China and world anthropology

A conversation on the legacy of Fei Xiaotong (1910-2005)

Gary Hamilton and Xiangqun Chang

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Fig. 1. The more popular replacement statue erected to commemorate the centenary of Fei Xiaotong’s birth, in front of the Fei Xiaotong Museum, Kaixiangong village. Inset: the traditional Chinese ‘big-tummy Maitrey Buddha’ that the statue echoes.

1. Chinese names in the text follow the Chinese or Western convention regarding ‘surname: given name’ order according to the individual’s preferred or usual usage.

2. Amongst many events commemorating the centenary of Professor Fei Xiaotong’s birth, two were prompted by his strong desire to contribute to anthropology worldwide through the study of China: (1) ‘How can Chinese anthropologists participate in shaping world anthropology?’, coordinated by Gao Bingzhong (Peking). This included the Fei Xiaotong Memorial Lectures, given by George Marcus (UC Irvine) and Judith B. Farquhar (Chicago), and a one-day workshop on 20-21 June 2010; (2) ‘Understanding China and engaging with Chinese people’, coordinated by Xiangqun Chang, 5-8 December 2010. The conference proceedings (in both Chinese and English versions) will be published in 2012 (eds.). Taipei: Aitiri Press Inc.

Fei Xiaotong (Fei Hsiao-Tung, 1910-2005) obtained his PhD under Bronislaw Malinowski’s supervision at the London School of Economics in 1938. Of the 20 volumes of his completed works (Fei 2010e), two books are well-known in the West: Peasant life in China, published in English in 1939, and Xiangtu zhingguo (1947), translated as From the soil by Gary Hamilton and Zheng Wang in 1992. As one of China’s finest sociologists and anthropologists, Fei was instrumental in laying a solid foundation for the development of sociological and anthropological studies in China; and his work helped to influence China’s social and economic development. Fei was awarded the Malinowski Prize of the International Applied Anthropology Association in 1980, and the Huxley Memorial Medal of the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1981.

This is a translated, abridged and revised version of a conversation originally conducted in English, but published in Chinese to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the birth of Fei Xiaotong (Hamilton and Chang 2010). Wu Zitong (WZ), the editor of China Reading Weekly, puts a series of questions to Gary Hamilton (GH) and Xiangqun Chang (XC). (Ed)

I. Fei’s work

GH: I read Peasant life in China in graduate school and immediately found it interesting. Later, reading From the soil, I became aware of the considerable success with which Fei had confronted the difficulties of comparing China with other societies. His comparisons between Chinese and Western societies were presented in graceful prose, in a disarming straightforward way, and I was greatly humbled to have had the opportunity to be his translator.

XC: Many studies of contemporary China and Chinese society have ignored the theoretical contributions of Chinese scholars such as Fei Xiaotong, and few seem to get to grips with vernacular Chinese theories about Chinese society. From the soil offers a convenient starting point from which to begin exploring these contributions.

WZ: Turning to ethnic issues, Fei believed that the principle of ‘pluralistic unity’ could be applied not only to China, but also to other multi-ethnic societies. How do you view this concept?

GH: Like his other concepts, Fei’s notion of ‘pluralistic unity’ derives from his understanding of Chinese society. He found that differential social relationships connected Chinese people to their society in multiple ways, some through close family ties, some through broader lineages, some through regions, and all of these ties represented extensions of consanguinity. He said ‘Geographical location is actually socialized space...these are consanguinous coordinates’ (Fei 1992: 121). So, for the Chinese, national identity is yet another socialized space with ‘consanguinous coordinates’, with every individual’s slightly different from those of another. This is, however, a description of national identity in Chinese, rather than Western, societies.

WZ: What do you think of these two books?

GH: I am only published in Chinese in 1987, half a century after Fei wrote it. Like many Chinese scholars, I had wondered about why Malinowski had called the book ‘a landmark in the development of anthropological fieldwork and theory’ (Malinowski 1939). Stephan Feuchtwang referred me to Maurice Freedman’s 1962 Malinowski Lecture, ‘A Chinese phase in social anthropology’ (Freedman 1963). In this lecture, Freedman encourages social anthropologists to study societies, such as China, with long and complex civilizational histories. He believed the future course of anthropology to lie in this type of study. It was clear that Peasant life in China was significant in terms of its contribution to the development of classic ethnography in relation to such a society.

From the soil gave me a clear picture of Chinese society as existing on vertical and horizontal axes, the former historical, the latter global. I frequently quoted Fei’s work in my PhD studies, and was pleased that you and Wang Zheng made the book available to the English-speaking world. In 2005, Feuchtwang gave a paper entitled ‘Social egoism and individualism: Surprises and questions that arise from reading Fei Xiaotong’s idea of “the opposition between East and West”’ (Feuchtwang 2009), which shows how Fei’s theoretical thinking had been brought to life for Western scholars.

GH: Surprisingly few specialists in Chinese society trained in the US or UK seem aware of Fei’s theories. So I was delighted to read Feuchtwang’s paper. Fei led the way for Chinese and Western scholars to develop a dialogue based on comparative studies of the institutional differences that distinguish one society from another, as well as on the commonalities that unite us.

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 XC: The basic idea of the ‘pattern of pluralistic unity’ (duoyuan yiti geju) can be found in From the soil, but it was developed more fully more than four decades later, in a speech Fei gave at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, ‘The pattern of Chinese nationalities’ pluralistic unity’ (Fei 1989). Fei saw China’s 56 ‘nationalities’ as integrated and interacting and coexisting within one big society. The term ‘geju’, meaning ‘pattern’, relates to ideas about relationships between individuals and nationalities drawn from documentary and empirical studies of Chinese society. But by 2000, Fei had written several articles on issues relating to globalization, in which he identified a need to construct a ‘pattern of multicultural or multinational pluralistic unity within one world’. When I conducted fieldwork for a project on migrants from the BRIC countries in the UK, I realized that Fei’s ‘pluralistic unity’ could be a useful addition to ways of thinking about multi-ethnic societies.

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II. Fei’s theoretical contribution

WZ: Could you briefly give us a sense of how the study of Fei Xiaotong’s thought currently stands in Western academia? In addition, in what ways do you think Fei’s conceptualization of different societies’ modes of social association can help us to understand social structures?

GH: What makes From the soil so important is captured in the subtitle to the book – The foundations of Chinese society: out of China’s rural past comes a distinctive mode of association, chaxugeju, that allows people to make sense of their place in a complex social order. I translated chaxugeju as ‘differential mode of association’. Fei’s core insight was that this differential mode of association was quite different from the way in which ‘Westerners’ associated with each other, a mode that he termed tuantigeju, and which I translated as ‘organizational mode of association’. These twin concepts offer a guide to thinking about how Chinese and Western societies are differently organized and institutionalized.

Far too few social theorists know about Fei; knowledge of his work is largely confined to China scholars. Many theorists in the United States and Europe (e.g. Kiser & Hechter 1991), like many theorists in China, persist in applying the same analytic concepts to different societies, neglecting one of Fei’s chief contributions, namely the point that concepts about societies should be generated from first-hand knowledge of the society in question.

XC: Your translation of and addenda to From the soil show a care and perception that has been appreciated by few reviewers. Do you think in retrospect that translating a concept such as chaxugeju as ‘social egoism’ to contrast with ‘individualism’, as Feuchtwang does, might have made the concept easier to understand?

GH: I must say that I too was disappointed with the reviews. Chaxugeju and tuantigeju are derived from an understanding of the social organization of two different societies. The terms identify institutionalized patterns of interaction and, to be faithful to Fei’s terminology, the translation must evoke an institutionalized pattern of interaction through which people conceptualize themselves, and which they constantly use to recreate social order in their daily lives. Feuchtwang’s translation of chaxugeju as ‘social egoism’ does not quite get at the interactional dimensions of Fei’s concept, although it is an apt characterization from an individual’s point of view.

XC: As a product of a ‘high-context culture’ (Hall 1976), Chinese language is complex. I have encountered many different translations of chaxugeju and tuantigeju, but I find all of them unsatisfactory. This happens so often with translation – as I know from the difficulty of expressing in English lishang-wanglai, my model of a Chinese style of reciprocity and networking, which does incorporate the interactional dimensions of Fei’s concept, and is an update of Fei’s chaxugeju and tuantigeju (Chang 2010). The Chinese term guanxi is already in common usage in English – ‘bourgeois’ and ‘proletariat’ are examples of similar borrowing – and I wonder whether perhaps the original terms chaxugeju and tuantigeju might be accepted into the technical vocabulary of the social sciences, so as to avoid the problem of distortion as a result of inadequate translation.

WZ: Do you think Fei’s stated aim to ‘enrich the people’ (Fei 1993) in his later academic life was a continuation or a transformation of his earlier academic interests?

GH: In the same period in which Fei wrote From the soil, he also wrote Xiangtu chongjian (Fei 1948), which is normally translated as ‘Reconstructing rural China’. We summarized its argument at the end of our edition of From the soil. Fei seemed prophetic putting forward in the 1940s ideas about the rural foundations of Chinese development that the changes of the 1980s were to prove correct. That


Robert Park and others in the ‘Chicago School’ of sociology. Notably, Park advised his students to study their own society. Fei studied with both scholars, mastering this style of research and going on to teach it to his students. All his major work was grounded in these methods. I have always wondered how he was able to write his thesis Peasant Life in China so soon after arriving at the London School of Economics, where he studied for a very short time and yet accomplished so much.

After two months of fieldwork in Kaixiangong village, he had several weeks in which to write up his fieldwork notes on the ship to the UK. Fei himself wrote that Peasant life in China had a similar methodological basis to an earlier book he had written, on Yao social organization (Fei & Wang 1936), only this time focused on a much more complex society with a more pronounced dynamic dimension (Fei 2010c). This similarity meant that Fei’s fieldwork notes on Kaixiangong were in a good state even before he began his formal PhD work at LSE. In addition, Malinowski’s and Firth’s supervision enabled him to bypass the process of undertaking in-depth literature reviews in English, which saved a great deal of time. This is how Fei was able to complete his PhD in just under two years.

In his Social anthropology (1982), Edmund Leach reviewed four books on Chinese society written by Chinese scholars who had studied in the UK and the US. Methodologically, Leach was critical of those scholars who, he felt, used their intimate knowledge of their own culture in ways that did not help their analyses; he also criticized any attempts to generalize to the whole of China, and into a long Chinese history, on the basis of single local studies. Leach remarked that Fei’s work was the most successful of the four, not only because it was the earliest, but also because Fei was alert to the quite subtle differences between the area where he grew up and the area nearby where he conducted fieldwork.

The pros and cons of studying one’s own society have been of interest to Chinese scholars for decades. Outsiders studying China bring in an extra dimension, which comes from translating back into the languages and thought patterns of their own culture. However, Fei believed in the advantage of Chinese studying their native society. He said that a Chinese person living abroad for only two or three years cannot get in-depth and comprehensive understanding of that society (Fei, 2010d).

There is no complicated jargon in Fei’s work. What does this mean for anthropologists, and what methods do you think scholars adopt nowadays?

A teacher of mine once said that you can divide social scientists into ‘lumpers’ and ‘splitters’. Lumpers put everything together and try to make one big pile, whereas splitters divide what they are examining, putting them into as many different piles as there are differences and as the analysis requires. Fei was foremost a splitter. He looked closely at all the social groups that came into his vision,
saw their differences, sought to explain those differences, and encouraged people to recognize each group’s distinctiveness and to live in harmony.

**XC:** Your characterization of Fei as a ‘splitter’ makes sense when we look at his concept of ‘the differential mode of association’ vs. the ‘organizational mode of association’ in relation to Chinese vs. Western social relationships. In addition, his promulgation of the idea of a ‘Southern Jiangsu model’ of collective-oriented economies beside a ‘Wenzhou model’ of private-oriented economies shows an instinct to see theories and phenomena in localized terms. Methodologically, such models can also be viewed as syntheses.

Fei’s work may be based mainly on fieldwork or field visits and documentary studies, but his findings are not grounded in the rigorous data analysis characteristic of Western social-scientific methodology. Fei’s policy-oriented studies did have practical application in China, though sometimes only for a short period, as policy implementation in China is often shortlived, a tendency which could be viewed as a consequence of the relatively poor development of social-scientific methods in the country.

**GH:** Fei was not a methodologically rigorous sociologist by today’s standards. In the 1940s, survey research was in its infancy, and quantitative techniques were quite primitive. Fei’s fieldwork methodology was, for his time, an advanced empirical way to do research. But if Fei had employed the quantitative techniques used today, I believe we would not be writing about him now. He would have slipped from our memory. Instead, we applaud his insights and his deep understanding of Chinese society. It is an understanding that evades quantitative proofs. It reminds me of a remark of Georg Simmel’s: ‘To grasp the logical sense of things, more than logical sense is required’ (Simmel 1950: 354). That is what Fei had, a sympathetic instinct to see theories and phenomena in localized terms.

**XC:** One reviewer of *From the soil* said that it seemed like a waste of time and energy to put such effort into translating a work Fei wrote in the 1940s, when there are so many better books now by Chinese scholars waiting to be introduced to the world. I would say that yes, newer works may well offer many helpful contributions about Chinese society, but Fei’s oeuvre shows a penetrating understanding of Chinese society as a whole.

**WZ:** Fei said that his lifelong aim was to examine Chinese society and cure its social ills using reliable data from his own observation and scientific study. How should we understand this as a social-scientific goal?

**GH:** *From the soil* and *Xiaotgu chongjian* show Fei in his role as a kind of ‘social doctor’. He wanted social remedies to be based on accurate knowledge of the social problem to be solved. Too often, reformers make plans for a new world with no knowledge of the society in which they are to be implemented. Fei wanted programmes of action that would work in the context of real people’s lives, and in order to identify the right programmes for those people, you need in-depth knowledge about their society. Fei’s sociological approach taught him always to be a reformer, never a revolutionary.

**XC:** In his early career, Fei indeed sought to cure China of its social ills, carrying out projects aimed at understanding people and helping them to improve their lives, both at home and abroad. He brought his policy-oriented findings to the attention of central government, sometimes also researching issues of concern to national-level leaders and feeding back results to them. I won’t elaborate here his fairly well-known formulations about ‘small towns and big issues’, or his ideas about the development of the ‘north-west national corridor’ in the 1980s. His speech ‘Preparing for a peaceful life’, given to a United Nations conference in 1986 (Fei 2010a), also pointed to broader social concerns beyond China. In 1988, when Deng Xiaoping apologized for not listing Shanghai as one of his ‘development zones’, instead of responding with suggestions that would make Shanghai like another Hong Kong, as other researchers did, Fei came up with the plan of making the city into a ‘dragon head’, with Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces as the creature’s two wings, as a model for developing the entire Yangtze Delta region (Fei 2010c). On 9 April 1990, the proposal was submitted to the CPC Central Committee, via the China Democratic League (CDL). It was subsequently formally approved and implemented. Fei then carried out further field visits in Shanghai and the surrounding region and his model is being implemented today.

**GH:** Yes, I agree. Early in his career, Fei may have used a social science inspired by Western academics to cure Chinese ills, but the more he worked in China, the more he saw the power of Chinese society to cure its own troubles, and by extension to cure troubles elsewhere. We should remember Fei as a great humanitarian, as well as a great sociologist/anthropologist.

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**Fig. 7.** Banner publicizing an exhibition held to commemorate Fei Xiaotong’s 70-year academic career in 2006, one year after Fei’s death, in Wujiang City.