**society/****社会(Shè Huì)**

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社会has come to be rendered as the equivalent of “society” in modern Chinese usage, but the meaning of the term in traditional Chinese has to do with religious rituals – what binds and coheres communities. In the oracle bone script, 社 is, signifying land, or a ritual to pay respects to the god of land. This is more clearly stated in Jin scripture:. Later it came to denote a neighbourhood unit of 25 families.

In the oracle bone script, HUI(会) is, the upper part resembles a lid, and the lower part resembles a vessel containing objects. As *Shuowen Jiezi* (《說文解字》) says, it means assembling and combining.

A similar term is SHE JI (社稷)，JI(稷) is, meaning grains, and denoting a peasant working on the farmland. Interestingly, SHE JI originally denotes the gods of the earth and of the grains, and as rituals honouring these gods were conducted by the establishment, the term came to denote the establishment itself. Mencius’ quote is well known: placing precedence of the people over the establishment, and over the Lord/Emperor(民为贵，社稷次之，君为轻). The establishment comes in between the people (the ruled) and the lords (the rulers). Later, SHE JI even came to denote the state, the institutional form keeping social bonds and social order.

In contemporary Chinese usage, SHE HUI (社会) has become generally accepted as the equivalent of “society” and “the social”, with extended usage of SHE HUI XUE(社会学) for “sociology”, and SHE HUI ZHU YI(社会主义) for “socialism”. This term is borrowed from Japanese coinage of “society” as 社会 by Fukuzawa Yukichi (福泽谕吉,1835-1901) during the Meiji Restoration period. Yan Fu (严复,1854-1921), Chinese translator introducing western concepts to China, offered QUN (群) as rendition of “society”, appropriating the concept of QUN XUE(群学) basically from Xunzi (荀子,310-238 bce). However, Yan Fu’s rendition was not popularized. QUN(群), in oracle bone script, was presented as, meaning commanding a herd of sheep to gather together, denoting coming together under certain command and control. In Xunzi’s QUN XUE(群学) Study of Groups/Study of the Social, human nature is seen as essentially “bad” and selfish, hence the need, when people come together, to be restrained by personal, social and religious codes, hence the elaboration of the necessity for Confucian values and practices of benevolence(仁, REN, literally Two Persons, meaning more than one person ) and YI(义, righteousness), leading to LI ( 礼, rites and propriety) which would form the foundation of QUN(群, groups, or society).“Now how about the way of the former kings and the ordering influence of *ren* and *yi*, and how these make for communal life, mutual support, mutual adornment, and mutual security?”[[1]](#footnote-1) (“今以夫先王之道，仁义之统，以相群居，以相持养，以相藩饰，以相安固邪。荀子：《荣辱》) Thus, it is a philosophy of personal conduct and inter-personal relationships. Worth noting is that the relationships extend from those between humans to those between humans and Nature, reflecting a cosmo-vision including the human world under heaven. Xunzi’s synthesis of Confucian ideas was largely adopted by successive dynasties.

Thus, QUN XUE(群学) offers not only a delineation of the social realm, referring to the assemblage of people in groups by kinship or territory, but also offers codes for proper conduct and social mores for communities and society to sustain in good order, highlighting the need for restraint in personal desire and selfishness, as well as restraint in human exploitation of Nature.

Going back to Xunzi, his idea of social regulation and balance is to realize community life and harmonious unity (**群居和一之道)** through different sectors accepting their assigned roles and positions. This is indeed a gist of Confucianism, for everyone, assigned their division of labour and position in the social hierarchy, to faithfully fulfil their duties. Hence the social order is maintained by moral obligations as well as laws and regulations. This was practiced in the context of an agrarian society primarily with the peasants producing food and with the merchant class dominating social exchange and trade. In this exposition, QUN (群) does not make explicit differentiation between the social, the political, the ethical, or the economic, whereas the modern usage of the term SHE HUI(社会) “the social” exists in distinction from the political, the economic, or the cultural.

With the term QUN, “society” is denoted with small peasant families living on the land in communities. QUN is inclusive of the rulers and the ruled. With the termSHE HUI taken from its European denotations and connotations based on capitalist values of individualism and personal good rather than common good, it is also used in contradistinction from the “state”, hence terms like “civil society”(公民社会) or “popular society”(民间社会) in the context of modern forms of governance, though the two terms in Chinese are greatly different.

Another foreign word related to “society” in Chinese is “community”, which was only translated by sociologists in the classroom in the 1940s on an ad hoc basis, although it soon became a term used to describe communities smaller than the larger society, such as team, group, village, township, district, which apparently were more related to geographical size than to cultural intimacy, whereas in fact Chinese society as a whole has always been a concept with both geographical and cultural significance, and even related to “nation” or “state” (See *“nation”* by Huang Ping and Lau Kin Chi). In other words, in vernacular expressions, very often nation is society, and society is nation. One could even say that “China” is both society and nation.

In addition, communities in China are more often those social groups and locations where people live and work in their daily lives, and a person can live and work and interact in many communities at the same time, same as in other societies or in European societies. The difference is that Chinese societies or communities have not had as many formal “contracts” for a long time but are based more on “tacit” or implicit agreements, and also taken-for-granted basic accepted norms such as “village customs and rites” to be followed.

Therefore, in Chinese society, one should not only deal with the relationship with others, but also with the relationship between the “little self” (XIAO WO) and the “great self”(DA WO). In the original sense, one who is not social cannot be human; and one who is not human cannot be social. In this sense, not only are people, as in European or other societies, social beings who are always in some kind of social relationship and cannot live apart from the herd, but also, if someone tries to be a maverick, he or she is largely regarded as an “eccentric”, which is the very reason why “socialism” is so fundamental in China, and why “socialism” (in both term and practice), originally from Europe, has instead become the basic social system and public discourse in China.

It would be interesting to pursue the meaning of “socialism” as a historical stage more advanced than “capitalism”. The Chinese term SHE HUI ZHU YI(社会主义) counterposes the social as against the capital ZI BEN ZHU YI(资本主义). Could socialism have been rendered other than SHE HUI ZHU YI，by not simply adding -ism to “social”？ If socialism is a political, social, and economic philosophy encompassing a range of economic and social systems characterized by social ownership of the means of production, as opposed to private ownership, then would not the Chinese term QUN(群) better encompass all dimensions of society’s workings?

1. “On Honour and Disgrace”, in *Xunzi*: *The Complete Text*, translated and with an introduction by Eric L. Hutton, Princeton University Press, 2014, pp. 23-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)