Xiaotong Fei, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*

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Although China has a remarkably well-documented lengthy history and Chinese scholars for many centuries devoted their energies to observing and recording diverse facets of their unique culture and civilization, it was not until the twentieth century that Chinese intellectuals began a serious study of sociology. Of course, it must be recognized that the relatively modern academic discipline of sociology actually evolved in the West where scholars began applying scientific methodology for analyzing social phenomenon. Thus it is not surprising that when Chinese students were first introduced to sociology, their teachers where Europeans or Americans and the context of their introduction to this "new" field of study largely dealt with Western conditions. But, having learned the tools of the trade, they quickly managed to utilize their acquired expertise to investigating conditions in China. A pioneer in this venture is Xiaotong Fei, who in many quarters is regarded as the founding father of Chinese sociology.

Xiaotong Fei, born in 1910, came from an intellectual family that provided him a traditional (classical) elementary education. Originally he determined to study medicine but changed his dedication when he entered Yanjing University in Beijing. One identified source of inspiration was Dr. Richard Park, an American who came to China after teaching many years at the University of Chicago. It was Professor Park who prompted Fei to appreciate the value of field research and actual observation of societal conditions. After further study with an eminent Russian anthropologist, S.M. Shirokogoroff at Qinghua University, Fei received a scholarship to study at the London School of Economics and Political Science. It was there in 1936 that he encountered Bronislaw Malinowski, "the world's most preeminent social anthropologist." (p. 6) When Fei received his Ph.D. in 1938, he noted a debt of gratitude to these three scholars for their impact on his intellectual perspectives. Already by this time he had accomplished preliminary investigations of rural society in China and published *Peasant Life in China* (1939) as his first major contribution to Chinese sociology. Fei returned to China in the fall of 1938 and in the next decade taught at several universities, published a great many articles and books, and engaged in considerable field study. *Xiangtu Zhongguo (From the Soil)* first published in 1948, is regarded as his most significant work.

In the Introduction, Gary Hamilton and Wang Zheng state that "he is the finest social scientist to emerge from China in the twentieth century, and Xiangtu Zhongguo is his chief theoretical statement about the nature of Chinese society." This book immediately attracted a wide audience in all regions of China. It has continued to be regarded "...as a classic text that lays a foundation for understanding Chinese society in its own terms." (p. 3) These circumstances prompted Hamilton and Wang to offer an English translation of this work, making it available to a broader reading public.
At this point, before launching into a discussion of the book’s contents, I can not resist the temptation to observe that Dr. Fei opted to remain in mainland China after the Communist victory in 1949. The Marxist dedication of the new political leaders caused a great deal of suffering and hardship for Dr. Fei in the decades that followed. "The discipline of sociology, however, was soon abolished. By 1952, under increasing Russian influence, Chinese party leaders adopted a more dogmatic attitude: Marxism-Leninism was the only true social science, and sociology was merely a bourgeois pseudo-science. With the abrupt dismissal of sociology, Fei and some other sociologists were transferred to work on the 'problems' of the national minorities, a field of investigation that was less controversial and about which policymakers needed information. But even there, Fei had to incorporate Marxist historical theories and the concepts of class struggle into his ethnological research." (p. 11) Following the Hundred Flowers campaign of 1957, Fei experienced his first difficulties from the Communist regime for being politically "incorrect." He "...was criticized publicly for his 'conspiracy' in restoring bourgeois sociology and was labeled a 'rightist.'" (p. 11) During the Cultural Revolution of the 1960's Fei endured further indignities by being assigned "to clean all the toilets in the building." (p. 11) Although Dr. Fei has been restored to a measure of favorable recognition after the fall of the Gang of Four, and became the first president of the Chinese Society of Sociology in 1979, it seems he still must conform to current political theoretical values and it is not apparent that Xiangtu Zhongguo has been accepted as a standard text in the People's Republic of China, despite the fact that in Hong Kong and Taiwan it seems to enjoy enormous popularity.

Xiangtu Zhongguo contains fourteen brief chapters of very lucid prose. The translators noted the "work is surprisingly straightforward, so much so that the book's very simplicity masks the brilliance of theory that Fei is trying to communicate. Because the book is so simply written, the complexity and significance of the thesis are not fully appreciated on a first reading. Misunderstanding is easy because the text can be read at three different levels: as a literary essay, as a sociology of China, and as a political document. Each reading gives a somewhat different message." (p. 13) This statement presents the reviewer with a formidable challenge. Having read the book only once (two chapters prompted a second reading) it appears somewhat difficult to evaluate a translated text as a "literary essay" (as I also have not read the original Chinese version), and on the surface any claim for its merits as a "political document" seem slightly exaggerated, so the only recourse is to regard this on the level of "a sociology of China." Yet, it must be noted that in the extremely helpful Introduction, Hamilton and Wang do offer cogent details pertaining to the three different levels identified.

The general thesis of Xiangtu Zhongguo is that in China a rural society evolved over many centuries that by the 1930's and 1940's was remarkably different from what he perceived to be the case in the Western world. In each and
every chapter Fei balances his discussion of the Chinese matrix with suitable comparisons of conditions in the United States and western Europe. This aspect of the book will prove most enlightening for English language readers. Fei identifies the non-legalistic attitudes of Chinese peasants in matters of conflict resolution. He notes that Chinese rural society was much more preoccupied with morality than is the case for Western people. He describes how and why Chinese rural society became characterized by male chauvinism, patriarchal control systems and male oriented political institutions.

Two chapters "Bringing Literacy to the Countryside" and "More Thoughts on Bringing Literacy to the Countryside" focus on the fundamental influence of language as an essential in all human communication and how language indirectly or directly affects societal norms and values. Fei adroitly observed that the written language exerted a more dominant influence on interpersonal relationships in Chinese urban society than was the case in the rural setting. In the 1930's and 1940's, China suffered from massive illiteracy. As the vast majority of Chinese were peasants, residing in the countryside, literacy actually proved NOT to be a significant factor in maintaining rural social stability. The Chinese peasants developed other (non-literary) mechanisms for dealing with the challenges of political, economic and social problems.

Perhaps one of the most intriguing matters Fei addresses related to his analysis of the emotional quality of all family linkages in China -- something he finds quite different from Western (American) conditions. Fei devotes considerable attention to the relationships between men and women in the Chinese rural setting and how this differs from Western conditions. He suggests that in China's rural society, marriage was largely contracted for procreational purposes. In the social realm men frequently spent most of their time with other males engaging in matters of mutual interest. Women, although not entirely segregated, were charged with practical management of household chores, and highly restricted in their social activities. Most Chinese rural social activities that tolerated public association between males and females involved annual ritual ceremonies and festival observances.

In a chapter entitled "An Inactive Government," Fei attempts to demonstrate how Chinese rural society for countless centuries functioned with minimal interference from central government authority. The majority of Chinese small hamlets and villages were controlled by village elders, whose positions were sanctified by traditional institutions. He observed this often led to economic inequalities and injustice. Because this system was rooted in tradition, Fei feels it is based on emotional social linkages that make rural society very different from urban social relationships. He suggests that urban society functions with less attachment to this emotional context, and city folk relate to each other in far more objective, practical and pragmatic terms.

Fei's goal was to offer a realistic appraisal of rural China's society at the time
he observed the lifestyle of Chinese peasants in the 1930's and 1940's. In this respect his book is eminently successful and enlightening. Yet it is intriguing to note that Professor Fei, who essentially is the product of an urban, intellectual environment, seems to enjoy embellishing his text with numerous literary allusions, classical phrases or other references. These cultural gems are associated with the educated literati and their particular outlook on life. They seem a little out of place in a discussion of rural society. Yet, very likely all Chinese peasants are quite familiar with Confucius. Perhaps they are more conversant with Confucian moral aphorisms than are American farmers with the political or social ideologies of Thomas Jefferson or Benjamin Franklin. Yet, Fei's citations from China's great Sage appear less appropriate for rural society than the salons of the gentry. To provide a couple examples from Fei's text let me quote: "As Confucius wrote, 'What the superior man seeks is in himself; what the petty man seeks is in others.'" (p. 68) "Sima Niu asked Confucius about ren. The Master said, 'A Man possessing ren is cautious and slow in speaking.'" (p. 85) "Familiarity is an intimate feeling that develops from frequent and repeated interaction occurring over a long period of time. The character used in the first sentence of Confucius's Analects expresses this process of interaction. The character is xi, which means 'to practice'. If we put this character together with xue, which means 'to meet strange things for the first time', we obtain the idea 'to learn' (xuexi). (p. 42) It becomes fairly obvious that Fei's description of China's rural society is filtered through the sieve of his early traditional (classical) training and perhaps reflects his own dedication to Confucius and company. Yet from my own personal encounters with rural Chinese, who seemed regularly attuned to Confucian morality, I can not entirely fault Fei's recourse to quoting form the Master to prove a point or two.

On a more serious level, especially as pertains to an audience dedicated to a comparative study of civilizations, I feel obligated to observe that Fei's description of Chinese rural society lacks for any sort of reference to regions of the world other than China and Western Europe/USA. Some matters that Fei suggests are unique to China, actually might prove to be rather standard or normal for the historical experience of a good portion of the world's non-western societies. Of course, we must recognize the realities of theme and variations that are involved. Fei had no chance to study Indian society or the societies of the Islamic world. There is a good chance that even in Latin America, rural social conditions may prove to be quite similar to what Fei observed for China. In all these areas rural society seems to be dominated by male associated values, morality is a significant factor in all human relationships, Western legal proclivities are not entirely relevant, literacy and language nuances may be similar, and the relationships between a central government and local communities in terms of control and supervision -- all of this perhaps offers a greater degree of similarity than contrast. In other words, what Fei has so aptly identified as a "uniqueness" as
regards China in comparison with what he observed as fairly normal for the United States and Western Europe, actually applies to much of the rest of the world’s historical experience. Chinese rural social conditions may actually prove to be far more normal for the vast majority of human experience than what evolved in the West! Perhaps Fei’s Xiangtu Zhongguo realistically mirrors rural conditions in most other non-Western societies. At least we can thank Professor Fei for his provocative and pioneering work in this area.

Ronald R. Robel


The author acknowledges two great aids to her book, among others. The first is her association with the School of Social Science at Princeton. The second is in her association with fellow professors at Yale University. Her avowed approach is by way of sociology and anthropology. Her book is an history, as well as a sociological study. She writes with great care; for she combines exact statement and excellent rhetoric. Here is an example:

The fact that the samurai’s honor culture cannot be reduced to a neatly codified formula does not mean that no social code existed. The living form of any honor culture always remains in an indeterminate intermediate position between formula and formlessness.(8)

We Westerners may wonder, how can a nation be so successful in industry and business management? For the Japanese encourage collectivist thinking. Doesn't this mean that Japan devalues individualism and depreciates bold initiative?

Eiko Ikegami approaches this question from a new angle: the cultural development of the Japanese samurai. She writes a history of the samurai's cultural transformations since the 12th century. This gives her a clear understanding and appreciation of the tensions between individualism and collectivism, from the Heian era to modern Japan. Japanese citizens now look to the Western model of individualism. And we Westerners are extreme individualists. But the samurai's life, since the 12th century beginning, has been individualistic. The samurai experienced his personal honor in the context of his own integrity. The honorific individualism of the samurai culture was an outstanding Japanese trait. It is,