

Some thoughts on the differential self and Professor Fei in October 2016¹

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So much has changed in China since Professor Fei died in 2005; and so much more since his pioneering reflections on the rural basis of Chinese social relations. The height of the influence of his ideas on rural industry, first stated in *Peasant Life in China* in 1939 and not much later in *Xiangtu Zhongguo*, and of his personal fame in China was the period of rural industrialization in the 1980s and 1990s. Those years and those policies have been rejected in favour of larger-scale industrialization based on privatized state-owned enterprises and the growth of cities, the Shanghai model according to Huang (2008). Indeed, in 2011 China's population statistics passed the landmark point at which city residents became the majority. And from the same year, the policy of urbanizing villages has been implemented, turning agriculture into a larger-scale commercial industry, rural dwellings into denser multi-storey blocks, and incorporating every village except some in the remotest areas into the jurisdiction of cities.

We might well ask what is left, if anything, of *Xiangtu Zhongguo*. I shall give you the answers that have occurred to me as a result of a number of projects upon which I have been working.

One project is to turn two courses that I have been teaching at the London School of Economics into textbooks, both of which will soon be published, and I hope soon after their publication in English, Chinese translations will come out. They are *The Anthropology of China* and *China in Comparative Perspective*. In both, as I shall explain, the work of Fei is vital. The second project is a book, now complete and submitted to a publisher, on a reconsideration of the idea of civilization. For this book too, at least for the comparison of civilization in China with civilization in India and elsewhere, the work of Fei is once again vital. All three of these books were co-written with colleagues, *The Anthropology of China*

¹ Editor's note: this is a speech note at the international conference of celebrating eighty's anniversary of Fei Xiaotong's fieldwork at Kaixiangong, organized by Nanjing University, China.

with Charlotte Bruckermann, *China in Comparative Perspective* with Hans Steinmueller, both accomplished and fluent ethnographers of China, and *Civilisation* with Michael Rowlands, an Africanist and an archaeologist as well as an anthropologist, now very interested in China. The third project has been research in four cities in China on governmental community formation, relying on six researchers (three of them Chinese), whose work I coordinated between 2011 and 2015. For this, the work of Fei has not been vital but, as I shall point out, it is still relevant when taken in conjunction with the more recent work of Professor Yan Yunxiang.

The textbooks

Our book on the anthropology of China sets out a number of key concepts and themes from anthropology and tests them against the anthropology and ethnographies of China. Fei has singular importance for us as a challenge to the Eurocentricity of the classical concept of the moral person and of the modern individual. I have already written on Fei's *chaxugeju*, which I translated as 'social egoism', that this conception in the 1940s anticipated in many ways the debates in the English-language anthropology of the 1980s about relatedness and the individual, a person defined by relations to significant others and the obligations to maintain those relations. But in addition, for our book, we elaborate our agreement with Hamilton and Wang (1992: 34), his translators of Xiangtu Zhongguo, *From the Soil*, that 'what passes in the West for general social theory is often, in fact, local knowledge – particular rules about particular people in particular places. Fei's sociology demands that we in the West rethink ourselves.' And we sum up: 'Fei Xiaotong posited foundational hierarchical relations within Confucian kinship systems as elaborations of concentric ego-centred models of relationality. This established what could be a hierarchical type that could neither be described as "collectivist" nor "individualist".'

What is most disconcerting to Western anthropology is that the principle of *chaxugeju* is at once a general but not a universal rule of morality; it does not establish right and obligation, but is always particular; it is each person's unique web of reciprocal and hierarchical relations but is not reducible to Talcott Parsons's Weberian and evolutionary notion of the traditional and the particularistic.

On the other hand, when we turn to studies of kinship, in China and elsewhere, Fei's principle does not provide sufficient ethnographic precision. It does of course describe the hierarchies of gender and seniority. But his idea of the ever-increasing scale of *jia*, which is 'family' in the sense of a household but also kinship on a larger scale, does not signal the importance of genealogy in China and how ancestry can turn into segmentary trusts. Curiously for someone who was a historian as well as an anthropologist, Fei does not, as later anthropologists such as Allen Chun and historians such as Patricia Ebrey do, show how ideological the cult of ancestry was and that it had a historical inception, in Song dynasty neo-Confucian recommendations to the imperial court. This itself is one of the

key comparative features of kinship in China and an illustration of the ideological nature of ritual, according to the theory of Maurice Bloch and Catherine Bell.

‘Relatedness’ is another example of how later anthropology is needed to build on and elaborate Fei’s basic principle of *chaxugeju*. Relatedness became a comparative theme of gender role differentiation and the importance of women in patrilineal societies such as China. Charles Stafford (2008) has gone so far as to suggest a matriarchal core within Chinese patriarchy, women not just maintaining their husband’s ancestral honour but also their own natal kinship ties as well as the rest of their household’s ripples of relationships outwards.

In other words, Professor Fei’s pioneering thoughts are for Charlotte Bruckermann and me a point of departure and a way of breaking away from Eurocentricity. The same goes for Hans Steinmueller and me in our book on *China in Comparative Perspective*. As the cover of our book proclaims, it shows how ‘analytic concepts [of all social sciences] have to be modified to avoid either Eurocentric or Sinocentric bias, and how ideas derived from Chinese sources and observations must be accommodated for complete understanding of the issues discussed.’ We start our book with a comparison of two great comparativists, Max Weber and Fei Xiaotong, each creating ideal types of what they thought was comparatively distinctive about Confucian society and how it might be transformed into modernity. Max Weber is Eurocentric, and quite explicit about it, while Fei is equally explicit about his Sinocentricity. For us, they are models because of their superiority to others who proclaim as if universal social scientific truths that in fact are particular to European and North American assumptions. Weber and Fei each contrasted the Confucian moral self with the Christian, in Weber’s case more particularly the Calvinist self. But whereas Weber had already decided that the Calvinist bore an elective affinity with the entrepreneurial spirit of capitalism and found features in Confucianism that went against the necessary entrepreneurial spirit, Fei established on the basis of his differential self a plan to reform the countryside and bring about a Chinese modernization. We conclude that a differential self is a universal fact of all kinds of social life, but it is possible to elaborate a peculiarly Chinese deferential, hierarchical and differential self. In philosophical terms, contrasted with the Greco–Roman bases of European civilization, this elaboration has been ably conducted by Roger Ames and his concept of role ethics (2011).

Civilization

Fei’s differentiated and deferential self as a characterization of the moral person in China is also of vital importance to the book on civilization that Michael Rowlands and I have written, based in part on lectures we have given in Shanghai and Beijing.

Again on a comparative scale, the hierarchy of roles and statuses that it suggests, not just familial but also associative and political, is a contrast to the sub-caste hierarchy of civilization in India. It therefore provides an opening to a far

greater comparison of human types of civilizational hierarchy than the typification of hierarchy that the anthropologist Louis Dumont proposed. Indeed, our book strikes another contrast, not with caste hierarchy but between civilization in China and in Africa, in which a peculiarity of China is that a steep hierarchy of both cosmos and polity coalesce into what we call a cosmocracy in a single political centre, whereas in African civilization a similarity of cosmologies, constituting a civilization, includes many shallowly hierarchical polities, many centres. For our new definition, civilization is constituted by an encompassing cosmology or a number of overlapping and similar cosmologies. But to designate what they are and have been in China, what we could learn from Fei was insufficient. We had to take into account a great number of other forms of self-cultivation and aspiration that he did not even mention. Nevertheless, he gave us a first clue and a stimulus to our efforts.

Contemporary, urban China

As I mentioned to begin this presentation, China is now urban. The countryside is no longer populated by peasants. Very few farmers plant for their own subsistence. Nearly all farmers produce everything but some garden vegetables, poultry and pigs, to sell. Nearly all villages include numbers registered there but working for wages in towns and cities. Most young people earn income for themselves, some of which they may remit to their village families, but they do not as before work within a joint household budget. They are, in short, much more individualistic. So, I ask myself, what is left of the differentiated self of *chaxugeju*, which, Professor Fei acknowledged, depends much on continuing face-to-face contact? Face-to-face contact is now far more voluntary and occasional.

In our research on the policy of community formation and social management within the areas of Residents' Representative Committees (*Juweihui*), the local Party branch is very active in securing volunteers for community activities and responsibilities to the aged, the infirm and the poor. In addition, every such area has a designated building for cultural activities. But most residents, apart from the retired and those that need state aid, are not affected. They form their own associations and visiting patterns. Their relationships for socializing and reciprocity are chosen, including familial and work relationships, as the studies of relatedness collected by Janet Carsten (2000) proposed but even more selectively. Does all this mean that the differential self must have vanished?

Here, I take into account the great empirical and theoretical work of another Chinese anthropologist, Yan Yunxiang. Studying long term the changes that village life in Xiajia, a northeastern village, has undergone from the 1980s until the present day, he has noted a number of changes of emphasis. Chief among them are the following: 1. growth of dual-family residence, in the village and in the nearest city; 2. the greater say that brides have in marital negotiations, and the greater say that the younger generations have in the setting up of their own households. Relationships between the three generations of grandparents, parents and grand-

children continue, but now they are descending, as he puts it, not ascending. Inter-generational relationships are now ones of care and affection, rather than those of a shared budget. So we can conclude that *chaxugeju* has become less deferential and the importance of daughters has brought out into the open the hidden matriarchy that Charles Stafford had identified. As always, there is a broader network of maintained relationships of reciprocity. From all this we should not conclude that the differential self has vanished, but that it has changed. Yan Yunxiang (2016) is at pains to point out in his latest work that the self in both villages and cities of China is a project, as it always was, as stated in Confucius' *Lun Yu*. A self, defined in relationship to others and the surface of interaction between them, including the giving and making of face (or reputation), is the work of a lifetime and under constant construction.

In sum, *chaxugeju* is a principle of change and a changing principle. Professor Fei pioneered comparison between Chinese and Western social life. He pioneered the idea of a differentiated self and of relationality, which is probably a universal fact of human morality. But he did not explicitly make these advances for social science. He was interested only in what was appropriate for China and for its reform. Within China, it seems to me his Chinese version of the differentiated self, as a moral principle, is quite flexible and has changed considerably in the course of China's urbanization, and it continues. For the anthropology of China, Fei's work is vital, but more than that, we have found his differential self to be a pioneering contribution to academic anthropology in general.

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