

Social egoism and individualism

Surprises and questions for a Western anthropologist of China – reading Professor Fei Xiaotong’s contrast between China and the West¹

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Abstract: This paper comments on the cultural comparisons between China and the West made in Fei Xiaotong’s book, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*, and asserts the important significance of Fei’s concept of “differential mode of association” in Chinese sociological and anthropological studies as well as in any attempt at China–West cultural comparisons. On the basis of that, the author revises the contrast between egoism and individualism by pointing out that, as the importance of economic relations is growing rapidly and extensively, a new differential mode of association is evolving to include trust between neighbours, friends and families, and the pursuit of common interests. It is also broadening into a way of conducting business transactions and political coalitions. The author then goes on to raise the question of how rural China, with social egoism as its defining character, should build up the idea of equal rights and individualism as required by the market economy in its transformational period.

¹ Editor’s note: This article was originally written for a conference celebrating Fei Xiaotong’s 70th anniversary of his academic career and the establishment of the 20th anniversary of the Institute of Sociology and Anthropology at Peking University in 2005. It was then delivered at Department of Sociology, China Agricultural University on the 31st Oct. 2005, and was translated into Chinese by Gong Haoqun and Yang Qingqing, proofread by Zhao Xudong, and published in *Open Times* (Kaifang Shidai), 2009(03): 67–82. The English version was published in Ma Gong, Liu Shiding, Qu Dongqi, and Pan Naigu, eds. *Fei Xiaotong yu Zhongguo Shehuixue Renleixue* (Fei Xiaotong and Chinese Sociology and Anthropology, Social Science Academic Press, 2009:18-32). The author made minor corrections before the English version was published at *JCGCP*, whereas the Chinese version has been updated thoroughly including additional translations based on both the latest English version and the published Chinese version by Julia Yu Du.

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My principal subject is the book *Xiangtu Zhongguo*, which Professor Fei wrote in the 1940s, when China was changing very dramatically and amidst great violence. China has changed a lot more since then and so have social anthropology and sociology. I shall offer some observations on these changes. But first I want to pay my respects to this work, which I read in its English translation with pleasant surprise and admiration.

The first and only English translation of *Xiangtu Zhongguo* was published in 1992 under the title '*From the soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*' (translation, introduction and epilogue by Gary G. Hamilton and Wang Zheng 1992, University of California Press). As the translators point out, Professor Fei was writing about rural China but treating it as the way Chinese society as a whole works. They stress that Fei wrote for an urban readership that was in the midst of change and was looking to the West and to the Soviet Union to find solutions to China's many problems, including recovery from Japanese invasion and civil war. Fei wrote *Xiangtu Chongjian* (*Reconstructing Rural China*) at the same time. Putting them together shows that he wanted any rebuilding of China to be based on what it already was, rather than to recommend a complete transformation based on urban China and using imported ideas, which would inevitably do further violence and would fail. So he wrote *Xiangtu Zhongguo* to establish what China already was. What China was and remained at that time was agrarian and rural.

Addressing his urban readership, Fei took on the task of showing that ideas imported from the West were inappropriate, because they came from and were appropriate to a completely different kind of society and its culture. He was then able, in *Xiangtu Chongjian*, to say how China could industrialize and build a modern state and society on a completely different basis from that of the pre-industrial West, because he had in fact made two comparisons, between agrarian and industrial society in general, and between Western and Chinese cultures in particular.

Xiangtu Zhongguo is a sustained comparison of two very different societies, one of which is his own. Fei's comparison is based on personal experience and research. He had lived for about two years in the UK and about a year in the USA and had read books of sociological research on US society by US sociologists. Indeed he published a third book on *The American Character* (*Meiguoren de Xingge*, Shanghai: Shenghuo) in 1947. So both sides of the comparison were empirically well informed. This was and still is unusual. But even less usual is the fact that it is a view of Western society by an outsider, whereas the usual comparison is by Western social scientists of their own society with the non-Western societies that they have studied.

I am a Western anthropologist and sociologist who studies Chinese society, so I am coming to Professor Fei's work from the opposite direction. I

study China as an outsider and bring to the comparison with the West my own reading of sociological and anthropological studies of the UK and the USA. Of course I am also bringing to the comparison my reading of studies of both China and the West (UK and USA) that Fei could not have read in the 1940s. They indicate many social changes since then on both sides of the comparison. I will have some remarks to offer on the changes that have occurred in both our societies since *Xiangtu Zhongguo*, and on changes that have occurred in the anthropology of some of the topics that are of central importance for Fei. But first I want to comment on how I came to know about *Xiangtu Zhongguo*.

On the anthropology of China in the UK in the 1960s

When I was being introduced to the anthropology of China, I read Fei's village study, *Peasant Life in China* (1939), his studies with Zhang Zhiyi whose English title is *Earthbound China* (1949), and his book on *China's Gentry* (1953). I did not realize then that the book on *China's Gentry* was made out of some chapters from *Xiangtu Chongjian*. This was because I read what had been translated into English in the 1960s. Now, when I teach the anthropology of China, at the London School of Economics (LSE), I ask students to read *Xiangtu Zhongguo* in translation. This is because I think serious comparative work is very important, whereas when I was learning to be an anthropologist in the sixties, what my teachers and I thought was most important was learning about other people, and comparing them, but leaving the comparison with our own societies as an implicit by-product of writing in English.

There was something else involved too. We read a number of studies by Chinese sociologists and anthropologists, but we read them for the information they provided about Chinese culture and society, including Chinese ideas about how to conduct themselves and about the world from their point of view. We did not read them as the products of a Chinese social science, by fellow theorists.

This is odd, because my teacher, Maurice Freedman, had rightly written in 1961 that 'outside North America and Western Europe, China was the seat of the most flourishing sociology' (1979: 379). He did not have available to him in translation the more general, theorizing books by the social scientists he so admired, including Professor Fei. Maurice Freedman did not read Chinese well enough; he could only speak Hokkien. I could read Chinese, but neither of us knew about *Xiangtu Zhongguo*: the result was ignorance about Chinese social scientists' theories on Chinese society. The translation of *Xiangtu Zhongguo* in 1992 by Gary Hamilton and Wang Zheng is the result of a new time of mutual respect and cooperation between Western and Chinese social scientists, although it is still rather one-sided because the Chinese anthropologists and sociologists with whom we Westerners work most closely have spent years in Western universities. It is still very rare for a Western sociologist or anthropologist to study social sciences in China. But it is begin-

ning to happen. At the same time, I am very aware that there is a continuing imbalance of resources and concentration of research and comparison, such that even now English is the main language of publication in international sociology and anthropology, and I am lecturing in English even though I am here, in China. Coming from the LSE, one of Fei's mother universities (alma mater, *muxiao*), which advertises itself as a world centre and a unique concentration of social scientific research and teaching, I am conscious of being in a privileged position. Even so, I think this *is* a time for greater mutual respect and self-questioning among colleagues, wherever they are centred, retaining what my friend and colleague Wang Mingming has called 'the third eye' of anthropology (2002).

In any case, at the level of concept if not general theory in social science, the type of sociality binding Chinese rural society in Fei's conception is *chaxugeju* ('differential mode of association' in Hamilton and Wang's translation). I am translating it as 'social egoism' to capture his point that each ring of association differs according to the position of the person who makes those rings. Reading about this concept came to me as a great surprise, because of my education under Maurice Freedman.

Corporate group versus small lineage

In British anthropology at the time when I studied with Freedman, the idea of social structure was an abstraction from what could be observed. The abstraction was a model of what might be the rules and principles of social organization and individual conduct, to be tested by further observation. British anthropologists like Freedman likened the rules and principles to laws. These were not physical laws; they were social laws, which he called 'jural' (Freedman 1970: 373–379). But they were not identified with written or stated laws. When as in China there were sets of written laws or codes, they were treated as indications of underlying and more general principles and rules of organization and conduct.

Fei's *chaxugeju* was also an abstraction and a model of observable and historically described Chinese society. He freely used his personal observations on one hand and quotations from Confucian classics on the other hand, to model a structure of Chinese society that had not itself changed in two thousand years, despite the changes he saw going on around him and which he knew had occurred in a longer historical time frame.

Both Freedman and Fei modelled what they proposed to be a basic structure that needed to be understood first, before they could write about social change.

I did the same later when I wrote *The Imperial Metaphor* (1992), but it was not about Chinese society as a whole. It was a conception of what I took to be a basic institution of Chinese social life, the institution of territorial protector cults and their festivals, even though I knew I was observing them under a process of profound change. An institution sometimes means an organiza-

tion, but not here. I was following another British anthropologist of Maurice Freedman's generation, S.F. Nadel (1951: ch. 6). For Nadel, a social institution is not a group or an organization, with a membership, rules of recruitment, and a boundary. It is a series of actions, patterned and with linked aims, performed regularly, such as the institution of marriage, or the institution of rites of passage, or the institution of the law, or of monarchy, or of kinship.

The distinction between institution and organization is interesting, but there is a more fascinating difference between Fei's and Freedman's models.

Freedman produced a model of Chinese kinship both as institution and as organization of groups, lineages and families, stressing rules of membership and recruitment. In my attempt to establish the universality in China of the institution of territorial cults, I did not stress membership and recruitment. Instead, I emphasized territorial boundaries and the distinction between inside and outside.

Freedman's was a model of corporate groups, lineages, which segment and grow in power according to their relations with the state and their different property holdings. He made a sharp distinction between family and lineage. Family is a more transient group, whereas a lineage is in principle permanent because it is defined as descent from a known ancestor. Fei's model, by contrast, was of the circles of social relatedness spreading out from each social person, so that he calls a family a small lineage. It is an efficient, flexible and expandable, multi-functional organization. For both Freedman and Fei, the household is a transient organization, but Fei pointed out that a family household was already a unit of lineal descent, presenting an organizational form that varied according to different purposes or functions. For Fei it was vital to conceive of sociality, starting from the family, as ego-centred, whereas for Freedman and in the studies of kinship in English anthropology in Freedman's time, ego-centred kinship was known as 'kindred' and was distinguished from a permanent structure. Kindred in contrast to lineage, is transient precisely because it is ego-centred. For Fei, ego-centred kinship is both transient and permanent. Freedman's lasting organization is conceived of as a group, whereas Fei's lasting organization has no fixed boundaries. It certainly has rules, lawlike customary rules, but it precedes either organization or institution as a primary conception of sociality. For Fei, 'structure' in the English anthropological sense of something permanent and fixed, would be too abstract.

Similarly to this stress on permanent and fixed organization, in European languages 'society' is usually understood as a large group, or a group of groups. There is also the adjective 'social', which can be turned into a noun 'the social', which is understood to be social relations in general and the obligations that bind it. But in the tradition of Durkheim, and therefore of British anthropology, what binds people to each other is also what binds them into a single society.

The difference between the rural sociology or anthropology that Fei founded in China and the anthropology and sociology that he and Freedman