

SUN LIPING
Qinghua University

Societal Transition New Issues in the Field of the Sociology of Development

Abstract: Two major approaches have dominated the field of the sociology of development: theories of modernization, which focus on developed countries, and theories of development, which concentrate on Latin America, Africa, and East Asia. The social transformations in China, Russia, and the other European former socialist countries since 1989, however, have challenged both the traditional approaches of Sociology of Development with a series of new issues: how should one evaluate the various pathways to development in different countries and regions? how should one examine the state–society relationship in social development and transition? how can one deal with the social inequality in the process of development? These topics have expanded the scope of the Sociology of Development and provided an opportunity to construct new theories. I suggest that, in response to the practice conditions of ongoing socioeconomic transformation, new theories of transition, in addition to theories of modernization and theories of development, is the imperative need in the field of the sociology of development.

Keywords: societal transition; sociology of development; modernization theories; theories of transition.

The main stream sociology theories, including theories on the socioeconomic development, might have been quite mature in describing and explaining the Western society, but they failed to predict and to some extent explain the collapse of communism in the late 1980s and 1990s. The great transformation in the post-communist countries in both Europe and Asia is the invitation to us to rethink the sociology of development in the new context and to discuss the possibility of a new sociology—the sociology of transition focusing on the practice condition of social transition.

From Theories of Modernization and Theories of Development to Theories of Transition

Two major schools have dominated the sociology of development: the modernization school, which focuses on the modernization of Western countries since the early modern period; and the development school, which concentrates on social development in developing countries (especially Latin America, Africa, and some countries and regions in East Asia) since the 1960s.

Theories of Modernization

In response to a proposal of Simon Kuznets, in 1950 the Social Science Research Council formed an economic development committee, which went on to organize a series of academic activities and then, in 1952, to found the journal *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, which became very influential. A circle of like-minded academics emerged around this committee, and raised their own funds and established a number of other important journals. These academics constituted the backbone of the modernization school.

In the 1950s, modernization scholars undertook numerous empirical and theoretical studies that paved the way for the formation of systematical theories of modernization. During this period, Talcott Parsons published several books and articles that helped lay the foundation for the modernization school. Building on that foundation, M. J. Levy, a student of Parsons, published his *The Structure of Society* in 1952. And at that time, Walt W. Rostow was working on his important book, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (1960). Therefore, when American, European, and Japanese scholars gathered at Hakone in 1960 at an international conference on "Modern Japan," which was later viewed as a milestone in the evolution of the modernization school, the preparatory work for theories of modernization had by and large been accomplished.

Although some modernization scholars touched on the problems of social development in developing countries, the focus of the school, as we have noted, was on the structural changes in the Western developed countries from the early modern era. The principal theoretical arguments of the modernization school can be summarized in the following three points. First, there is an either/or dichotomous binary of "modernity" vs. "tradition," which encompasses all societies, both historical and contemporary. Societies are thus, according to given criteria, either "modern" or "traditional." Modernization is thus a process of transition from a traditional to a modern society. Second, social development and modernization are primarily decided by internal factors. Therefore, it is the internal barriers embedded in the societies of developing countries that impede their development. Modernization scholars once defined these barriers mainly as a matter of culture and values. Obviously, this view is derived from Max Weber. Third, societies tend to converge. As countries develop, they acquire more and more features of modern society along with development. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt even argued that "historically speaking, modernization is a process of transition toward Euro-American social, economic and political systems" (Eisenstadt 1966). According to this view, all modernized societies share the following characteristics: an industrial market economy, sustainable economic growth, an extensive bureaucracy, a high rate of literacy, popularization of formal education, reduction of overall inequality, increasing social mobility, a relatively low birth-rate, urbanization, decreasing influence of religion, an adaptable social structure, and a modern value system.

During the late 1950s and all through the 1960s, the modernization school was in its heyday. However, it began to encounter various criticisms in the late 1960s as scholars first attacked the either/or binary of "modernity" vs. "tradition" and then the

assumption of linear development and the “Western-centrism” embedded in theories of modernization. Although the modernization school was weakened by the onslaught, studies on modernization have not faded away. Recently, debates over modernity and post-modernity, the theory of “post-industrial society” followed by various other theories of development prefixed with “post-,” Ulrich Beck’s theory of re-modernization, and other approaches have, to varying extents, influenced the sociology of development. These new theories no longer emphasize a comparative study of developed and developing societies, but instead exclusively concentrate on the problems arising in Western developed countries at an advanced stage of modernization.

Theories of Development

As theories of modernization became discredited, theories of development, with their focus on the developing countries, became more and more influential. At first, development scholars concentrated on economic and social development in Latin America and Africa. Since the 1980s, some scholars have shifted their focus to the development experiences of East Asia, which were later conceptualized in the “East Asian model.”

Theories of development mainly consist of dependency theory, world-systems theory, and theories of comparative political economy.

Theories of modernization encountered powerful challenges from dependency theory from the mid-1960s. Dependency theory grew out of studies by Latin American scholars of the modernization of the Latin American societies. It was also sustained by scholars from other countries and regions, such as Samir Amin from Egypt and Andre Gunder Frank from Germany. In addition, a group of American radical Marxists wielded this theory to examine social modernization in developing countries and inveigh against classic theories of modernization. Dependency theory is built on two assumptions: (1) in analyzing social development, we should not discuss different societies individually, but regard them as a part of a world system; and (2) in many instances, external factors exert a greater influence on social development than do internal factors. Based on these assumptions, dependency scholars maintain that developed and developing countries, rather than developing in tandem, are actually at the same historical stage, with the former as the center and the latter as the periphery. They believe the development of developed countries and the underdevelopment of developing countries are two sides of the same coin. The latter is the precondition for the former while the former is the root of the latter. To be sure, dependency theorists recognize that some developing countries have made much progress in their development. However, that development has usually benefited the developed countries much more than the developing countries, and indeed it has often infringed on the latter’s interests. In fact, according to dependency theory, it is the development of developed countries that caused the underdevelopment of developing countries (Frank 1967; Dos Santos 1971; Amin 1976).

Immanuel Wallerstein (1974) proposed a world-systems theory as an alternative to dependency theory. Although these two theories bear a strong resemblance, there

are three major differences between them. First, “dependency” or “reliance” in dependency theory is unilateral, whereas “reliance” in world-systems theory is bidirectional. Second, the world-systems theorists construct a three-level system consisting of core states, semi-peripheral, and peripheral areas, rather than a dichotomous world of metropolises and satellite towns, or center and periphery. Third, a circulation of dominant powers is structurally unavoidable in this three-level world system. A particular core state may be replaced in its role by a semi-peripheral or peripheral country. Thus, for Wallerstein, the development of a country or region means an advantageous change in its structural role; in other words, a movement from the periphery toward the core.

World-systems theory has been followed by many new theories, of which new comparative political economy is most representative. New comparative political economics emerged in the 1970s, and became particularly influential in the field of development studies by the mid-1980s. It raised various new questions regarding modernization and development and provided many new insights. However, it remains less influential than dependency theory and world-systems theory.

Theories of Transition

The societal transition in China, Russia, and Eastern Europe (throughout the rest of this article I term all the countries involved “countries in transition”) during the last two decades of the twentieth century calls for a new, third way of approaching the field of the sociology of development.

Modern social sciences grew out of studies of capitalism. The founders of sociology primarily concerned themselves with interpreting capitalism. Karl Marx (1981) gave priority to capitalist relations of production, especially the labor-capital relationship; Max Weber (1976) focused on the spiritual preconditions for modern bourgeois culture, in particular the Protestant ethic; and Emile Durkheim (1947) emphasized the mechanism of social integration. As Durkheim pointed out, unlike traditional societies, which exhibit a mechanical solidarity based on shared activities and beliefs, modern capitalist society constructs itself on an organic solidarity coming from the interdependence that arises from the division of labor. In short, it is the study of capitalism that provided the framework for classic sociology.

Communism is doubtlessly another civilization, if we may call it that, which has greatly influenced history. In its heyday, one-third of the world’s population lived under the communist system. Communism possesses very different values, institutions, and logics from Western capitalism. However, in the recent wave of social reform and transition, such sweeping historical changes have taken place within the communist system that many fundamental questions confront us. What precisely is the nature of communist “civilization”? What are its features? Where does it go from here? Frankly, there has been little effort to rethink communism as a civilization or to analyze its internal subtleties. However, understanding communist civilization *per se* and its recent transition is crucial to the advancement of sociology. Studying the features, logic, and transition of communism should yield

new inspiration for contemporary sociology and even for the social sciences as a whole.

Recently, more and more sociologists, even those in Western academia who are not particularly interested in China, Russia, or Eastern Europe, have begun to study the ongoing transition in socialist or former socialist countries. Moreover, the results from studies of informal institutions, social factors embedded in these institutions, and problems of inequality in socialist and former socialist societies, have challenged the classic theoretical framework of sociology. Michael Buroway, the former president of the American Sociological Association, in his 2004 presidential address, even argued that such studies are becoming the mainstream in American sociology. In addition, in their book *Making Capitalism without Capitalists*, Gil Eyal, Ivan Szelenyi and Eleanor Townsley (1998) develop a “neo-classic sociology” through their exploration of the societal transition. It is clear that we should view the communist experiments of socialist or former socialist countries in the past decades and their current societal transition as a major scholarly resource for sociology.

The societal transition in China, Russia, and Eastern Europe embodies a complicated process of social change, a process that we cannot understand without investigating the sweeping social changes in China during the past twenty years. These changes began with the slogan of “four modernizations,” which was soon superseded by the discourse of “reform of economic institutions.” It is clear that modernization requires remolding outdated institutions. Furthermore, it is universally accepted that the reform of economic institutions cannot be carried out without a full-fledged transition of the whole society. Therefore, in other words, societal transition contains elements of modernization, but it is more than modernization. Similarly, societal transition includes development, but it is more than development. As universally acknowledged, it is very important to keep a balance between reform and development in economic life. Clearly, this means societal transition and development are not the same thing. If communism can be viewed as a unique civilization, the societal transition I have studied is a distinctive transition toward modern civilization of communist civilization as a whole. It is this transition that has highlighted the need in the sociology of development of a new theory, a theory of societal transition.

New Research Topics on Societal Transition and Development

In recent years, the advancement of the sociology of development has lagged behind that of other branches of sociology. Since the rise of world-systems theory, scholars of the sociology of development have made little theoretical progress. Although the “East Asian model” spurred studies of social development in the 1980s, this model and its corresponding theoretical efforts disappeared with the bursting of the Asian financial bubble in the 1990s. Ironically, the sociology of development, which, according to its name, should focus on social development, seems indifferent to the dramatic transition in Chinese, Russian, and Eastern European societies. This indifference reveals the inability of contemporary theories to explain the social development of the

countries in transition. Therefore, it is necessary for sociologists to draw a new portrait of the societal transition as mentioned above, grappling with the new topics that it has raised, and from that develop new theories of transition.

Socialism and Another Type of Modernity

The societal transition in socialist and former socialist societies has ushered in many fresh topics for research because these societies are very distinctive from both developed and developing countries in terms of the inception, the institutional preconditions, and the logic of development.

At a macro level, the theoretical framework of the sociology of development, such as theories of modernization or theories of development, usually comes from comparative historical studies. The modernization of developed countries, the development of developing countries, and the transition of socialist countries from a perspective of comparative history should be analyzed in the context of the formation and expansion of modernity. As we have noted, for the modernization school, modernization is a transition from a traditional society to a modern society. For the development school, although it is little concerned with the tradition-modernity relationship, the goal and process of social development assumes that modernization means a social change from tradition to modernity. However, the societal transition discussed in this article is a transition from a socialist society, instead of a traditional society, to a modern society. More and more scholars are now aware that socialism is a distinctive response to, rather than a social phenomenon unrelated to, modernity. As a form of civilization, socialism integrates into its own structure many elements of modernity (Arendt 1993; Moore 1987). For example, Friedrich Hayek (1994) argued that authoritarianism is derived from an epistemology that overestimates the power of reason and that political-economic dominance stems from this epistemology. As we know, the cult of reason is an essential element of modernity. For another example, Hanna Arendt concluded that there are elements of modernity in the institutional basis (i.e., “the people”), the organization, and the ideology of authoritarianism. Moreover, almost all of the socialist experiments were undertaken in countries that were viewed as “backward,” at least from the perspective of modernity. Such backwardness was universally recognized by the people of the socialist countries and spurred them to launch various movements to “leap ahead.” As mentioned above, the theory of convergence holds that the socialist and capitalist countries tend to compete with each other on the same track, and it ascribes this to the requirements of the development of modern technology. From the perspective of modernity, these two civilizations appear to be antipodal, but in fact they bear a strong resemblance to one another. To be sure, socialism provided a unique, distorted, or even extreme answer to modernity. That is why it survived for decades as the adversary of capitalism. What I undertake here is not to systematically analyze socialism, but to discuss from the perspective of the sociology of development the characteristics of socialist countries that make them different from both developed and developing countries.

Redistributive Economy System and a Near Monopoly of Resources

Karl Polanyi (1957) divides all economic systems into three types: reciprocity and gift exchange (i.e., natural economy as universally acknowledged), redistribution, and the market economy. Whereas the modernization of developed countries and the development of developing countries arose from a market economy or a combination of market and natural economy, the socialist countries established a unique economic system—state-redistribution—predicated on the state's near monopoly of resources. (Compared with this socialist redistributive economy, the institutions of redistribution in the early empires analyzed by Polanyi were rudimentary.) In China, for example, the state captured the power to gather and control most scarce resources through the confiscation of bureaucratic capital, the reform of the national economy, land reform, collectivization, communization, and other social programs and movements after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Thus, unlike both modernization and development, the post-socialist transition is economically a change from state redistribution to a market economy. Such an economic transition not only lays the foundation for the societal transition on the whole, but also engenders a complicated and subtle relationship between economic and social development. Basically, this economic transition is a basis and precondition for economic development. At the same time, in practice it sometimes clashes with economic development. In Russia and Eastern Europe, almost all of the reforms of economic institutions caused economic stagnation or even depression. In the process of societal transition, it is thus crucial to balance the relationship between reform and development.

State–Society Relationship under the State's Near Monopoly of Resources

The state's near monopoly of resources engenders a total social system where the state controls everything. Such a total society is constructed on a series of institutions. For instance, in addition to the monopoly system, the urban work-unit system and the rural commune system were important organizational institutions in China during the socialist period. Since these two institutions were actually extensions of the formal bureaucracy, the fact that their members heavily relied on them meant that they actually heavily depended on the state. Consequently, to strengthen the state's total control over society, it was necessary for the Chinese government to eliminate any social force that tended toward independence from the state. Thus it was that all the previously independent social forces in China were deprived of their independence after 1949. The state–society relationship in such a country undergoing transition involves a ceaseless weakening and disassembly of the total social system, the formation of a civil society, and the rebuilding of society. This is fundamentally unlike what happens in both developed countries and in developing ones, where modernization and development mean the building of the nation-state. In short, the transition from socialism moves in a direction opposite that both modernization and development.

Social Mobilization as the Major Mode of Social Operation

The state's near monopoly of resources and the absence of independent social organization make campaign-like social mobilization the major mode of carrying out social and economic life. This mobilization took different forms in different socialist countries. According to Michael Bernstein, social mobilization in the Soviet Union can be viewed as a command mobilization whereas in China it was participatory. For instance, in the collectivization of agriculture, the Soviet Union implemented collectivization coercively by sending urban work teams out into the rural areas, while the PRC required its numerous work teams to persuade individual peasants of the problematic character of the system of land ownership and management, and accept collectivization as in their own best interests. Social mobilization exerted a great influence on the societal transition in the various socialist countries many years later. In China, Russia, and Eastern Europe, broad social mobilization became an important dynamic for the reform in those countries. However, social mobilization tends to be gradually replaced by bureaucratization and routinization with the establishment of new institutions. At this level, the post-socialist transition and modernization seem to converge.

Path Dependency and the Logic of Development

In 1989 Francis Fukuyama published an article, "The End of History," that generated a great deal of comment and controversy. In 1992 he published a book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, expanding on the article. In both publications Fukuyama declared that the disintegration of the Soviet and Eastern European social system marks the triumph of liberal democracy as an ideology and a system of government. Therefore, Fukuyama asserted, the grand challenge of the future will be economic, technical, and environmental. Moreover, in his view liberal democracy constitutes the last social form in the evolutionary process of mankind's history, and as such represents the end of history. Thus, the debate initiated by the modernization school in 1950s and 1960s over the convergence of the development of capitalism and socialism appears to have come to an end.

However, has history really ended in such a simple way? Actually, with respect to their modes of development, there are not only great differences between the countries in transition and the developed countries, but also differences among the countries in transition themselves. All this is evidence that history is still evolving. My purpose is not to debate Fukuyama over the philosophical point of whether or not history has ended, but to portray the special modes of development chosen by the countries in transition and to examine how these modes have influenced the sociology of development as a discipline.

State socialism, which embodies a unique social pattern with its own institutional logic and development dynamics, has become a fundamental topic in the recently influential field of neo-institutionalism. Victor Nee and David Stark argue that this institutional logic is not derived from the development of capitalism. State socialism,

they contend, is neither the antithesis of capitalism as authoritarianism assumes, nor a social pattern that will converge with capitalism in time as the modernization school predicts, but is as an independent social pattern. Janos Kornai, the famous Hungarian economist, laid the foundation for such an approach. As Nee and Stark point out, Kornai's thesis centers on his exploration of the theoretical implications of an "economy of shortage" as the unique economic phenomenon embedded in state socialism, and of the "soft budget constraint" as the unique economic mechanism of an economy of shortage. Besides laying these two theoretical foundation stones, Kornai persuasively explains why the same mechanism in a planned economy—i.e., "soft budget constraints"—could first stimulate the economy, but then create periodic shortages, and thus prevent the economy from attaining prosperity. The greatest significance of Kornai's theory is that it reveals that the socialist economy is a result of a unique institutional arrangement. As Nee and Stark point out, Kornai analyzed the "institutional mechanisms of economic reproduction of state socialism," which constitutes his greatest contribution. The concepts of an "economy of shortage" and "soft budget constraints" are crucial to understanding the particular operation of socialist economies (Nee and Stark 1989).

Socialism, with its peculiar institutional logic, has not ended with the societal transition. Either as a historical heritage or as a restricting condition of the present, the institutional features of socialism are playing a pivotal role in the ongoing transition. In fact, these features are shaping the particular route of development in the countries in transition, making them different from both developed and developing countries, and different from each other.

Recently, some sociologists have made great strides in the comparative study of capitalism. Whereas Fukuyama and his adherents declare the death of socialism and hail capitalism as the only surviving civilization and institution, these sociologists question the existing theory of capitalism, which describes it as monolithic, with a unitary logic. In their latest article, Lawrence Peter King and Ivan Szelenyi (2004) point out that

in the classic sociological theories, capitalism is viewed as a monolithic system. For those classic theorists, especially for Adam Smith and Karl Marx, the operation of capitalism abides by a unique logic, which is embedded in the powers of reason of individuals, or in the unique capitalist institutions especially the institution integrating private ownership and market economy.

The former socialist countries, in their transition from socialism to capitalism, are evolving along different tracks, rather than tending to converge on any particular form of capitalism. Many aspects of this kind of transition indicate that these countries vary one from the other, and indeed have little in common with the so-called modern capitalist system. Thus King and Szelenyi suggest that the transition is in fact constructing new types of capitalism (King and Szelenyi, forthcoming).

King and Szelenyi divide the countries in transition into the three categories. The first consists of the countries building capitalism from the bottom up. In this group are East Asian countries, especially China and to a great extent Vietnam. The second group includes the countries building capitalism from the top down. This includes the

East European countries, and especially Russia. The Central European countries have developed a third route of transition from socialism to capitalism. In these countries, foreign investors, in particular multinational corporations, have played a pivotal role in privatization. King and Szelenyi argue that the different historical heritages of these former socialist countries, meaning the levels of their development during the socialist period, account for their different modes of societal transition. Moreover, these different preconditions not only exert a great influence on the societal transition in the long run, but also influence the composition of classes and the internal conflicts among the elites in transition. Therefore, the theory of path dependence plays a very important role in studies of the transition from socialism. As Nee points out, so-called path dependence means that the track followed by societal transition is shaped by the previous institutional framework. At an empirical level, path dependence embodies those things that are deeply embedded in the previous institutional arrangement. Path dependence can be a barrier to the evolution of institutions, and at the same time a dynamic for the evolution of institutions in a certain direction as well. That countries in transition have chosen different routes to development can be to a considerable extent ascribed to path dependence (Nee and Yang Cao 1999).

Rebuilding Society: A Different Type of State–Society Relationship

In considering the dynamics of societal transition or social evolution, we must closely scrutinize the state–society relationship in the countries in transition. In the modern era, the developed countries of the West underwent social change on the basis of a full-fledged civil society, while the developing countries were primarily preoccupied with the problem of nation-state building. However, the societal transition from socialism presents still another picture of the state–society relationship. Before the transition, a typical feature shared by the socialist countries was the state’s near monopoly of almost all valuable resources and even of room for social activities. Therefore, society, in the face of the preponderant presence of the seemingly omnipotent state, virtually disappeared. This raises many questions: If the state controlled everything and society nearly did not exist at all before the transition, where do today’s “dramatic changes” and transition come from? What is the source of the dynamics of these changes and the societal transition? What will be the differences between the rebuilding of a society out of the framework of a “total society” and the modernization and further development of a modern nation-state in the future?

Scholars have examined the dynamics of the evolution of socialist countries for many years. As early as 1967, the Committee on the Comparative Study of Communism, funded by the American Council of Learned Societies, recruited a special group of social scientists to explore the evolution of socialist countries. The basic conclusions drawn by this research can be summarized as follows: after the revolution, and once the new regime is consolidated, a socialist society is bound to pursue economic growth. Such growth requires industrialization and the introduction of modern technology, both of which demand a corresponding series of modern values and institutions. How-

ever, these values and institutions are incompatible with top-down social mobilization and a total society. Richard Lowenthal (1964) argued that a socialist society faces a difficult dilemma—the contradiction between its utopian revolutionary goals and economic development—in the process of modernization. For Lowenthal, successful economic development can strengthen the ability of a socialist society to sustain further economic growth by itself for a long time. Yet, the greater economic growth becomes, the less it is connected with revolutionary passion. Lowenthal applied the logic behind the modernization of Western societies to the development of socialist societies. He contended that when the economic development of a socialist society reaches the level of a developed industrial society, structural change conveying the functions and values of a modern technological society will be unavoidable. As we know, the early theorists of modernization usually viewed the bureaucratization of the socialist countries as a crucial step toward modernization, and talked about how revolution and mass mobilization would be replaced by routinization and industrialization respectively. Here we can also see that when the socialist countries have bureaucratized their administrations, these scholars would like to define the introduction of modern technology and values to the socialist societies as the most important feature of modernization.

Although there is no single answer to the question whence sprang the dynamics of large-scale societal transition from socialism, it is clear that explorations such as the ones mentioned above, which explain the transition only in terms of the development of technology and bureaucratization, cannot withstand analysis. On the contrary, it is not surprising that the dramatic changes in Russia and Eastern Europe have brought the state–society relationship (especially civil society) back under scholars’ microscope. This new wave of discussion on the state–society relationship results from the Polish societal transition, where the trade union Solidarity and the church played a vital role. Many people thus view this transition as a revival of Polish civil society. However, the true picture is not so rosy. The Polish transition from socialism is actually very complicated and full of regressions. By now many scholars have become aware that Polish civil society was in fact very weak, and some scholars have even declared an “absence of civil society” (Szkłarski 1993). Michael Bernhard, for example, analyzes the vicissitudes of Polish civil society in transition and ascribes its decline to the historical heritage from the socialist period. He argues that before the transition Poland and other socialist countries pursued a type of non-capitalist modernity where the social order was built in a top-down way while all the previous political and social organizations were destroyed. For him, the pursuit of this kind of modernity leads to a “leveling” of society. Therefore, although the societal transition during the 1980s enlarged the room for horizontal social relationships in Poland, it contributed very little to the space for social pluralism. This phenomenon represents a striking contrast between the countries in transition and modern authoritarian countries. In the countries in transition, independent self-governing social organizations can only arise in a crisis. Once the crisis ends, the room for such organizations disappears. At the same time, some social elements produced by the transition from socialism are also advantageous for civil society. Moreover, as some scholars point out, in the post-communist countries it is very difficult to thoroughly change the preexisting

fundamental mechanisms for the distribution of political power and resources. Even though a market economy has been built up in these countries, the right to distribute many key elements of a market economy (especially capital and labor) still remains in the hands of bureaucrats. Consequently, during the societal transition, a new dichotomous structure has emerged: on one side stand many state-run enterprises that cannot survive without numerous state subsidies, while on the other side is a new economic system that can respond flexibly to the market. These changes have not only led to economic depression, inflation, and unemployment, but also have reframed the economic structure itself. The concept of “dichotomous society” is widely used in studying underdevelopment, dependency development, and internal colonization. However, it is clear that what is revealed by this concept is much different from the dichotomous structure of the countries in transition. Whereas the binary of tradition vs. modernity constitutes the dichotomous structure of the developing countries, the binary of communist modernity vs. capitalist modernity constitutes the dichotomous structure of the countries in transition. In the latter, economic reform has reframed the previous political construction where two or more social groups (i.e., classes) opposed each other, resulting in the dichotomization of state and society. Ironically, the depression caused by economic reform has undermined the social support for this reform and mobilized its opponents, which has weakened the long-term organizational basis for civil society. Simultaneously, the dichotomous structure has split occupational groups, which is also disadvantageous to the building of a strong civil society (Bernhard 1996).

In his analysis of the societal transition in Bulgaria, UCLA's Peter Stamatov develops the concept of “bad public,” which is closely related to racialist nationalism and the corresponding social cleavages it causes (Stamatov 2000). This concept is very insightful: it was once universally believed that any form of horizontal social tie or any form of social organization independent from the state could accelerate the transition from socialism. Understanding this concept of “bad public” is also important for understanding the state–society relationship in the societal transition in China. Early in China's reform, people also pinned their hope on independent social forces as a dynamic force for the transition from socialism. Yet, although such an independent social forces have arisen after twenty years of reform, they have ushered in social differentiation and imbalance among various social groups. The reform led to a cleavage between the powerful and the weak: on the one hand, economic, political, and intellectual elites have forged a firm alliance; on the other hand, the weak have been increasingly fragmented. Thus, the ability of the powerful to defend and fight for their interests is much greater than that of the weak. Clearly, such a “bad public” is exerting a great influence not only on the distribution of social interests, but also on the society as a whole.

Mechanisms for Social Inequality

Social inequality constitutes a key topic of the sociology of development. However, this problem takes various forms in different societies. In the modernization of West-

ern societies, social inequality most often means that the free market economy cannot guarantee a structural equality of opportunities for everyone at the level of the institution. Theories of liberalism have dominated the explorations of the logic behind this social phenomenon. In the social development of developing countries, the problem of social inequality is more complicated. In some cases, it is sometimes closely connected with the stage and the level of economic development, as Kuznets' inverted U-curve hypothesis describes. In other cases, there is an unequal relationship between the developed and the developing countries and the external factors for the development of the poor countries, as dependency theory and world-systems theory argue.

In the countries in transition, the dominant state redistributive economy before the transition has had a great impact on the problem of social inequality. The transition from this redistributive economy to a market economy constitutes the basic context for the problem of social inequality. Moreover, this context provides an opportunity to examine the relationship of state redistribution with social inequality and social differentiation.

In their studies of social inequality in the post-communist countries, scholars of societal transition have begun by looking at social inequality during the socialist period. In his article "Social Inequalities under State Redistributive Economies," Szelenyi proposes a theory about "social inequality in state socialism" that draws on the concept of "non-market trade" to examine how the state redistributive economy worked. He contends that the crux of the redistributive economy is how the state extracts the surplus product. Here, a key feature of state socialism is that the price of labor is set administratively by the state. Thus, while the labor market constitutes the core institution of a capitalist economy, the non-market trade of labor is the prime characteristic of a state socialist economy, where wages and salaries are set administratively, rather than by the market, and the redistribution of the surplus product is arranged according to the central government's goals and values by the state budget before production takes place. This kind of redistribution, Szelenyi argues, creates social inequality (Szelenyi 1978).

However, studies of the early period of the transition from socialism indicate that market reform has an obvious equalizing effect. In other words, market transition initially benefits the previously powerless and less privileged. Moreover, this transition results in the rise of a new entrepreneur class consisting of new elites, and thus completes a replacement of the elites at the top of the social structure. Therefore, social inequalities can be relieved in the early stage of market reform. But, as Victor Nee, a proponent of the market transition school, admits, this picture only depicts a short-term social phenomenon, without much consideration of the inequalities among different administrative regions or sectors of the economy and the effects of the business cycle. It is now universally believed that, after the early period of market reform, market-created inequalities begin to reinforce the previous inequalities generated by state socialism.

In response to the contradictory influences of market reform on the problem of social inequality, Akos Rona-Tas, a scholar at the University of California, San Diego,

suggests a distinction between the erosion phase of the socialist economy, which is primarily generated from below by people driven by a sense of personal gain, and the transition phase to a market economy, which is primarily initiated from above through legislation for the purpose of creating a market economy. During the first phase, the socialist state remains hostile to the private sector, although it makes temporary concessions. However, the second phase begins with the state's commitment to create the legal institutions of a market economy, which secure property rights and end discrimination against the private sector. Rona-Tas maintains that in the erosion phase in the countries in transition the equalizing effect of market reform outweighs the inequalities it creates, while in the transition phase market-generated inequalities intensify the problem of social inequality (Rona-Tas 1994). Similarly, Szelenyi also interprets the different consequences of market reform according to the character of the various types of markets.

It is in this area that studies of social inequality with the help of theories of transition have made a theoretical breakthrough. In the past, Marxism and liberalism dominated interpretations of the problem of social inequality. For classic Marxism, this problem is embedded in a series of institutions called "the market," where competition and in particular unbridled capital constitute the root cause of social inequality. Consequently, the prescription to solve this problem is to substitute state redistribution for the market. At this level, socialism in practice is a large-scale social experiment to root out social inequality through state redistribution. Liberalism offers the opposite answer. It emphasizes the intervention of political power into the redistribution of resources as the root of social inequality, and views the market as providing the possibility for social equality. To be sure, liberalism runs into the problem that social inequality is widespread in Western societies dominated by the market economy. Liberalism's response to such criticism is that social inequality should be ascribed to the imperfections of market institutions.

Theories of transition propose neo-institutionalism as an answer, contending that Marxism and liberalism share the same assumption that social inequality is an integral feature of any economic integration mechanism, but ignore the institutional background of this mechanism. Neo-institutionalism reveals that neither state redistribution nor a market economy maintains a static relationship with the problem of social inequality. Under different institution backgrounds, the same economic integration mechanism can have different effects. In a capitalist market economy, the market produces most social inequalities, which are balanced by redistribution via state welfare. In state socialist countries, on the other hand, state redistribution creates social inequalities, which are leveled by the market. In general, the prime, dominating adjustment mechanism for any economic institution always serves the powerful and the privileged rich, whereas the powerless and underprivileged poor have to rely what I call subordinate compensation mechanisms. Individuals who are politically repressed and economically uncompetitive often rely on these subordinate mechanisms as a survival strategy.

Neo-institutionalism encourages us to explore the mechanism that generates social inequality. However, this approach cannot explain the Chinese experience over

Table 1
Models of Development

Mode	Theories of Modernization	Theories of Development	Theories of Transition
Object	Traditional society	Backward-society	Socialist society
Transition	Tradition–Modernity	Tradition–Modernity	Tradition-Socialism-Modernity
Basis for regime	Civil society	Colonized society or Tribal society	Total society
Economic basis	Market economy	Market economy and Traditional economy	State redistributive economy
International environment	Control led allocation	Dependency	Independence and convergence
Mechanism for social inequality	Market	Market, Traditional economy, and International environment	Market and state redistribution
Mechanism for social evolution	Development of elements of modernity	External impact and internal response	Societal transition

the last twenty years. Whereas neo-institutionalism hypothesizes that state redistribution and the market have opposite effects on the problem of social inequality, the increasing social inequalities in China today imply that state redistribution and the market have similar effects on social inequality. In other words, the growing social inequality in China during the 1990s derived from the combined effects of both state redistribution and the market. Table 1 summarizes the three theoretical models in the field of sociology.

Understanding Socialism and Its Transition in Practice: The Chinese Experience

Scholars of the so-called Budapest school, notably Szelenyi and Stark, have investigated market reform in Russia, Eastern Europe, and especially Central Europe. The work of these scholars has the following four features. First, in their examination of market transition and post-communist society, they are primarily concerned with structural characteristics such as formal organizations and institutions. Second, their studies of structural characteristics (and this is particularly true of Szelenyi’s research on Central European elites in transition) have mainly involved large-scale questionnaire surveys. Third, most of these studies adopt a top-down perspective by focusing on elites. Fourth, the object of these studies is the post-communist societies (i.e., in Eastern Europe, and particularly Hungary) where market reform has been accompanied by regime rupture.

This coexistence of market reform and regime rupture in these countries clearly shows that before a large-scale transition to a market economy their polity and dominant ideology had already experienced a fundamental “transition,” which made pos-

sible credible legislative action by the state to create the conditions for a market economy. During this kind of societal transition, the basic institutions of society were quickly and fundamentally reformed. Clearly, the Budapest school's focus on structural characteristics and the comparison of institutions during different periods is a response to this phenomenon. Intellectual elites play a crucial role in market transitions where regime rupture has deprived the party elites of their former resources and the rise of new economic elites is still underway. This is why the Budapest school scholars give priority to elites and take a top-down approach in their studies. In addition, a wide-ranging questionnaire survey is very suitable for exploring the evolution of formal institutions.

However, the market transition in China tells a different story from that in Russia and Eastern Europe. These differences can be encapsulated in three aspects, discussed immediately below (Sun Liping 2002a).

Gradual Reform under Regime Continuity

The continuity of rule by the Chinese Communist Party constitutes a striking feature of the societal transition in China today, in contrast to Russia and Eastern Europe. The dramatic social and political changes in Russia and the countries of Eastern Europe during the late 1980s broke the continuity of political institutions and ideology in those countries. Since then, wholesale privatization and market transition have taken place without any political or ideological limitations, although the evolution of each society has its particular characteristics. However, reform in China is usually defined as “gradual reform,” a term that has multiple meanings, some of which are very ambiguous in the Chinese context. At the level of strategy, this “gradual reform” stands in vivid contrast to the radical “shock therapy” of Russia and Eastern Europe. At the level of substance, “gradual reform” means self-improvement based on the persistence of the fundamental institutions and principles of socialism (which implies that Russia and Eastern Europe have departed from socialism). No matter how one portrays China's reform, one of its fundamental characteristics is the stability of the basic institutional framework of Chinese society (in particular political institutions) and the dominant ideology. This differentiates the market transition in China from that in Russia and Eastern Europe. Thus, what merits our concern are the features of the “social transformation” that have followed from China's particular market transition.

Formation of Elites under the Continuity of Political Power

This “gradual reform” has resulted in the differences between the formation of elites in contemporary China and in Russia and Eastern Europe. Regarding Russia and Eastern Europe, Szelenyi has developed a theory based on two concepts—“type of capital” and “exchange of capital”—which assumes that different types of capital are relatively independent and interchangeable with each other. However, in Russia

and the countries of Eastern Europe regime rupture has been the precondition for this assumption. Whereas in those countries the market transition along with regime rupture undermined the ability of political capital to control other types of capital, in China regime continuity as a background for the transition from a state redistributive economy to a market economy has meant that the privileged position of political capital has not been undermined. Therefore, even though the market in China has already become the predominating economic integration mechanism for all of society, political power has preserved its capacity to control and maneuver other types of capital. In this situation, the relative independence of different types of capital is stifled. In fact, in China rather than capital being independent of political power, all the capital of society to a considerable extent takes the form of total capital that, through the operation of political power, is virtually undifferentiated. Thus, the formation of elites in China during its market transition has not been a process of replacing different types of elites with new elites, but a rise of a new group of elites who control the total capital consisting of cultural, political, and economic capital. Their primary capital is the political or administrative power in their own hands or those of their parents.

“Informal Operation” under the Continuity of the Dominant Ideology

The market transition that accompanies regime rupture is undertaken through legislation and the reform of formal institutions. To be sure, the process of transition is accompanied by heated debates. Yet, these debates are by and large not carried out at the level of ideology, but mainly at the level of strategy and interest. Thus, this kind of market transition has cleared ample room for formal institutions to act. By contrast, in the context of the continuity of the regime and the dominant ideology, Chinese reform has been the subject of ceaseless ideological debates, such as the debate early in the reform over the legitimacy of the market economy, the debate over the stock market system in later years, and the debate over privatization, which is even now a forbidden topic for public discussion. This ideological background constitutes an extra cost of reform. To minimize this cost, the reformists have adopted two strategies. The first is to incorporate new reform plans or new elements of the market into the preexisting ideology. An example would be the concept of “socialist market economy.” The second strategy is to “put aside the debate,” which in practice means being able to do something, but not able to talk about it. Actually, many important reforms have applied these two alternative strategies (Sun Liping 2002b).

In short, we can summarize the special features of the societal transition in China as follows. First, the old regime and ideology continue to be dominant after twenty years of reform. Second, this political continuity has resulted in the many important reforms and steps in the market transition taking the alternative route discussed above. Third, new institutional elements have most often assumed an informal form and then spread in along the alternative route. Fourth, since informal institutions usually emerge in the operation of formal institutions, in our studies of market transition we should

pay attention to the process of this operation and informal elements embedded in it. This means we should be more serious about the actual practice of China's societal transition.

To examine the practical dimension of the market transition requires that we go beyond the structural characteristics of institutions and organizations. In my article "The Sociology of Practice and an Analysis of the Process of Market Transition," I advocate an analysis of the process of practice of societal transition. Basically, I call on scholars to focus on this process of practice and uncover the practical logic behind it to deepen our understanding of the substantive changes brought by the societal transition in China. I have tried to undertake this kind of analysis in my recent studies on the oral history of Chinese peasants, the state-peasant relationship in rural China, and the process of the operation of the social security system for the unemployed (Sun Liping 2002b).

The theoretical basis of this kind of research is "the sociology of practice," which has been emphasized by me for a few years. What the sociology of practice underscores is not that the discipline of sociology is practical per se, nor how knowledge gained through sociology can be applied to social life in practice, but how to study the manifestation in practice of social phenomena. The sociology of practice has three main theses. First, social realities are dynamic and flowing, rather than static. In other words, the normal state of social realities is a practical state. To be sure, this does not mean we should ignore structural and institutional elements, but instead that we should emphasize social structure and institutions in operation. Second, the sociology of practice strives to disclose the logic behind the process of practice of social phenomena, logic that can hardly be found in a static state. Methodologically, this emphasis on the process of practice is because of so-called structural invisibility, an inherent defect of the analysis of static structures. This defect arises from fact that many important features of a phenomenon, the complicated relationships among the inner elements of a phenomenon, and numerous possible changes initiated by the interactions between a phenomenon and various environments are not embedded in the static structure of this phenomenon, but develop gradually in a dynamic practical process. Therefore, third, practice is "more than" a static structure or institution. There is "an increment of practice," which means practice has an additional aspect compared to a static structure. For instance, both the urgency and the totality of practice discussed by Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1990) are not what resides in a static social structure, but "grows out" of practice. These things that can only emerge, develop, and function in practice enable us to make new interpretations and explanations of social phenomena. Moreover, practice has a generating mechanism, which produces new elements—i.e., new social realities—in practice. Therefore, practice transcends structure. In one word, practice is more than structure. Thus, the introduction of the sociology of practice into studies of the market transition in China should lead to a new understanding of this transition and of the Chinese reform as a whole.

When applying the sociology of practice to research on the societal transition, we should emphasize four steps—process, logic, mechanism, and technique—of societal transition in practice.

The Process of Societal Transition

Process is in fact a way to approach a social phenomenon in a practical state. In particular, it is in the emergent process where the logic behind this kind of social phenomenon can be seen most clearly. The features of China's societal transition as discussed above present us with good reason to pay serious attention to its practical process. In practice, people use different terms to describe these features, such as "to put aside debate" in official discourse, "to do but not to say" in unofficial discourse, "to turn on the left light but to make a right turn" in informal official discourse, and so on. These discourses reveal that the process of China's societal transition is distinctive from that of Russia and Eastern Europe because of structural limitations. In China, there is a great divergence between theory and practice. Thus, only through understanding the real process of China's societal transition can one thoroughly understand this transition as a whole.

The Logic Underlying Societal Transition

Logic is the goal of the sociology of practice. In applying the discipline of sociology, one seeks to reveal the logic behind a social phenomenon in a practical state and then apply this logic to the exploration of problems one is interested in. Although reform in China is most often viewed as planned, it tends to generate new forces that can guide the process of reform and keep it going forward. In other words, a logic ensuring further reform can be produced in the process of reform. At this level, in fact, we can see that the newly generated logic began to exert its effects on the process of reform and societal transition in China soon after the inception of this process, and these effects have grown with time. Therefore, the process and the results of China's societal transition in later years have become less and less connected what was originally planned or designed.

The Mechanism for Societal Transition

From the perspective of the formation of logic, a mechanism is the way in which logic develops; from the perspective of the whole process of societal transition, a mechanism is the way that logic exerts its effects. Although the mechanism for societal transition is involved in all aspects of a society, such as institutions, social structure, social behavior, culture and so on, from the perspective of sociology, this mechanism involves the composition of social forces and changes in that composition. This is why, generally speaking, widespread social evolution is always related to two correlative processes: the evolution of institutions and changes in the composition of social forces. However, the relationship between these two processes changes as social evolution moves through different stages. For example, in China in the 1980s the evolution of institutions led to the transition of social structure, which embodied the formation

of new social forces and their adaptation to these institutions. However, in the 1990s (especially after the mid-1990s), we find that the transition of social structures was completed before the evolution of institutions, and thus social structures began to influence the evolution of institutions (Sun Liping 2004).

Skills and Strategies Adopted by the Common People in Societal Transition

What I call the techniques of societal transition refers to the skills and strategies adopted by people in their social activities. I emphasize these skills and strategies to underscore the influence of agency on practice. Practice is a process whereby people actively exercise their agency, which is an important factor in practical logic. As the above discussion indicates, a crucial feature of China's societal transition is the great divergence between practice and theory, and correspondingly the active role played by informal institutions, a situation that creates a large space for common people—using various skills and strategies—to maneuver. Thus, we might venture to say the real process of reform and societal transition in China is a result of how people strategize and act in practice in pursuing their interests (*boyi*). Thus, to deepen our understanding of the societal transition in China, it is necessary for us to understand the skills and strategies adopted by common people in dealing with the societal transition.

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Biographical Note: Sun Liping is Professor of Sociology at Qinghua University. Beijing, P.R. China.

Address: The Department of Sociology, Qinghua University Beijing, 100084 P.R. China, E-mail: slp-ing@pku.edu.cn