

Philip C. C. Huang's Explorations in the Social Science of Practice*

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Abstract

Over the course of six decades of scholarly exploration, Philip C. C. Huang has conducted in-depth research on Chinese history and contemporary society and published fifteen monographs based on his findings. His work covers the late imperial, modern, and contemporary periods and spans a wide range of topics, including the peasant economy, the law and the justice system, the informal economy, and state governance. Huang's academic thought, theoretical perspectives, and research methodologies are systematically presented in these fifteen monographs. His most significant theoretical contribution lies in his understanding of “practice” as the dualistic interaction and unification of the subjective and objective, through which he has constructed a methodological framework for the “social science of practice.” This innovation not only provides important methodological guidance for building China's independent knowledge system, but also introduces new academic paradigms and theoretical pathways for the global study of Chinese issues.

Keywords

Philip C. C. Huang, the social science of practice, dualistic interaction and unification, China's independent knowledge system

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At the end of 2024, Guangxi Normal University Press completed the publication of a thirteen-volume collection of the works of the historian Philip C. C. Huang 黄宗智. The collection encompasses studies on the peasant economy (four volumes), the law and justice system (four volumes), the informal economy (one volume), and his theoretical and methodological research (four volumes), effectively gathering together the most significant research achievements of his scholarly career. The breadth, depth, and theoretical sophistication of Huang's research—spanning a variety of periods and a number of fields—hold great significance for our understanding of modern history and the social sciences.

Grounded in the history of practice and the reality of China's present, Huang's work on the rural economy and legal history has led him to critically engage with and challenge the presumed universality of Western theory. In challenging these theories, he developed several original and conceptually rich terms, such as “involution” 内卷化, “the third realm” 第三领域, and “practical moralism” 实用道德主义, forming a unique research approach that he describes as the “social science of practice” 实践社会科学. The concept of “practice” runs throughout Huang's body of work. His understanding, articulation, and application of this concept evolved gradually until it became the core of his theoretical and methodological framework. Revisiting Huang's writings to trace the evolution of this concept is essential to our understanding of the full scope and significance of the “social science of practice.”

Emotional Motivations and the Original Intent of Practice

Philip Huang's first monograph, *Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and Modern Chinese Liberalism*, originated from his doctoral dissertation at the University of Washington and remains his only work in intellectual history.¹ Huang openly acknowledged that “Professor K. C. Hsiao [Xiao Gongquan 萧公权] first set me on the trail of Liang” (Huang, 2023a [1972]: 1). Huang, however, never fully embraced the study of intellectual history, as he believed its “focus was limited to elite culture, [and] it ignored ordinary people” (Huang, 2023b: 192); he also felt it was often ideologically driven. Although Huang's study utilized thousands of pages of then-unpublished reports by the Japanese police on Liang's activities in Japan, his emphasis remained on intellectual analysis rather than on “practice.” During this early period, Huang's professors largely shaped his research questions. Nevertheless, the vigorous training in empirical research he received at the University of Washington provided Huang with a solid foundation for his scholarship based on experience. This orientation later shaped his distinctive approach in studies on the peasant economy, law, and

the informal economy, where he placed particular emphasis on identifying empirical evidence that “gets right to the bottom” 一竿子插到底. This kind of solid, thorough, and deeply grounded empirical research would become a key pillar of the “social science of practice” that he would go on to advocate.

The tensions and contradictions between Huang’s early training in intellectual history—centered on elite figures—and his “concern for ordinary people, especially rural people” (Huang, 2023b: 776), led him into a prolonged period of inner conflict after the publication of his first monograph. He began to ponder questions about the kind of research that would truly speak to the lives of ordinary people, and he turned to theory. The rich and diverse theoretical concepts in the social sciences, with their strong internal coherence, had an enormous appeal to him in contrast to the China studies field at the time, which excelled in textual analysis but lacked conceptual depth. However, Huang’s training in empirical research also prevented him from ignoring the complex, multidimensional, and powerful fragments of the lives of ordinary people in the materials of the South Manchurian Railway Company (Mantetsu) and the grassroots legal archives he was working on at the time. As a result, he was cautious about applying theoretical models uncritically to this complex material. The close entanglement of intellectual history with ideology also made him alert to the potential ideological forces behind the theoretical frameworks in the social sciences. Huang’s subsequent body of work demonstrates that a critical engagement with social science theory is another pillar of the “social science of practice” that he advocates.

Huang’s cautious approach to the application of theory and his emphasis on empirical evidence together shaped his strong commitment to seeking the truth, a hallmark clearly evident in his earliest two studies on the peasant economy. In 1985, Huang published his landmark study, *The Peasant Economy and Social Change in North China*. Drawing extensively on detailed surveys conducted by Japan’s South Manchurian Railway Company in thirty-three villages in North China during the 1930s and 1940s, he used this rich empirical data as the core of his analysis. He demonstrated that because of increasing popular pressure on the land, family-run farms in North China had long operated with excessive labor inputs, leading to diminishing marginal returns. Small peasant households were forced to supplement their limited farm yields with seasonal wage labor in order to sustain their livelihoods. Meanwhile, mid-sized managerial farms of 100 to 200 *mu* remained underdeveloped and never transitioned into capitalist-style production. The combination of these two forms of farming constituted a particularly entrenched system of “involution,” a concept Huang used to describe the self-perpetuating, stagnant nature of the peasant economy. According to Huang, the intrusion of imperialism and the development of market forces

merely accelerated this process of involution rather than bringing about any substantive transformation in the economy (Huang, 2022a [1985]).

Huang's 1990 monograph, *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Yangzi Delta, 1350-1988*, similarly drew upon a range of empirical sources, including investigations conducted in the 1930s and 1940s by Hayashi Megumi 林惠海, Fei Xiaotong 费孝通, and the South Manchurian Railway Company in eight villages in the Yangzi delta, as well as Huang's own fieldwork and interviews conducted between 1983 and 1988 in four villages of Huayangqiao township, Songjiang county, Shanghai. His research revealed that six hundred years of commercialization and urbanization, beginning in the early Ming, had failed to bring about any qualitative change or fundamental transformation in the peasant economy of the Yangzi delta. Instead, increasingly labor-intensive crop cultivation, coupled with household handicrafts that made full use of supplementary household labor, supported a high level of what Huang called "involutionary commercialization" 过密型商品化 in the Yangzi delta region.² Agricultural output grew, but marginal returns per workday declined, resulting in what he termed "growth without development." Because collective organizations during the Maoist period shared essential similarities with the practices of small peasant farmers—notably a tolerance for surplus labor—the rural involutionary economy persisted into the collectivization period after 1949. It was not until the 1980s, with the rapid growth of rural industry and new sidelines in the delta, that the surplus labor previously tied to the land was released. This shift led to a rise in agricultural labor productivity and a significant increase in peasant income, even though per-worker output in farming did not grow. For the first time, this marked a shift away from the involutionary "growth without development" that had characterized the rural economy in the delta (Huang, 2023c [1990]).

Compared to his work in intellectual history, Huang's studies on the peasantry not only reflected his concern for ordinary people but also embodied a stronger theoretical engagement. In these two monographs, he critically integrated three theoretical traditions in peasant studies—the formalist view of the "rational peasant," the Marxist theory of "exploitation," and the substantivist theory of the household as a production-consumption unit and its concept of the "moral peasant." Huang argued that peasant family farms were simultaneously profit-seekers, exploited cultivators, and subsistence producers. Focusing on any single one of these roles, he argued, was inadequate to fully understand the complexities of China's peasants and the agricultural economy. Concepts such as "involution" and "involutionary commercialization" directly challenged the classical theoretical assumptions of thinkers like Adam Smith and Karl Marx, who argued, in their separate ways, that commercialization would inevitably lead to a qualitative change in the peasant economy and transform it into a capitalist one. Instead, Huang offered a

powerful explanation for why Chinese peasants struggled for centuries on the edge of subsistence, and why, in the modern Chinese revolution, self-cultivators in the north were more politically mobilized than tenant farmers in the delta. These arguments, backed by robust empirical evidence, earned the *Peasant Economy and Social Change in North China* the Fairbank Prize from the American Historical Association, and *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Yangzi Delta* the Levenson Prize from the Association for Asian Studies.

At this stage in his career, Huang had not yet explicitly articulated the complex implications of “practice” in his research, but instead focused on using objective empirical evidence to reveal the multidimensional behavior of peasants. In the process of engaging with and juxtaposing these findings against established theoretical frameworks, he uncovered numerous “paradoxes”—contradictions between empirical realities and theoretical assumptions—such as “involutionary commercialization” and “growth without development.” If we relate these early works to the three types of practice that Huang later elaborated on in his historical research on the law, it becomes clear that his initial studies on the peasant economy were primarily concerned with “practice” as opposed to theory. That is, he emphasized the “action-oriented” dimension of practice and its contradictions with classical theoretical frameworks.

Three Dimensions of Practice: As Opposed to Theory, Representation, and Institutions

In the late 1980s, with the opening of local legal archives from the Qing dynasty, Huang shifted his focus to legal history. His 1996 monograph, *Civil Justice in China: Representation and Practice in the Qing*, drew on 628 civil cases from Ba county in Sichuan (1760s–1850s), Baodi county in Hebei (1810–1900s), and the Danshui-Xinzhu region in Taiwan (1830s–1890s); 128 cases from Shunyi county in Hebei dating from the early Republican period to the 1930s; and 41 detailed disputes from 1920 to 1942 in Shajing in Shunyi county, Sibeichai in Luancheng county, and Houjiaying in Changli county (all in Hebei), as documented by the Research Office of the South Manchurian Railway Company.³ Huang’s work directly challenged long-standing scholarly views—based on the Qing state’s moral rhetoric—that civil litigation was rare in Qing courts, that the increase in lawsuits during the dynasty was merely the result of immoral people and corrupt yamen clerks, and that magistrates relied more on moral exhortation than legal adjudication in such cases. In contrast, Huang argued that the Qing legal system was characterized by the flexible coexistence of representation and practice. The representations of a highly moralized official discourse coexisted alongside

pragmatic court practices, both influencing each other, and formed a distinctive model of legal practice Huang described as “practical moralism.” This model stood in stark contrast to the formal rationality of the law as described in Max Weber’s theories (Huang, 2024a [1996]).

In his first monograph on legal history, Huang particularly emphasized the importance of practice compared to representation, with his concept of the “third realm” serving as a key example. According to the official moral rhetoric of the dynasty, civil disputes were supposed to be resolved through informal mediation within the community, without state judicial intervention; even when county magistrates accepted civil cases, their role was only to mediate and facilitate settlements. However, archival evidence revealed a different reality—local governments frequently handled civil disputes, and county magistrates did not merely perform “didactic conciliation” in court (Shiga, 2022 [1984]). In the vast majority of cases, Qing magistrates adjudicated disputes in accordance with the law. Moreover, before a case reached a formal verdict, the magistrate’s comments on petitions and their instructions to local *xiangbao* 乡保 or yamen clerks to investigate the facts also facilitated dispute resolution within a “third realm” between informal mediation and formal adjudication (Huang, 2024a [1996]: 123–51). In short, disputes were not confined to either informal mediation or formal adjudication; there existed a semiformal “third realm” for settling disputes—a space that was completely unimagined in official Qing moral representation, but that existed in practice.

Postmodern discourse theory inspired Huang’s focus on “representation.” According to postmodern theorists such as Edward Said and Clifford Geertz, discourse is the externalization of ideology and embodies the power relations of domination and control. The moralistic exhortations about civil law in Qing official discourse reflected not reality but a normative vision with a deep ideological logic behind it, making the study of Qing discourse indispensable for understanding the complexity of Qing law. The other side of the law was the practical strategies adopted by local magistrates, many of which contradicted official moral discourse. The combination of these two elements in the system led Huang to characterize traditional Chinese law as a form of “practical moralism.”

Philip Huang’s next monograph on the law, *Code, Custom, and Legal Practice: The Qing and the Republic Compared* was published in 2001. In the book, Huang continued to use local legal archives to examine the evolution of legal practices in five commonly contested areas of civil law—conditional sales of land, topsoil ownership, debt, old-age support, and marriage—from the Qing through the Republican era. Although the legal codes of the Guomindang and the Qing dynasty were significantly different,

there was a strong continuity in social customs, and how the law was adapted to or in conflict with those customs was reflected in judicial practice. Overall, the Republican codes incorporated Western legal conceptual frameworks while retaining practical provisions that aligned with customary practices. Social customs, while continuing, also came to be influenced by the codes and judicial practices. Meanwhile, judicial practices continuously mediated between the codes and customs, adopting pragmatic approaches that often avoided ideological considerations (Huang, 2024b [2001]).

The book opens with an “emphasis on legal practice and the ‘logic of practice’” (Huang, 2024b [2001]: preface to the Chinese edition), but the type of “practice” highlighted in the book differs somewhat from the concept of practice discussed in *Civil Justice in China: Representation and Practice*. In this later volume, Huang placed greater emphasis on practice in relation to formal institutions (and legal provisions). In the earlier work, Huang stressed that there was no logical contradiction between subjective moral representations and objective practical actions in the Qing legal system; rather, the two converged under the logic of practice characterized by “practical moralism.” *Code, Custom, and Legal Practice*, however, reminds us that, compared to the Qing, greater attention must be paid to the divergence between legal codes and judicial practices in the Republican period, as a result of the complex and popular customs that persisted from the Qing into the “modern” era. If we take inheritance law during the Republic as an example, we see that the Guomindang’s *Civil Code* of 1929–1930 granted equal inheritance rights to men and women, but legislators chose not to apply the law in rural areas because of traditional popular customs. According to popular customs, sons were supposed to stay in their native villages and take care of their elderly parents, as opposed to daughters who married out of the village. In rural areas, then, judicial practice continued to only recognize the inheritance rights of sons, but Guomindang legislators never revised the appropriate legal provisions accordingly. Instead, they allowed contradictory provisions and judicial practices to coexist (Huang, 2024b [2001]: 147–68).

Huang’s understanding of “practice” in relation to formal legal institutions (and provisions) was largely inherited from Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice. It focuses on the evolution of institutions and structures, emphasizes the mutual construction between social structures and individual actions, and highlights the resulting dual interaction and unification produced in the process—for example, how Republican legislators allowed contradictory legal provisions and judicial practices to coexist. Huang’s concept of “practice,” however, also differs significantly from Bourdieu’s theory of practice, which I will discuss below.

Huang's research on legal history continued the style of his work on the peasant economy, both in terms of archival materials and problematics—employing a wealth of fresh, “gets right to the bottom” empirical evidence while rejecting the mere accumulation of data; synthesizing Western social science theories while avoiding simplistic theoretical applications; and emphasizing the connection between practice and theory to uncover overlooked paradoxical facts. That said, Huang also recognized the key differences between his work on legal history and that on the peasant economy. His work on legal history had to engage with customs and practices, but also with the discursive constructs and institutional structures of the state. Thus, whereas his work on peasants focused on the “action” dimension of practice and its contradictions with classical theoretical frameworks, his work on legal history went further by elucidating the tensions between practice on the one hand and official discourse and institutional arrangements on the other. From this perspective, Huang's elaboration of “practice” in his work on legal history began to transcend the most common meaning of “action.” If his research on the peasant economy compared the predictive insights of classical economic theory to the actual behavior of peasants, his interpretation of traditional Chinese law moved beyond a focus on “action” to explore two additional dimensions of practice: discursive and institutional. Together, these elements form Huang's three-dimensional interpretation of practice—that is, practice as opposed to theory, practice as opposed to discourse/representation, and practice as opposed to formal institutions and laws.

Both of Huang's monographs on legal history focus on the complex evolution of ordinary people's civil rights during the transition to modernity and their encounters in the courtroom, pioneering an innovative approach to legal history through extensive use of county- and prefecture-level judicial archives. The analytical framework of “representation and practice” has gradually gained acceptance and widespread application in the field of legal history in China. However, many studies have oversimplified it as merely “legal codes and judicial practices,” with few incorporating Huang's broader concept of “representation” or achieving the kind of integrated analysis that encompasses discourse, institutions, theory, and practice as he advocated.

Law and Peasants in the History of Practice

After completing his research on the traditional Chinese peasant economy and the legal system, Philip Huang shifted his focus to contemporary China's problems. This shift was closely related to his retirement from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), in 2004 and the beginning of his teaching in China in 2005. Around that time, he began writing primarily for

Chinese audiences in Chinese, transforming his previously passive concern for and reflections on China's contemporary problems into active engagement and research, which led to a series of articles discussing the prospects of China's peasant economy and the modernity of Chinese law. These articles, together with the core empirical findings and theoretical insights from his first four monographs, were compiled into a book entitled *Experience and Theory: The History of Practice in Chinese Society, Economy, and Law* 经验与理论: 中国社会、经济与法律的实践历史研究, published in 2007.

In this book, Huang explicitly articulated his research approach to “the history of practice” 实践历史. Unlike his earlier works, Huang not only re-emphasized new empirical discoveries and theoretical concepts such as “agricultural involution,” the “third realm,” and “practical moralism,” but also aimed to describe and demonstrate how he had arrived at these findings and developed these concepts. That is, he provided a methodological explanation for how to study the “history of practice” and how to closely link experience with theory (Huang, 2024c [2007]). A number of the new insights and reflections on contemporary problems discussed in this book—such as the practice of divorce law and the historical opportunities for the development of the peasant economy—later became central themes in his subsequent monographs.

In *The Past and the Present: Chinese Civil Justice in Practice* 过去和现在: 中国民事法律实践的探索, published in 2009, Huang continued to work on the “history of practice,” but extended his study of traditional Chinese law into the contemporary period. Viewed solely from the perspective of “theory,” Huang argued, the nearly century-long transformation of Chinese law appears as a rupture in theoretical traditions, self-negation in legal codes, and wholesale Westernization. From the perspective of the “history of practice,” however, the distinctive features of traditional Chinese law and its “practical moralism” persisted through a century of legal reforms, and new legal principles were formed around them. Examples of these continuities included traditional community mediation, the expansion of the “third realm” in dispute resolution and local administration, creative connections between responsibilities for elder care and inheritance rights, the establishment of a no-fault liability principle, court mediation in divorce proceedings, and divorce jurisprudence based on the “breakdown of affection” 感情是否破裂, among others. In short, Huang argued that the modernity of Chinese law did not lie in wholesale adoption of Western formalist law or in rigid adherence to Chinese tradition, but rather in the long-term coexistence and interplay between the precision of Western formal rationalism and the flexibility of Chinese practical moralism. The history of practice approach does not prioritize theory, discourse, institutions, or practice alone; instead, it seeks to

understand and articulate the “logic of practice” formed through the long-term interaction between them (Huang, 2024d [2009]).

Huang’s next two monographs, *China’s Hidden Agricultural Revolution* 中国的隐性农业革命 and *Beyond Left and Right: The History of Practice and Rural Development in China* 超越左右: 实践历史与中国农村的发展, published in 2010 and 2014, respectively, both embody his reflections and ideas about how to develop the peasant economy in contemporary China.⁴

An examination grounded in the history of practice reveals that, because of the enduring reality of limited arable land relative to population size, China’s agricultural practices have often diverged from the theoretical constructs of Western economics, whether Marxist or neoliberal. China’s peasant economy currently stands at the convergence of three pivotal historical changes: the migration of over two hundred million rural laborers to urban employment, the transformation of food consumption patterns, and a slowdown in the growth of the labor force as a result of the family planning policy. An effective way to ensure full employment and increased income for small family farms is to seize this historic opportunity to transition from extensive grain cultivation to “capital- and labor-intensive” small-scale livestock raising and/or vegetable and fruit farming (especially greenhouse vegetables on plots of 1, 3, or 5 *mu*). Huang described this ongoing structural transformation as the “hidden agricultural revolution, which embodies the potential for China’s small-scale farmers to “overcome involution” (Huang, 2010; 2024e [2014]: parts 1 and 2).⁵

In *Beyond Left and Right*, Huang not only identified development opportunities for the peasant household economy within the “hidden agricultural revolution,” but also its potential as a solution to certain social crises. Contrary to Marxist and neoliberal assumptions that China’s peasant economy would be replaced by capitalist production, it has instead formed a resilient “agriculture + sideline” 农业+副业 production model under population pressure. This demographic pressure and family-based economic model have given rise to a vast informal labor force—accounting, in 2010, for 83.2 percent of total employment. These workers log 1.5 times the hours of their formal sector counterparts but earn only 60 percent of the latter’s wages, receive virtually no welfare benefits, and are excluded from the protection of national labor laws. This reality strongly refutes theories predicting China’s imminent transition to an “olive-shaped” social structure or the arrival of a “Lewis turning point.” While new institutional economics attributes China’s reform-era achievements entirely to marketization and privatization, the truth is that local governments have driven growth by leveraging the informal economy and informal methods—such as cheap labor, land expropriation, evasion of labor and environmental regulations, tax breaks, and cash

subsidies—alongside high investment returns of about 20 percent, thus attracting robust investments. Therefore, the informal economy is both the root of China’s economic growth during the reform era and the source of the widening wealth gap. At the time, Chongqing’s reforms demonstrated a practice that transcended the theoretical dichotomy between the left’s insistence on total control under a planned economy and the right’s advocacy for laissez-faire free markets: a strong local government harnessing market-generated value and profits to serve public welfare, relying on rising prosperity to sustain healthy economic development. This approach creatively channeled market dynamism toward public interests, yielding relatively healthy economic and social conditions in the short term (Huang, 2024e [2014]: parts three and four).

In the 2010s, Huang’s approach to the “history of practice,” while continuing to build on the analysis of solid empirical evidence and the critical application of theory, places greater emphasis on the connection between history and the present. The “practical moralism” in traditional Chinese law transcended theoretical and textual ruptures and negations, and became the guiding philosophy behind many newly established legal principles today. The dilemma of “involution” in the traditional Chinese peasant economy led Huang to explore how contemporary smallholders could escape population, land scarcity, and labor-intensive development. In this process, he also uncovered challenges brought about by the informal economy. By linking experience and theory, Huang identified numerous paradoxical phenomena in China’s past and present—not only the “paradoxes” between Western theory and Chinese realities, but also the paradoxes within China’s own discourses, theories, and realities. By connecting the past to the present, Huang was able to describe the uniquely Chinese logic of practice and a way of thinking characterized by the dualistic unity of these paradoxical realities. Understanding these two layers of connection allows one to grasp how Huang’s research and his “history of practice” approach have sought to overcome the normative epistemological crisis in China studies caused by Western binary theories and discourses.

Building on this foundation, Huang published his second theoretical and methodological work, entitled *Practice and Theory: The Past and Present of Chinese Society, Economy, and Law* 实践与理论: 中国社会经济史与法律史研究, in 2015. Starting with reflections on paradoxical phenomena and theoretical traps, he presented research ideas and approaches for specific fields such as the legal history of practice, the economic history of practice, the informal economy, and the state and the economic system (Huang, 2024f [2015]). Compared to the earlier *Experience and Theory*, which emphasized that theory should be rooted in empirical reality, this book placed greater

focus on the “logic of practice” behind experience and the process of its formation, especially how “practice,” as distinct from “experience,” consciously transcends binary oppositions such as the “subjective and objective” 主观与客观.

It was also in this book that Huang first explicitly described the “social science of practice.” Earlier, in 2005, he had published an article entitled “Understanding China: Towards a Social Science Based on Practice” 认识中国: 走向从实践出发的社会科学 in the journal *The Social Sciences in China* 中国社会科学. In the article, Huang proposed to “move toward establishing social sciences and theories based on practice,” meaning “starting from knowledge based on practice, then elevating it to theoretical concepts, and finally returning to practice for verification” (Huang, 2024f [2015]: 240). The examples he gave in 2005, however, were still based on his new empirical discoveries and theoretical summaries in the field of historical research. Over the following decade, as Huang continued to expand his research into contemporary law, the peasant economy, and the informal economy, the meaning of the “social science of practice” evolved to encompass not only the connection between experience and theory but also the linkage between the past and the present.⁶ In other words, if Huang’s historical scholarship transcended the “spatial rupture” between Western theory and Chinese experience as well as the “intertwinement of the ideal and the real” between official discourse and actual practice, then his studies on contemporary issues and recommended pathways for development consciously went beyond the “temporal gap” between Chinese history and the present. Both of these transcendences were grounded in his fundamental understanding of “practice,” which overcomes the binary opposition between subjective constructions and objective experiences.

Dualistic Unity and a Prospective Vision of Practice

Philip Huang’s research into the social science of practice did not stop at elucidating the binary opposition between the subjective and the objective; it is also marked by a distinctively prospective or forward-looking vision. In 2020, he published three monographs in succession: *China’s New Justice System: Practice and Theory* 中国的新型正义体系: 实践与理论, *China’s New Peasant Economy: Practice and Theory* 中国的新型小农经济: 实践与理论, and *China’s New Informal Economy: Practice and Theory* 中国的新型非正规经济: 实践与理论. The identical subtitles reveal a consistent “social science of practice” approach—extracting theoretical concepts from practice, then returning to practice to verify those theoretical insights. His use of “new” in each title directly points to forward-looking questions about the

future directions of China's justice system, peasant economy, and informal economy. Among these prospective visions, Huang's thoughts on "dualistic (or pluralistic) unity" 二元(或多元)合一 stand out especially prominently.

In *China's New Justice System: Practice and Theory*, Huang continued his observations on the history of legal practice in China, evincing the uniqueness of Chinese law—both ancient and modern—in balancing prospective moral concepts and pragmatic strategies, and in integrating Western rights theory with Chinese moral concepts. Huang argues that China's current and future justice system should fully incorporate three major traditions: first, the ancient "Chinese legal tradition," especially its noble moral ideals and its combination of informal popular mediation, formal adjudication, and the semiformal "third realm"; second, the contemporary legal system transplanted from the West during the contemporary and reform eras, based on formal rationality and individual rights; and third, the multifaceted system of party, government, and law inherited from China's revolutionary tradition. His analysis differs from "transplantism" 移植主义 and its emphasis on the superiority of formal rationality and "nativism" 本土主义 with its emphasis on the excavation of traditional resources, but it is even more different from "pluralism" 多元主义, which merely describes differences. Instead, Huang emphasizes the pluralistic integration of multiple traditions to transcend binary oppositions such as morality versus the law, the past versus the present, tradition versus modernity, and China versus the West. This approach can help create a precisely integrated, truly sustainable new "law for all ages" that combines the three major traditions with moral prospective vision and formal rationality (Huang, 2020a).

In *China's New Peasant Economy: Practice and Theory*, Huang argues from the perspective of the history of practice that, contrary to the assumptions of neoliberalism and classical Marxist theory—which predicted the replacement of small peasant family farms by large-scale capitalist wage-labor farms—China's historical and contemporary peasant households have persisted resiliently despite the constraints of limited land and abundant labor. This endurance is achieved through a "part-worker, part-cultivator" 半工半耕 model based on an intergenerational division of labor: agriculture is maintained by auxiliary labor (such as the elderly or women), while younger, able-bodied family members migrate for off-farm work. The nonagricultural income of small peasant households has become the primary source of capital investment necessary for China's agricultural development, including capital-intensive "new agriculture." Today, small family farms—which account for about one-third of all cultivated land—dominate China's high-value-added agricultural sector, producing nearly two-thirds of total agricultural output. This demonstrates that small-scale family farms have been and remain

the backbone of Chinese agriculture, exhibiting greater economic competitiveness and vitality than the Western classical model of large-scale wage-labor production. Given this objective reality, China's future agricultural development should firmly focus on small family farms, moving beyond the ideological expectations (whether left or right) of promoting horizontally integrated large-scale farms. Instead, the state should draw lessons from the agricultural cooperative experiences of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, leveraging China's unique community-based institutions to channel state support to farmer cooperatives. By establishing a vertically integrated service system, smallholders can be effectively connected to broader markets (Huang, 2020b).

In *China's New Informal Economy: Practice and Theory*, Huang focuses on exploring the prospective question of where China's informal economy is headed. A large portion of informal workers—who lack legal protections and social welfare support—come from small peasant households engaged in the “part-worker, part-cultivator” livelihood strategy, while others include employees laid off from state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in the late 1990s and, more recently, the vast number of “dispatched workers” 劳务派遣工 employed by SOEs, public institutions, and private enterprises. By 2015, informal workers accounted for roughly three-quarters of all urban employees. Highly ideological free-market proponents argue that the informal economy unleashes entrepreneurial potential, believing that unfettered market mechanisms will naturally optimize resource allocation. Meanwhile, highly ideological Marxists contend that the state should regulate or even eliminate the informal sector, replacing it with state-provided public services and social welfare. Yet China's actual economic development reveals a different reality: The abundance of cheap informal labor has been a key bargaining chip for local governments in attracting investment, serving as one of the foundational drivers of China's growth during the reform era, but it has also exacerbated wealth inequality. In response, Huang proposed a comprehensive reform plan that transcends the binary oppositions between the state and the market, development, and justice. First, development should be driven by fairness, enabling migrant workers to integrate into cities with dignity through government-guaranteed institutional protections covering income, housing, healthcare, and children's education. Second, labor laws must be reformed to genuinely reformatize workers, progressively extending legal protections to them (Huang, 2020c).

Building on the objective realities of Chinese law, the peasant economy, and the informal economy—all of which defy the mutually exclusive binaries projected by both left and right classical theories—Huang proposed a series of prospective ideas in these three works. Central to his framework is a

dualistic (or pluralistic) unity and an integrative approach combining Chinese and Western perspectives. For example, he argues that Chinese law must transcend rigid binaries like morality vs. the law or China vs. the West, instead forging a system that precisely integrates the three major traditions with both moral prospective vision and formal rationality. Agricultural development, he argued, should be based on small family farms rather than capitalist agribusinesses, leveraging vertical integration to connect them to broader markets while recognizing their market potential. The informal economy's challenges and opportunities demand a developmental imperative that balances social equity with economic growth, rather than privileging one over the other.

This dualistic and integrated way of thinking about China and the West is nowhere more evident than in Philip Huang's third theoretical and methodological work, *The Dualistic Unity of State and Society: Historical Retrospect and Prospective Vision* 国家与社会的二元合一：中国历史回顾与前瞻 (Huang, 2022b). Unlike his first two theoretical and methodological works—both based on empirical evidence from rural areas, the law, and the informal economy—this book starts with Huang's reflections on China's governance system to present his methodological insights. Over the past century, Huang argues, a series of binary constructs such as “China and the West,” “tradition and modernity,” and “state and market” have not only served as the fundamental frameworks through which the West views China (e.g., Western-centric perspectives), but have also profoundly influenced China's understanding of itself (e.g., China-centric perspectives). But these binary oppositional theoretical constructs have obscured the reality of China's state governance system. First, China's semiformal local governance system—dominated by quasi-officials and dispute resolution—embodies the dualistic unity of a highly centralized central state with a low level of local penetration. This tradition of “centralized minimalist governance” 集权的简约治理 has persisted from the past into the present. Today, in the justice system, rural governance, and economic development, state institutions rely simultaneously on the formal administrative system and the informal community system, and the enormous “third realm” formed through their interaction. The positive collaboration between state and society in this third realm can release tremendous energy, stimulating local government entrepreneurship and rural revitalization. These practices of dualistic unity are completely different from the binary opposition of “state and society” as constructed in Western theory.

Second, the Chinese government has played a key role in economic development during the reform era. With strong state support and its active involvement, state-owned enterprises successfully entered the global market and engaged in profit-driven competition—a phenomenon that Western economic

theories, which emphasize the binary oppositions of “market vs. state” and “private vs. public,” fail to comprehend. Although China’s economic development has also brought about issues such as social inequality and environmental crises, the future direction of reform should not be the elimination of profitable SOEs, as advocated by neoliberal economics, but rather the channeling of their profits toward more public welfare, thereby making them serve society and achieving a deeper integration of the market economy and social justice.

Third, China’s “Belt and Road Initiative” and the Asian Infrastructure Bank provide neighboring countries with essential infrastructure and developmental momentum, followed by equitable and mutually beneficial trade. This practical approach demonstrates China’s groundbreaking understanding of the “market economy”: leveraging comparative advantages between parties with different resource endowments to achieve significant productivity gains through fair and reciprocal exchange. Entirely free from the hegemonic mindset inherent in Western liberal expansion, it proves that a market economy can also operate in close coordination with public ownership and an effective government.

Finally, China can also apply its insights on the “market economy” to address urban-rural relations. By advancing large-scale rural infrastructure development—including the establishment of efficient and modern logistics systems—the state can facilitate the production and sale of high-value-added agricultural products, enabling mutually beneficial two-way trade and interactions between urban and rural areas.

In summary, Huang argues, we must recognize that the modern West, while upholding the noble ideals of freedom and democracy, has also been marked by the realities of imperialism, colonialism, and hegemony. Liberalism is merely an ideological framework for its self-justification, and binary oppositions such as “state vs. society,” “market economy vs. state intervention,” and “liberal democracy vs. authoritarianism” are little more than one-sidedly constructed ideal types. China’s governance practices demonstrate a completely different path of dualistic unity—one that transcends such dichotomies and synthesizes oppositional theories and left-right ideologies. This path stems from both the traditional Chinese dualistic unity of moralism in principle and pragmatism in practice, as well as the revolutionary tradition of the Communist Party of China, which is deeply rooted in and actively engages with the people. It further arises from the theoretical and practical innovations of China’s reform era, which combined “socialism” with a “market economy.” Therefore, the prospective developmental path of China’s governance system differs not only from the Western model of a minimalist state but also from the top-down control characteristic of

revolutionary tradition. Instead, it should be characterized by active interaction and effective participation between the state, society, and the people.

The Threefold Transcendence of the Social Science of Practice

After completing his research on the historical, present, and future dimensions of China's peasant economy, justice system, informal economy, and state governance, Philip Huang turned his focus to elucidating the essence of the "social science of practice." His findings were ultimately compiled in *The Social Science of Practice: Method, Theory, and Prospective Vision* 实践社会科学的方法、理论与前瞻, published in 2023 (Huang, 2023b). This book is Huang's fourth monograph on theory and methodology and stands as his most comprehensive exposition and interpretation of the concept and approach of the "social science of practice." Tracing its development reveals that the "social science of practice" is not merely a research method aimed at understanding China's realities and addressing its challenges but also an academic philosophy grounded in seeking truth from facts. It transcends either/or binary thinking on three distinct levels.

First, the social science of practice transcends the binary opposition between subjectivity and objectivity. Huang's elaboration on "practice" is closely linked to Bourdieu's theory of practice. By employing the key concepts of habitus and symbolic capital, Bourdieu extended Marxist class analysis from the material to the symbolic level, thereby breaking through the epistemological and methodological dichotomies in Western social science—such as structuralism versus voluntarism and objectivism versus subjectivism. Bourdieu's theory of practice critically reexamines the methodological approach of understanding the objective world through theoretical frameworks. Whether subjectivism or objectivism, voluntarism or structuralism, their essence lies not in comprehending objective reality but in transforming this endeavor into an intellectual game for scholars—one that seeks to assert the superiority of knowledge acquired through great effort, even justifying privilege on the basis of that superiority. In other words, Bourdieu argues that all theories contain an unexamined trap: The scholar's subjective relationship with the world remains unobjectified, leading them to observe and interpret reality through preconceived theoretical assumptions and presuppositions. This type of theoretical rationality inevitably implies falsity because, from the outset, it cannot transcend the binary nature of epistemic approaches (Bourdieu, 2003).

Huang recognized the enormous potential of Bourdieu's theory of practice. The "social science of practice" that Huang advocates first and foremost

seeks to transcend the binary opposition between subjective theory and objective facts prevalent in mainstream Western social science research. It argues that the real world does not reside in either subjectivity or objectivity alone, nor in their binary opposition, but rather in their dynamic interaction and unity. Building on this fundamental premise, both Huang and Bourdieu sharply critique liberal theory for “objectifying” its subjective notions—such as liberalism and market ideology—into empirical reality and universalized ideals. On this foundation, Huang further integrates the theoretical tradition of substantivism 实质主义. Unlike liberalism, which proceeds from the assumption of the rational economic man, substantivism pays closer attention to the multifaceted nature of individuals as natural, social, and economic beings. Factors such as economic interests, subsistence pressures, and psychological conditions all shape their actions—a perspective vividly illustrated in Huang’s analysis of the three-dimensional nature of traditional Chinese peasants.

However, unlike Bourdieu, Huang places greater emphasis on the intertwinement and interaction of dual subjective-objective systems shaped by two cultural influences. Although Bourdieu conducted anthropological participant observation in the Kabylia region of Algeria, his focus was primarily on reconstructing the pre-modern cultural conditions of the area before French colonization. As a result, he did not account for the cultural duality of “Third World” countries subjected to prolonged Western domination, nor did he consider the complexity of practice emerging out of the contradictions and tensions between two sets of subjective-objective systems. Huang’s research on the justice system, for example, profoundly acknowledges how contemporary Chinese law has been shaped by three traditions: the transplanted Western formal rational legal system, the practical moralism of the traditional Chinese legal system, and the revolutionary tradition.

Second, the social science of practice transcends the binary opposition between the past and the present. While nearly all historians agree that historical research should engage with contemporary concerns, the relationship between history and the present does not lie in simple “mirroring” or “borrowing,” but rather in genuinely understanding the logic of practice shaped by long-term historical evolution. This understanding becomes even more crucial for modern China. The intense shocks inflicted upon China by the West—ranging from military force and ideological-cultural influences to the wholesale restructuring of knowledge systems—have repeatedly compelled China to abandon traditions deemed “backward” or “pre-modern.” As a result, Chinese traditions (including its pragmatic moralist legal tradition and the resilient small peasant family farm economy) were severed from contemporary reality, and dismissed as irrelevant to modern life. Consequently,

much historical research on China either consciously avoids addressing present realities or only vaguely gestures toward “reviving tradition.” As noted earlier, Huang’s work deliberately bridges the past and the present—a distinctive feature of his “social science of practice” approach.

Huang’s “social science of practice” approach, with its emphasis on bridging the past and the present, is deeply intertwined with his critical reflections on formalism, the theory of practice, and substantivism/pragmatism. For formalist theories, the relationship between history and the present is neither complex nor crucial. This is because formalism unilaterally reduces empirical reality to idealized typologies, presenting them as highly scientific and universal—thereby claiming natural applicability to both present and future contexts. Bourdieu’s theory of practice, meanwhile, prioritizes a dual corrective—recognizing objective reality while exposing theoretical traps—within the same temporal dimension. However, it does not account for long-term historical trends over time. Even though Bourdieu acknowledges that habitus is historically constituted, this “history” is limited to an individual’s lifespan and does not engage with the *longue durée* evolution of national institutions and social structures. Substantivism/pragmatism, for its part, focuses on highlighting the complexity of the real world, critiquing the reductivism of formalist epistemology and navigating its constraints. While Huang values substantivism/pragmatism and the theory of practice for their role in revealing real-world dynamics and transcending mainstream formalized theories and ideological traditions, he also clearly identified their lack of prospective guidance for contemporary and future practice.

From the very inception of his “history of practice” approach, Philip Huang has placed special emphasis on understanding the evolutionary logic of practice over long historical periods and the transformative dynamics embedded within it. With the development of his “social science of practice” framework, he has further focused on imbuing it with a prospective vision. In his view, while the epistemology of practice/substantivist/pragmatist thought can liberate us from the universalist constructs of formalist theory, it lacks a set of criteria to distinguish between “good” and “bad” practices—a standard that must not, like the prescriptive claims of formalism, carry with it discursive or ideological hegemony. He argues that the social science of practice must first derive developmental directions, opportunities, and driving forces from the logic of practice. For instance, it must recognize that the resilient family farm has persisted from the Ming and Qing dynasties through collectivization to the reform period and that it remains key to China’s new agrarian economy; it must also recognize how the moralized ideals and pragmatic legal practices in China’s justice system have coexisted and interacted as a fundamental dynamic of its evolution. Second, the social science of practice must also ground value

judgments of “good” and “bad” in revered moral principles from Chinese tradition that are widely recognized by the people—such as the Confucian virtues of “benevolence” and “do not impose upon others what you yourself do not desire” or the revolutionary tradition of “serving the people.” This synthesis forms a prospective epistemology and methodology (Huang, 2023b: 275–77). In short, by tightly interweaving the past and the present, history and reality, the social science of practice not only makes up for the long-term historical dimension missing from the theory of practice but also adds a nonhegemonic, prospective vision—one robust enough to counterbalance the conceptual and discursive systems of formalism.

Finally, the social science of practice transcends the binary opposition between left and right ideologies. Marxism and neoliberalism, as the two most influential theoretical paradigms in the world today, are both deeply intertwined with ideology. The dichotomy and divergence between left and right manifest in numerous ways—for example, the left advocates for a completely planned economy while the right believes in *laissez-faire* free markets; the left emphasizes a strong state over society while the right prefers minimal state intervention. Beyond employing the theory of practice to overcome the epistemological divide between subjectivity and objectivity, the social science of practice also incorporates postmodernism’s critique of dominant ideologies. Postmodernism rigorously deconstructs modernist theories, arguing that their so-called universal principles are not objective reality but rather discursive constructs that externalize ideology. In other words, both left and right ideologies, through discursive practices, elevate their abstract ideal types into authoritative and exclusionary universal frameworks. This discursive practice not only seeks to legitimize their own theoretical systems but also attempts to present their abstract values and institutional models as universally applicable norms.

The “social science of practice” incorporates postmodernism’s skepticism and critique of modernist theories like liberalism and Marxism, remaining highly vigilant about the ideological underpinnings of theories and their impact on practice. While a focus on practice can reveal the binary divide between the subjective and the objective, it cannot fully resolve it—after all, practice itself is invariably accompanied by a discursive system that may either converge with practice or diverge from reality. Thus, Huang’s conception of “practice” from the outset encompasses not only practice as opposed to theory and institutions, but also practice as opposed to discourse. Going further, the social science of practice firmly rejects formulating prospective visions on the basis of ideological differences. However, it is crucial to note that while the social science of practice draws on postmodernism’s emphasis on discourse and its deconstruction of ideology, it categorically opposes

postmodernism's epistemological nihilism—the claim that everything is discourse and there is no such thing as the truth.

The Social Science of Practice and Building China's Independent Knowledge System

Currently, the construction of China's independent knowledge system 中国自主知识体系 has risen to the level of a national strategy, demanding that it “take addressing China's issues as its logical starting point, use Chinese materials as its foundation, and express China's position as its guiding direction” (Zhang, 2024: 96). The establishment of an independent knowledge system carries a profound sense of historical mission and contemporary urgency for the fields of Chinese history and social sciences. This is because many pivotal theories in China's social sciences originate from Western knowledge frameworks and systems, to the extent that “many in Chinese academia regard Western economics (or social sciences) as universal, believing that China has no need to construct its own social sciences” (Zheng, 2024). To alter the long-standing subordinate status of Chinese academia, it is imperative to focus on China's practical issues, pursue scholarly innovation with subjectivity and autonomy, and develop new concepts and theories that better align with China's realities. Therefore, given that Western modernization theories have already established dominant research paradigms and wield discursive hegemony, the construction of China's independent knowledge system demands even greater critical awareness and breakthrough capabilities.

Philip Huang's exploration of the “social science of practice” begins with a concern for ordinary people and is grounded in rigorous empirical research. While investigating the nature of China's traditional peasant economy and legal system, he identified the paradoxical relationship between China's historical empirical realities and the subjective theoretical assumptions of the West, leading him to develop numerous original concepts that closely fit actual conditions. By bridging history and contemporary reality, he highlighted the enduring resilience of the peasant family economic structure and the tradition of moral pragmatism in the law, as well as the dualistic complexities of the informal economy and the state governance system. Going even further, Huang critically examined the insights and limitations of theoretical traditions such as liberalism, Marxism, various forms of rationalism (practical, substantive, and pragmatic), and postmodernism. On this basis, he advocates for a social science of practice that moves “from practice to theoretical generalization, then back to practice for verification,” while also proposing a prospective vision for China's development path—one that embodies

lofty moral ideals and transcends ideological disputes. Tracing the formation of the “social science of practice” reveals that this is not only Huang’s personal intellectual journey—synthesizing Chinese and Western thought, transcending three major dichotomies, and creating new concepts and approaches—but also the research direction and practical path he has illuminated for the construction of China’s independent knowledge system for the social sciences.

For researchers in the broader field of social sciences, the “social science of practice” provides both methodological and conceptual guidance for constructing China’s independent knowledge system, serving as a model in the following two respects.

First, in terms of research methodology, the social science of practice argues against the overemphasis on deductive and inductive logic found in the natural sciences. Instead, it advocates starting from “inductive observations of real-world empirical evidence, employing reasoned conjecture and inference to uncover the logical relationships between specific empirical conditions, thereby deriving insights that align with reality and constructing theories with defined conditions and boundaries—and finally returning to the empirical world for verification” (Huang, 2024f: 768). The natural sciences deal with an inorganic world characterized by rigid binary oppositions, exhibiting a strong universalist and purely objectivist tendency, emphasizing the use of deduction and induction to establish absolute, universally applicable laws. In contrast, the human world is filled with complex interactions between binaries such as objectivity and subjectivity, theory and experience, modernity and tradition, and the West and China. Simplistic scientism or formalist reasoning cannot produce nuanced generalizations; more often, they result in unrealistic, ideologically driven ideal-type constructions that diverge from reality.

For researchers, when they are heavily influenced by ideology or the hegemony of a single culture, there is a risk of imposing subjective interpretations onto empirical evidence—and of relying on familiar or favored theoretical frameworks to analyze their subjects. This makes it highly likely that they will overlook empirical paradoxes or fall into theoretical traps. Conversely, if researchers remain unaware of the immense influence of theory and the ideology behind it, they may confine themselves to the superficial accumulation of empirical data without intentional abstraction or generalization. In such cases, they are even less capable of developing a critical understanding of existing theories.

Chinese historical research has long prioritized factual reconstruction over abstract theorization, resulting in many significant theoretical frameworks

about Chinese history having been developed by Western historians deeply influenced by the social sciences. As early as the beginning of this century, Chinese historians like Yang Nianqun critiqued this “craftsman-style” approach for “only pulling the cart without looking at the road” and advocated adopting “mid-level theory” 中层理论 to better interpret China’s historical experiences (Yang, 2015 [2001]). However, current Chinese historical studies still struggle to fully integrate and critically engage with social science theories. Researchers often oscillate between two extremes: either fixating on empirical minutiae, producing fragmented studies devoid of theoretical synthesis; or mechanically applying imported frameworks, falling into conceptual traps that prioritize theory over historical specificity.

The field of Chinese legal studies exhibits even deeper fractures. Contemporary scholarship predominantly focuses on constructing a formally rational legal system, while studies of premodern law lean toward historical empiricism, aiming to reconstruct the concrete realities of legal practices. The latter serves as a repository of particularized historical experiences, offering corrective or supplementary perspectives to modern universalizing norms. The disconnection between historical and contemporary perspectives in legal studies has left the imperative to “build upon the foundation of China’s excellent traditional culture”—a core requirement for constructing an independent knowledge system—without a clear direction. This issue extends even more profoundly and stubbornly into broader social science research, where the trends of “scientization” and “formalization” have taken deeper root. While many disciplines appear increasingly scientific in their knowledge systems, they have paradoxically become more detached from reality. These research approaches urgently need to change.

The “social science of practice” approach requires researchers to begin with China’s rich empirical evidence, full of contradictions and tensions, and to use their own sense of truth to make the most grounded judgments and generalizations, thereby advancing theoretical exploration rooted in a desire to “seek the truth.” In this process, a researcher’s life experiences and educational background may limit their capacity for authentic understanding. The solution lies in transcending the binary oppositions of subject/object and experience/theory by beginning with “practice”—freeing oneself from ideological dominance while “combining induction, reasoned conjecture, deduction, and moral choice to understand the real human world” (Huang, 2024f: 769)—and ultimately evaluating whether such understanding fulfills the ideals of fairness, justice, and social welfare.

Secondly, in terms of research philosophy, the social science of practice holds that “researchers should be entirely forthright and explicit about their

moral value choices, rather than trying to package their research as a completely value-neutral science, as formalist theory does” (Huang, 2024f: 768). A research philosophy constitutes the core ideas and value orientations guiding scholars in their academic pursuits. For a long time, Western formalist theories have been portrayed as possessing universal applicability, akin to the laws of the natural sciences. However, the human world studied by the social sciences is fundamentally different from the natural world observed by the natural sciences. This difference lies, on one hand, in the fact that the human world exhibits both logical and determinate aspects as well as paradoxical, contingent, and particularistic dimensions. On the other hand, whereas the laws of the natural world do not reflect human will or values, the human world is saturated with value judgments. By presenting themselves as absolute truth, Western formalist theories inherently carry the value-laden intention of universalization. Thus, their claim of being “value-neutral” is merely a construct. Any presuppositions derived from Western formalist theories implicitly embed the idealized value systems championed by the West.

If we are confined to Western theoretical paradigms that claim value neutrality in the construction of China’s independent knowledge system, we will never truly grasp the complexity and innovativeness of China’s practices. For instance, why have China’s highly commercialized small family farms not transformed into large capitalist farms? How have China’s state-owned enterprises successfully entered the global market’s profit-driven competition with active state participation? If we rely on Western theories that promote value neutrality to explain these phenomena, the underlying values and discursive constructs—such as the free market economy and the *laissez-faire* state, embedded in binary oppositions like “state intervention vs. market economy” and “socialism vs. capitalism”—will inevitably obscure the interpretation of China’s objective realities.

The building of China’s independent knowledge system should embody a distinct cultural subjectivity. The emotional engagement of researchers with China in their studies is a natural expression that does not need to be concealed. Rather, it should be elevated into a clear value orientation. As Philip Huang has advocated in his “social science of practice,” this value orientation should stem from China’s traditional high moral principles, such as Confucian “benevolence” 仁. These principles should not only shape the prospective vision of China’s developmental path but also permeate every researcher’s scholarly pursuits. Western social scientists have a strong tendency to exclude morality from their research, as morality deals with questions of value, whereas their theories claim to be “value-free.” In contrast, Chinese thinking emphasizes both “what is” and “what ought to be.” On the basis of objectively interpreting Chinese practices, they also incorporate value judgments distinguishing good

from evil. If the methodological approach of the “social science of practice” is “seeking truth” 求真, then its guiding philosophy is “seeking goodness” 求善.

In the dual pursuit of academic truth and social value, Huang’s “social science of practice” approach can offer us a clear direction. Constructing China’s independent knowledge system is the responsibility of every social science scholar in China—not only as an academic duty to gain a genuine understanding of China’s realities and explore its future but also as a moral commitment to contribute to China’s development through scholarly engagement.

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1. The Chinese translation of this book is not included in the thirteen volumes of Huang’s collected works.
2. The original Chinese translation of the book rendered “involution” as “overdensification” 过密化, and it was not until the 2023 edition that it was accurately translated as “involution” 内卷化.
3. The earliest Chinese translation of the book was published by the China Social Sciences Press in 1998 under the title *Civil Adjudication and Popular Mediation: Representation and Practice in the Qing* 民事审判与民间调解: 清代的表达与实践. The current Chinese title, *Law, Society, and Culture in the Qing: Representation and Practice in Civil Law* 清代的法律、社会与文化: 民法的表达与实践, was adopted in the 2001 edition published by Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House.
4. *The Hidden Agricultural Revolution in China* can be seen as a transitional work and was not included in Huang’s thirteen-volume collected works. *Beyond Left and Right* was retitled *Beyond Left and Right: The History of Practice and the Development of Rural China* 超越左右: 实践历史与中国农村的发展 when it was reissued as part of the thirteen-volume collection.
5. In Huang’s words, “it is ‘hidden’ because the revolution has not come so much from the conventional and readily apparent increases of certain crops’ output by weight due to new inputs, but rather mainly by the switch from grain production to more and more higher-value agricultural products like meat-poultry-fish, milk-eggs, and fruits and higher grade vegetables” (P. Huang, 2016: 339).
6. Huang has repeatedly pointed out that Western theoretical constructs, especially those ideologically shaped by state power, often do not correspond to the actual

historical practices of the West. For instance, while the United States has long emphasized legal formalism based on deductive logic as the “(classical) orthodoxy,” the actual practices of the Supreme Court reveal a persistent tension and coexistence between classical orthodoxy and pragmatic realism (Huang, 2024d [2009]: 2–3). Similarly, the neoliberal theories and ideologies of the Anglo-American world posit the free market economy as the primary driving force of economic development and claim that this is true across all economic systems, yet this too contradicts the actual historical trajectory of capitalist economic development in their own countries (Huang, 2023b: 239–46).

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