

FROM THE SOIL  
THE FOUNDATIONS OF  
CHINESE SOCIETY

A Translation of  
Fei Xiaotong's *Xiangtu Zhongguo*,  
with an Introduction and Epilogue by  
Gary G. Hamilton and Wang Zheng

University of California Press

*Berkeley · Los Angeles · London*

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## Foreword

The bulk of this book is a translation of *Xiangtu Zhongguo*, a set of essays written by Fei Xiaotong shortly after World War II. In writings about Fei and his works, the book's title is usually rendered in English as "rural China," but this rendering is inexact. *Xiang* means "countryside" and *tu* means "earth"; but the combination, *xiangtu*, is a set phrase meaning "one's native soil or home village." By using *xiangtu* to modify *Zhongguo* (China), Fei is conveying a subtle meaning to his readers: that Chinese society has grown out of its ties to the land. Should any of his readers miss the subtlety, Fei clarifies the meaning of the title in the book's first sentence, "Chinese society is fundamentally rural." "From the soil" captures Fei's meaning in a way that "rural China" does not.

Although this book is virtually unknown in the West, it is a standard text in many Chinese universities and contains ideas that are useful for Western readers as well. In our introduction, we explain why this book remains as fresh and as intellectually gripping today as it was over forty years ago, when it was first written. In fact, it may be even better suited to today's climate of opinion than to the earlier one, because Fei addresses the structural foundations of social pluralism and cultural diversity. By describing the fundamental differences between Chinese and Western societies, Fei helps us to understand the distinctiveness of Chinese society and to look at Western modernity in a new way.

We decided to translate this book because we were engaged in a similar pursuit. We, too, were contrasting China and the West in order to understand the distinctiveness of Chinese society; and on first reading Fei's book (Hamilton in 1985 and Wang in 1986), we were struck by the parallels between what we were trying to do and what Fei had already done forty years earlier. Moreover, once we had studied the book, it became increasingly evident that our subsequent work would have to build on Fei's insights. For this

reason, we realized that we had to produce an English translation of the book and to explain how Fei's ideas open the way for understanding China and indeed other non-Western societies in new terms.

Throughout the book, Fei is attempting to explain to his Chinese readers what the West is like, so that he can show how Chinese society differs from Western societies. In our translation, we find ourselves having to cross the cultural barrier one additional time. Here we have had to convey in English what the West is like from a Chinese point of view, and to show how this Chinese understanding of the West allows the unique qualities of Chinese society to become visible to the very Chinese who would otherwise take those qualities for granted. Multiple levels of discourse needed to be included simultaneously. Throughout our translation, we have tried to emphasize Fei's Chinese point of view and to clarify this point of view for an English-reading public. As Fei himself has said, however, every act of translation is necessarily a new interpretation. We only hope that the English readers of this book will bracket their own taken-for-granted world-their Westernness-and allow themselves not only to enter a different social world but also to understand that that social world functions as fully as the world they themselves live in.

*Xiangtu Zhongguo* has been reissued many times in Taiwan and Hong Kong. For our translation, we used two reissued copies of the original edition.<sup>1</sup> One of the reissued editions was printed in Taiwan without publishing information or date of publication. The other edition was published in Hong Kong with publishing information but no date of publication.<sup>2</sup> Both editions were identical; we subsequently checked this version against a more recent edition published in Hong Kong.<sup>3</sup> With one exception, which we note in the text, this version is identical to the version we used in the translation.

For the epilogue, we also translated short passages from Fei's *Xiangtu chongjian* (Reconstructing rural China).<sup>4</sup> In the past, this

1. *Xiangtu Zhongguo* (Shanghai: Shanghai guanchashe, 1947).

2. *Xiangtu Zhongguo* (Xianggang: Wenxue chubanshe, n.d.).

3. *Xiangtu Zhongguo* (Xianggang: Sanlian shudian, 1986).

4. *Xiangtu chongjian* (Reconstructing rural China) (Shanghai: Shanghai guanchashe, 1948).

book has often been published in the same volume as *Xiangtu Zhongguo*, and both the Taiwan and Hong Kong volumes that we used to translate *Xiangtu Zhongguo* also contained the reissued 1948 edition of *Xiangtu chongjian*, which we used as the source of our translation.

We wish to acknowledge the assistance of a number of people and to express our thanks to them all. The students at the University of California, Davis, in a number of courses on complex organizations, comparative management, and Chinese societies, encouraged us by their enthusiastic reactions to our initial translations of chapters 4 and 5. Finding that people with no previous knowledge of China could enjoy and learn from these chapters prompted us to translate the entire book. The following people gave helpful comments on all or parts of this book (although we incorporated many of their suggestions, we are still responsible for the result): Tani Barlow, Eleanor Bender, Nicole Biggart, Thomas Gold, Lyn Lofland, Mausang Ng, Benjamin Orlove, Martha Winnacker, and especially Marco Orm, who also gave us the benefit of his editorial skills. We want to single out David Arkush for a special acknowledgment. His encouragement from the outset helped keep the project going, and his line-by-line reading of our translation saved us from many mistakes. Finally, we thank Sasha Bessom and Jean Stratford for assembling the manuscript and putting it into its present form.

G. C.H.  
W.Z.

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## Introduction

### *Fei Xiaotong and the Beginnings of a Chinese Sociology*

by Gary G. Hamilton and Wang Zheng

The book translated here, *Xiangtu Zhongguo*, began in the 1940s as lecture notes for an introductory class in Chinese rural society. The instructor of that class and the author of this book is Fei Xiaotong. The book that grew out of Fei's effort to introduce sociology to Chinese students is no ordinary textbook, and Fei is no ordinary sociologist.<sup>1</sup> 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 is a book written by a Chinese for a Chinese audience about the distinctiveness of Chinese society. Because it presents an insider's view of a non-Western world, it is an unusual book for Westerners to read. But even at the time of its first publication in 1948, it was an unusual book for Chinese to read as well.

Fei rewrote and published his lecture notes chapter by chapter as a series of essays in a leading intellectual journal, *Shiji pinglun*. In the years immediately after World War II, before the Chinese revolution of 1949, Fei was already recognized as one of China's leading intellectuals and as a popular writer whose essays were widely read and admired. When Fei published the serialized version of *Xiangtu Zhongguo*, the essays immediately attracted attention; he quickly collected, revised, and published them in book

1. For the discussion of Fei's life, we have drawn extensively upon R. David Arkush's excellent biography, *Fei Xiaotong and Sociology in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), and Burton Pasternak's extensive interview with Fei, "A Conversation with Fei Xiaotong," *Current Anthropology* 29, no. 4 (Aug.-Oct. 1988): 637-62. Also see James P. McGough's *Fei Hsiao-fung: The Dilemma of a Chinese Intellectual* (White Plains, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1979).

form in 1947. In the following year, he published a second book, *Xiangtu chongjian* (Reconstructing rural China)—another set of essays written over the same period and also published first in serialized form. The two books, often published together in the same volume, became Fei's most widely read works in Chinese. In the few years until 1952 (when the Communist government abolished the discipline of sociology on the mainland), these books made Fei famous among educated Chinese and one of the best-known advocates in China for reform.

The years between the end of World War II and the consolidation of Communist rule on the mainland mark a watershed in modern Chinese history. Fei's works barely survived the transition. After the Communist government banned sociology in 1952, it began to attack Fei and other sociologists who remained in the People's Republic of China as "rightist," bourgeois, and anti-Marxist.<sup>2</sup> *Xiangtu Zhongguo* and its companion volume, *Xiangtu chongjian*, went out of print and ceased to be readily available in the PRC. Across the Taiwan Straits, in Taiwan, where Chiang Kai-shek and his Guomindang armies fled in 1949, writers who remained in Communist territory and expressed loyalty to the new government had their works officially restricted. Fei's writings existed in a gray zone, not readily available in bookstores and yet not totally unavailable. His books were sold in street stalls without his name or with his name shortened to Fei Tong, and universities were not allowed to include them in officially approved reading lists.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, beginning in the 1950s, aside from a continuing readership in Hong Kong, the books that Fei had written in Chinese were not readily available and were no longer studied as closely as they had been before the political climate changed. Ironically, in the same years, Fei's books in English were widely read and became quite influential.<sup>4</sup>

Since the late 1970s, the situation has changed. On the mainland, beginning with reforms after Mao Zedong's death in 1976,

2. See McGough, *Fei; Hsiao-fung*, for a discussion of these attacks and some translations of the most influential criticisms.

3. For a listing of the various editions of *Xiangtu Zhongguo* before 1980, see Arkush, *Fei Xiaotong*, p. 332.

4. See note 7 below.

Fei and other intellectuals labeled earlier as rightists were gradually rehabilitated. In 1979, sociology was reinstated as an academic discipline; and the Chinese Society of Sociology was founded, with Fei as its first president. However, Fei's pre-1949 writings were not immediately reissued.<sup>5</sup> Fei even had to use mimeographed versions of *Xiangtu Zhongguo* and *Xiangtu chongjian* in his course when he began offering graduate training to a small group of students at Beijing University in the early 1980s. Although Fei Xiaotong is once again a widely known figure and although some of his pre-1949 writings, including *Xiangtu Zhongguo*, are now available in the PRC, these writings have only recently become known outside of a small group of sociologists.<sup>6</sup>

In Chinese-speaking areas outside the PRC, *Xiangtu Zhongguo* is today regarded as a classic text that lays a foundation for understanding Chinese society in its own terms. In Hong Kong, most of Fei's works, including *Xiangtu Zhongguo*, were reissued after 1980, and *Xiangtu Zhongguo* began to serve as a standard text for understanding Chinese society. In Taiwan, where Fei's works are still not officially approved, many of Fei's pre-1949 books, with full attribution to his authorship, became readily available in market bookstalls even before the new Hong Kong editions appeared. In Taiwan, too, the ideas from *Xiangtu Zhongguo* became part of the established wisdom about how to interpret Chinese society. In the

5. *Xiangtu Zhongguo* became available only in 1986, when the Hong Kong edition, published by Sanlian Press, appeared. Since 1986, several volumes of Fei's selected works have been published in the PRC, including *Fei Xiaotong xuanji* (Selected works of Fei Xiaotong) (Tianjin: Renmin Publishing Co., 1988) and *Fei Xiaotong xueshu jinghua lu* (The best academic writings of Fei Xiaotong) (Beijing: Normal University Press, 1988). Both contain selected chapters from *Xiangtu Zhongguo*.

6. Fei is better known in China today for his political than for his intellectual roles. When he was rehabilitated after the Cultural Revolution, he became a well-known political figure. In 1989, he was vice president of the National People's Congress and president of the Democratic League of China. He is regarded as one of the leading figures in the democratic political movements, a role he had already played during World War II. In the post-1978 period in the PRC, the Democratic League is, in principle, supposed to consult with Community Party leaders on policy issues--although, in fact, its role, as well as that of its leaders, seems largely honorific. Drawing upon his small-town research, Fei does appear to have had some influence on the development of economic reforms after 1978. For a survey of this research, see Fei's recent book *Small Towns in China* (Beijing: New World Press, 1986). For more on Fei's activities in the early years of the Democratic League, see Arkush, *Fei Xiaotong*, pp. 178ff.

English-speaking world, however, although Fei Xiaotong is the best-known Chinese social scientist, *Xiangtu Zhongguo* is virtually unknown.<sup>7</sup>

#### THE MAKING OF A CHINESE SOCIOLOGIST

*Xiangtu Zhongguo* represents Fei Xiaotong's first and only effort to construct a non-Western theoretical foundation for a sociology of Chinese society. Only a few years after *Xiangtu Zhongguo* appeared in print, Marxist social analysis became intellectual orthodoxy throughout China. All attempts to develop ideas that would run counter to this orthodoxy were forbidden, and transgressors were severely punished.<sup>8</sup> As we will discuss later in the introduction and again in the epilogue, Fei's sociology of Chinese society runs directly counter to a Chinese Marxist interpretation of Chinese society. It offers a very different view of the society and recommends a very different course of action for facing China's economic and social problems. Consequently, it has not had a chance for a full hearing in the People's Republic of China. But even without the hearing in the PRC, Fei's pre-1949 writings and their theoretical centerpiece, *Xiangtu Zhongguo*, are now regarded as well-grounded and challenging attempts to develop a sociology of Chinese society.<sup>9</sup> In fact, Fei's *Xiangtu Zhongguo* represents one of the few and certainly one of the most insightful efforts to build a sociology of a non-Western society.

Fei, the son of a schoolteacher and the youngest of five children,

7. Fei is best known in the West for a series of books and articles published in English between 1939 and early the 1950s. See, especially, *Peasant Life in China* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1939); *Earthbound China*, written with Zhang Ziyi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945); "Peasantry and Gentry: An Interpretation of Chinese Social Structure and Its Changes," *American Journal of Sociology* 52 (1946): 1-17; and *China's Gentry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953). Some of Fei's post-1949 works have been translated in McGough's *Fei Hsiao-t'ung* and, most recently, in Fei's *Rural Development in China: Prospect and Retrospect* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). For Fei's bibliography to 1980, see Arkush, *Fei Xiaotong*.

8. See Fei's discussion in Pastemak, "A Conversation with Fei Xiaotong."

9. Another very significant and more recent effort to create a "sinified" sociology has occurred in Taiwan. See, in particular, Kuo-shu Yang and Chung-I Wen (eds.), *Shehui ji xingwei kexue yanjiu de Zhongguo hua* (The sinicization of social and behavioral science research in China), Monograph Series B, no. 10 (Taipei: Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, 1982).

was born in the central Chinese province of Jiangsu in 1910. Following the lead of his older siblings, Fei attended local missionary schools and eventually entered the missionary-sponsored soochow University. An honors student, Fei began preparing for a medical degree, but he switched to sociology after transferring, as a junior, to another missionary school, Yanjing University in Beijing. Fifty years later, talking about his decision to change his major from medicine to sociology, Fei said, *liMy* reasoning was that as a medical doctor I might cure the afflictions of a few, but not those of hundreds of millions engendered by an irrational society. What ails society must be cured first. . . . To be a doctor we have to learn physiology first; likewise, to cure the society we have to study social theories first." <sup>10</sup> With the practical goal of understanding Chinese society in order to change it, Fei started his long journey toward establishing a sociology of China.

Although Fei Xiaotong was primarily concerned with Chinese social problems, his training was mainly Western. At Yanjing University, he worked with American-trained teachers, and in the fall of his senior year, in 1932, he studied with the American sociologist Robert Park. Teaching in China for one term, Park had recently retired from the chair of the department of sociology at the University of Chicago, then the best-known sociology department in the world. Park had a great influence on that department and played a central role in creating what had become known as the Chicago school of sociology.<sup>11</sup> He was a well-known critic of ivory-tower theorizing and an outspoken advocate for a sociology based on field research. A dynamic teacher, Park preached that message to Fei, who thereafter turned decisively from library research and reading about Western theories to actual observation of Chinese society.

Entering graduate school and now attracted to field research, Fei

10. See Fei Xiaotong, *Toward a People's Anthropology* (Beijing: New World Press, 1981), p. i; and *Congshi shehuixue wushi nian* (Fifty years in sociology) (Tianjin: People's Press, n.d.), p. 2. We might note that modern China's great author, Lu Xun, and modern China's first renowned revolutionary, Sun Yat-sen, both gave up medicine for the same reasons.

11. For a discussion of the Chicago school of sociology and of Park's role in that school, see Fred H. Matthews, *Quest of an American Sociology: Robert E. Park and the Chicago School* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1977), and Martin Bulmer, *The Chicago School of Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

switched focus once again from sociology, which in China was a more library-oriented discipline, to anthropology. Fei took his graduate training with the Russian anthropologist S. M. Shirokogoroff at Qinghua University. Shirokogoroff was devoted to the empirical study of the social organization and physical characteristics of tribal peoples in China, and under his direction Fei enhanced his appreciation of empirical research and developed a life-long interest in studying China's minorities. After receiving his master's degree, Fei won a British Boxer Indemnity Fund scholarship and, in the fall of 1936, attended the London School of Economics and Political Science, where he studied anthropology under Bronislaw Malinowski.

In the 1930S, Malinowski, then in his early fifties, was the world's preeminent social anthropologist.<sup>12</sup> He was a pioneer of anthropological techniques of field research and of the type of theorizing that emerged from intensive fieldwork. His field research among the Trobriand Islanders, published in a series of books, had established the theoretical and methodological standards for anthropology in his day. Under his leadership, the discipline of anthropology was transformed. Instead of taking a distant, comparative, evolutionary approach to "primitive" peoples, anthropologists now attempted to understand tribal societies in terms of their own worldviews. One of Malinowski's principal ideas, and one that Fei took back to China with him, was that valid social theories are those that account for reality as perceived and created by social actors themselves. Malinowski worked closely with Fei, and they developed what Fei's biographer, David Arkush, called a "warm avuncular relationship."<sup>13</sup> Fei received his Ph.D. in two years. In 1945, Fei paid homage to *limy* three esteemed masters, Professors S. M. Shirokogoroff, R. E. Park, and B. Malinowski. From them I inherited most of my ideas."<sup>14</sup>

Fei was attracted to Western social scientists who told him that the best theories are those that emerge from an intimate, systematic knowledge of the society being studied. These Western schol-

12. For a summary of Malinowski's life and works, see Adam Kuper, *Anthropologists and Anthropology: The British School, 1922-1972* (New York: Pica Press, 1973).

13. Arkush, *Fei Xiaotong*, p. 43.

14. *Earthbound China*, p. xiv; "Studying in England," in *Revisiting England* (Hunan: People's Press, 1983), pp. 174-85; Arkush, *Fei Xiaotong*, p. 24.

ars told Fei, in essence, that adequate theories of China must be based on intensive, firsthand knowledge of Chinese society itself. In Fei's time, and even today, however, many theories applied to China were first developed in studies of the West. Most standard theories about the nature of economic development, religious movements, political structure, social organization, and even human emotions have been derived from observations made in Western societies. Conducting such investigations, many scholars abstract the basic conclusions of their studies and offer them as theories for further testing. The assumption is that researchers need to search for general theories, theories that **apply** in varying degrees to all societies and to all people, regardless of time and place. This type of theorizing does not require that all societies or all individuals be identical. Rather, theories themselves become a sort of model against which societies and individuals can be compared. When applied to a particular setting, the model more or less fits; and the analyst then reaches a conclusion about how, in that particular context, societies work and individuals act. The model becomes the standard; sociological knowledge becomes a probabilistic assessment of how well the real world conforms to the predictions of the model.

Park, Malinowski, and later Fei took a strong stand against this type of theorizing. In one form or another, they all argued that valid social knowledge cannot be obtained through testing deductive models in different social contexts. The goal of social science is not to discover what is similar in all societies. At this level, such similarities turn out to be superficial and actually limit, even undermine, the understanding of why people act as they do. For instance, as Fei points out in *Xiangtu Zhongguo*, that people in all societies create something we can call a "family" says very little about the complexity and variations in what actually constitutes a family. What is important to discover, then, are differences among people and among societies; these differences are what cause societies to change in distinctive ways.

The first step in understanding differences is to understand how people in anyone context actually conduct their lives. This approach calls for intensive research into a specific social context, rather than an extensive application of a theory across many contexts. Out of this intensive understanding, the researcher develops sensitizing concepts, or what Fei, drawing on Max Weber's sociology,

calls "ideal types."<sup>15</sup> Ideal types synthesize and somewhat exaggerate actual patterns of behavior, and in turn can be used both to analyze actual behavior within that society and to contrast similar but ultimately different patterns of behavior in other societies.

This is the methodology that Fei employs in *Xiangtu Zhongguo*, but he began to develop this methodology very early in his quest to understand Chinese society. It is illustrated in his first major research project, a study carried out in the aftermath of a tragic accident that took the life of his wife and left Fei badly injured.<sup>16</sup> The accident occurred in 1935, when Fei and his wife of less than five months were conducting a survey among Yao tribes in remote regions of Guangxi province. Fei was caught in a "dead fall" tiger trap, and his wife, running for help, drowned when crossing a river. After the accident, Fei returned to his hometown in Jiangsu province to recuperate. While staying with his sister in the village of Kaixiangong, Fei started an ethnography of the village, in which he tried to understand rural life in the same terms that the peasants understood it. In the summer of 1936, he collected material on the village's economic system and social structure and took his notes with him when he went to England to study with Malinowski in the fall of that year. Later, under Malinowski's direction, he used these materials to write his renowned book *Peasant Life in China*.

The publication of *Peasant Life in China* in 1939 made Fei an avant-garde intellectual among the non-Marxist sociologists in China. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, universities across China had started sociology departments, and sociology had become one of the most popular majors. Western academic sociology quickly became influential among other intellectuals as well. However, during this pioneering period, many well-known works produced by Chinese sociologists were rudimentary social surveys and were often aimed

15. In his foreword to the 1986 reissue of *Xiangtu Zhongguo*, Fei characterizes his ideal-typical methodology as follows: *My attempt to abstract concepts from concrete phenomena in order to understand the phenomena better is similar to the use of what are called ideal types in English. Ideal types belong to the realm of reason. They are neither fictitious nor ideal; rather, they are concepts formed as part of a cognitive process and are used to synthesize something that is general, so that it can be applied to concrete situations. Since a concept is formed through abstracting from concrete situations, it has to be continuously tested in concrete situations in order to reduce error*" (pp. ii-iii).

16. For an account of the accident, see Arkush, *Fei Xiaotong*, pp. 60-69.

at correcting social problems. When it appeared, Fei's *Peasant Life in China* was an extraordinary work. It was a description of life as it was actually lived, rather than a recipe for social change. Throughout the book, reflecting Malinowski's theory of social functionalism, Fei tried to demonstrate the interrelationships among various aspects of life in a rural village. This sophisticated effort attracted the attention of Western scholars and marked Fei's first step toward understanding rural Chinese society.<sup>17</sup>

When Fei returned to China from England in the fall of 1938, the northern and coastal cities had been occupied by Japan. Fei went to Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan province in extreme south-western China, which was to become the wartime intellectual center of Free China. There he obtained a position in the sociology department at Yunnan University and by 1941 was promoted to full professor and head of the department. At the same time, he and his close colleagues conducted field research coordinated through the Yanjing-Yunnan Station for Sociological Research. In 1940, Fei became the field director as well.

The decade 1938-1948 was the most effervescent period of Chinese sociology.<sup>18</sup> During this period, Fei finished his second village ethnography, *Paddy Fields of Lucun*. More significantly, he became the head of a team of young researchers who, under his direction, consciously and brilliantly strove to create a Chinese sociology. The team of about ten people produced a dozen monographs, all based on field research in the area, bearing such titles as Zhang Ziyi's *Land and Capital in Yicun*, Tian Rukang's *Female Workers in a Cotton Mill*, Li Yuyi's *Economics of a Mixed Community of Lolos and Chinese*, Gu Bao's *The Power Structure in a Rural Community in Yunnan*, and Francis Hsu's *Magic and Science in Western Yunnan: A Study of the Introduction of Modern Medicine in a Rustic Community*.<sup>19</sup> Fei translated some of these works into English and

17. Lucie Cheng and Alvin So, *lithe* Reestablishment of Sociology in the PRC," *Annual Review of Sociology* 9 (1983): 471-98.

18. Arkush, *Fei Xiaotong*, p. 100.

19. For a complete list of these works and some description of the team effort behind the research monographs, see Fei's introduction to *Earthbound China*. Also see Wilma Fairbank, *America's Cultural Experiment in China*, 1942-1949, Department of State Publication 8839 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976), pp. 96-97, for a brief description of the Yanjing Yunnan field station with Fei in charge.