injustices and drawing a blueprint for social development and progress. This moral concern tradition of sociology, is an important condition of its survival and the spiritual wealth on which the whole society depends.

From these supporters’ views, the communication and popularity of sociology will also enable more people to access this field and pay attention to it, which is also beneficial to understanding themselves and their society. People have the right to evaluate social problems and communicate with sociologists. If sociology can alleviate social problems through mutual conversation, taking the issues of labour problems (e.g., salaries) as an example, then more people might care about such phenomena within society, as well as the sense of well-being of labourers might be advanced. People thus are more willing to accept the benefits that public sociology brings, and spontaneously focus on the whole society. Sociology can exert the leading role in building a democratic public sphere and sociologists also need to begin to make the truth known to the public. If so, then their

contributions to public life will grow and the world will in time hurt less. Contrarily, sociology will slip silently off the screen of public regard. By considering this, the profession should intend to serve the public to keep sociology even other social sciences and human sciences from losing their essential place.

4.2 Oppositional Standpoint

Meanwhile, there are some oppositional voices towards public sociology.

Some discussions in the professional academy are about the “fears” that such work of public sociology will “result in a loss of the scientific approach” (Nichols, 2017: 316). For example, Chinese scholar Li Junpeng (2011) pointed out the apparent dangers of public sociology because it would play a negative role in academic sociology. Li (2011) claimed that although sociology has openness and other advantages, sociological theories and works should be more rigorous and professional. In his views, sociology needs to root itself in professional fields and try to avoid entering the public vision. Li (2011) emphasized that one problem of public sociology is that it uses facts rather than theory to deal with the future, but only theory can deal with this. From his viewpoint, to a certain degree, the popularization of public sociology seems to leave reality out of consideration, as well as putting sociology in a dangerous situation at the expense of its technicality and speciality.

Besides, the realization of public sociology in China may be difficult because it greatly depends on the fact that the overall national institutional environment or development prospects (Li, 2011). For this point, Cheng (2010: 131) also mentioned the development of public sociology in China inevitably faces a more complex and difficult situation than in other countries, because considering the truth that sociology in China was only revived and rebuilt after the reform and opening up policy, and basic academic norms and professional standards have yet not improved as developed countries. In fact, in China, public sociology even sociology, “still has a long way to go” (Zhao & Zhao, 2008: 13).

In such opponents’ views, the communication of public sociology will threaten the profession of sociology or challenge the scientific nature of sociology, and have less significance in the Chinese environment. When sociologists underline public sociology, their thoughts may inevitably not be consistent with or conflict with the inherent tradition and norms of sociology. From such opponents’ views, the academic profession is always at the expense of the public, which enables sociologists to avoid outside interference while doing research. They thought that sociology, as a subject that takes positivism as guidelines and carries out the natural science methods in social research, contains the doctrine of value neutrality and various specifications. To some extent, these norms determine the distance between the sociologists as experts and the public society. For the public, it is impossible to have the same knowledge as sociologists, or to pursue academic knowledge to the same level, which inevitably shows a degree of absence of this subject in the public. For public sociologists, albeit they are trying to find an integration scheme in a chaotic world, the public concern and moral responsibility can merely be deemed as a sort of latent function.

4.3 Neutral Standpoint

Apart from that, a kind of neutral standpoint from China also exists.

Chinese scholars who hold neutral standpoints neither fall for nor against the communication of public sociology in China. From their thoughts, it seems not a proper thing to hold strong values from the angle of sociology. Such sociological scholars do not try to recommend any particular view as good or bad, equal or unjust. Some Chinese experts insist that they can try to inform people of the facts instead of unnecessarily influencing them through certain thoughts with a strong tendency. Taking Wang Xiaobin as a representative, he holds the view that public sociology is just open-ended questions and suggests that it is important to make people aware of various possibilities rather than merely going in one direction. Wang (2009) believes that public sociology exerts little change in current society, whether it is popularized widely or not, then it is a proper choice to maintain the status quo. This is not only because the boundaries between professional sociology and public society become blurred with the development of the Internet, but also in view of the present national development.

In such scholars’ views, there is no need to explicitly divide the boundaries between academics and the public, such as freshmen in sociology, and sociological amateurs in civil society organizations. In other words, there are public components in a university, similarly, there are professional groups within the public domain. As the Internet has developed, people have the opportunity to acquire or create a lot of information, then it is possible for any member of the public to learn sociological knowledge if they want; therefore, it is not necessary to firmly propagate the concept of public sociology. Certainly, it is also acceptable if someone propagates public sociology in China. Moreover, considering the current conditions, there is “still a long way” for China to go (Zhao & Zhao, 2008: 13), particularly in view of the degree of national development. In reality, when a society develops to a

certain extent, like many developed countries, its superstructure improves. As a matter of fact, the universal awareness of public sociology depends on the time, whether for experts or the general public, especially in this particular region. Meanwhile, from these scholars' thoughts, it is unnecessary to strongly criticize public sociology. One important thing is that people can keep up with current situations and things will gradually change with their development. Chen and He (2009) also mentioned that when accepting the baptism of sociological knowledge, it is more important to maintain our own position and consciousness, and we can critically learn and inherit the connotations of public sociology.

5. Discussion

Given the present era full of "alternative facts" and "fake news" that will pose a threat to social harmony or "social stability of countries" (Xie et al., 2021: 14), "moving sociological research into the hands of a wider audience" has taken on huge importance (Rank, 2017: 74). In fact, there is "the fore the inescapable interpenetration and interaction of the academic and the extra-academic" (Burawoy, 2021a: 18-19). It is necessary for Chinese sociology to enter the public sphere, although its development may be different from that in America. "American civil society is relatively well-developed", it occurs in the defence of the social interests of humanity when the market and its expansion threaten this society (Hu, 2012: 146); therefore, Burawoy put forward the slogan of "defending the society" (Burawoy, 2007a), which is based on the premise that there is an object to be defended, namely civil society. However, in many other countries (actually, most of the developing countries, including China), the principle of public sociology for public sociologists is actually to "produce the society" (Burawoy, 2007a), because their civil society has not yet formed. It is obvious that the development stage of public sociology is different between China and America; therefore, in China, the present mission of public sociology is to establish public society rather than defend it (Burawoy, 2007a). Regardless of this, it is important for China to carry out public sociology. Chinese sociologists should shoulder heavy responsibilities and practice in reality, including "producing a civil society" and "creating social agency" (Hu, 2012: 146). Public sociology is of great significance in satisfying the increasing spiritual demand of the general public, and advancing the cooperation between the general public (the basic power to produce civil society) and public sociologists.

For the specific measures of the communication of public sociology in China, this study supported the following two points.

Firstly, public sociologists need to focus on literary writing, particularly combining the knowledge of academic sociology and the characters of sociality in literature. Academic professionalism should be transformed into a vehicle of public discourse rather than abandoned. In fact, little sociology is in the public domain; instead, much of sociology is dreary, conservative, unenlivening, and obsessed with the method. Torras-Gómez et al. (2025: 3) also mentioned that some social theories have neglected the voices from citizens "as cocreation agents in the scientific knowledge creation process"; however, "societies need cocreated scientific knowledge to allow a wide diversity of social actors (policy-makers, organizations and citizens) to address these societal challenges". In view of this, those working sociologists who are interested in sociology as a "social text" can write something for publication that advances academic careers (Agger, 2000). In China, some of the sociological literature is merely translated from Western literature and not fully applied to national conditions or added with local reflection. This requires sociologists to constitute themselves as public and participate in social conversation, while delivering complex ideas in plain language and keeping away from "undue professionalism" in academic writing (Gans, 1989 & 2009). It is noteworthy that this is a process that demands collective effort (Hu, 2007), which signifies the mutual participation of both experts and the public. Public sociology as a mode of writing, participates in self-translation with the public in mind, and addresses crucial public issues (Agger, 2000). In this way, sociological knowledge can be shared in the public legitimacy according to more universal scientific knowledge (Holmwood, 2007).

At this point, "e-public sociology" (Fatsis, 2014) can be considered in practice as well, which is a form of public sociology that involves publishing sociological materials in online accessible spaces and subsequent interaction with publics in these spaces. Nowadays, exerting the advantages of self-media is also a proper approach for sociologists or relevant practitioners trained in social science fields to achieve a better communication of public sociology in contemporary Chinese society. Because self-media has a huge impact on people's attitudes and understanding, and such influence is a long-term subtle process of "education" or "accumulation", which unconsciously shapes people's view of reality (Xie et al., 2020: 11868). Based on the Chinese context or social environment, the sociologists or related practitioners can use social media to actively share sociological insights and engage in public discussions, for example, writing op-eds or other forms of popular press materials (Prener, 2022), establishing collaboration with community organizations through online platform, providing open online

public lectures/courses around social issues, and so on. The focused social issues in complex contextual realities include but not limited to various social inequalities that sociology discipline has sustained or overlooked (Burawoy et al., 2023), which related to exploitation, oppression, racism, democracy, crime, unemployment problems, gender-based violence, educational opportunities, social security system, or those local problems with regional characteristics like Chinese rural taxation reforms, etc. This interaction and conversation can offer the opportunity to create long-developed public sociology and long-term civil society. Engaging with diverse publics can not only help people better understand the complexities of social problems, but also lead to more informed and productive solutions about social issues.

Secondly, apart from literary acts, social practices in the form of social movements should be considered, such as cooperating with labour organizations, establishing citizen juries, participating in communities, and so on.

In the public domain, Chinese sociologists can make social endeavours with labour NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations), various media, policy-makers, and union workers, to actively reflect the spirit of public sociology. Besides, the establishment of citizen juries is also a proper choice, through which academics can convey relevant information and people can learn relevant issues and form their critical thoughts about social phenomena. The public sociologists can also work with communities to conduct research and develop solutions together, empowering those affected by social problems. Zhao and Zhao (2008: 9) also argued that apart from focusing on public issues, Chinese public sociology needs to guarantee that the voices of vulnerable/disadvantaged groups or lower-class people are not drowned out to ensure their expressions of interest and the construction of a “pluralistic society”. The groups of people Chinese sociologists can pay more attention to, such as migrants, peasants, the urban poor, left-behind children, solitary elderly people or social outcasts. It is one of the promises for the establishment of positive and long-term interaction with the visible, local and vulnerable public. It should be a fundamental presupposition for public sociology to promise the interaction between scholars and various social groups, and ensure real practices and reflection. For a socialist society, it requires more expression of diversified social discourses, thus public sociologists should deem it as a long-term project and shoulder the responsibility of the maintenance of this pluralistic society. In the meantime, Chinese public sociology cannot neglect to combine traditional public sociology and organic public sociology (Wang, 2009), and combine internationalization and localization, incorporating proper concepts or actions from developed countries and embedding them into the practice of regional development.

6. Conclusion

In general, it can be found that in terms of contemporary debate around the topic of the communication of public sociology in China, there are three standpoints, including supportive, oppositional and neutral. Meanwhile, it should be acknowledged that the debate merely happens within the scope of sociology, that is, within the professional scholars. From the perspective of this study, even though there exist considerable challenges in actuality, including the constriction of the Chinese situation and the threat to sociology’s profession, in fact, it is possible for China to make efforts in this field based on Chinese characteristics and reality, and try to catch up with some developed countries. It is a necessity to connect sociology to the world of the publics, constructing a civil society and then to think about how to defend it. Besides, this study recognized that the communication of public sociology not only demands the sociologists write academic literature in a public way, but also calls for their social practices based on the method of participatory action research.

In fact, social conditions in the 21st century are “optimal for” (Nichols, 2017: 318) or “ripe for the growth of public sociology and the influence of the work of public sociologists on society” (Nichols, 2017: 319). As our societies and connections with one another in a global context become more complex, there is a need for sociologists and other social scientists to “de-mythologize and democratize knowledge” (Light, 2005: 1650). Through making sociological knowledge more accessible, relevant and impactful in a wider world, public sociology, as a dynamic and evolving approach to sociology, is beneficial to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and public understanding and even contribute to promoting positive social change. It is necessary to disseminate or spread in China not only for the good of many and but also for a better development of Chinese society even a better, more just and equal world in the future. In the meantime, this study also does not ignore or deny the significance of the other three types of sociology, because, to a certain degree, the co-existence or collective development of the four types of sociology can contribute to constructing a healthy academic environment of sociology and a more harmonious society.

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Authors contributions

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