CHICAGO JOURNALS

Peasant Life in China by Fei Xiaotong
Earthbound China by Fei Xiaotong and Zhang Zhiyi
Peasant Life in China by Fei Xiaotong; Earthbound China by Fei Xiaotong; Zhang Zhiyi
Review by: Barbara Celarent
American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 118, No. 4 (January 2013), pp. 1153-1160
Published by: The University of Chicago Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/669921
Accessed: 17/04/2013 19:05

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Journal of Sociology.*

http://www.jstor.org

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Wed, 17 Apr 2013 19:05:58 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

people have a tendency to romanticize) as about religion, worship, or church music. Among the deepest, most thought-provoking of Marti's insights are those involving African-Americans, "black" musical forms, and blackness itself. In interview after interview and chapter after chapter, what comes through is the extent to which African-Americans and "their" cultural forms—gospel music, most of all—serve as key markers of "difference" and "multiculturalism."

There may be good reason to emphasize black folks and forms, but this often puts a great deal of pressure on a small group of people in any religious community, and makes fetishizing such differences easy as well. An anecdote that Marti says inspired the project illustrates this point. The story involved a church that was committed to diversity and wanted to integrate quickly. Their solution was to introduce gospel music to the worship with a few Negro spirituals thrown in. The result, he tells us, was predictable: "Although the almost entirely white congregation experienced the music as 'cool' . . . this 'quick fix' approach ended up reinforcing stereotypes of what African-Americans are 'supposed to be' overall . . . [which] effectively deepened racial divides already embedded" (p. 5).

Music, Marti's research makes clear, can contribute to the agendas of antiracism, racial reconciliation, integration, and diversity—but only when it is part of larger behavioral changes, institutional shifts, and new patterns of interaction. Other paths overestimate the power of music (and religious worship) and underestimate the depth, complexity, and intransigence of race and racism in the United States today.

Peasant Life in China. By Fei Xiaotong [Hsiao-Tung Fei]. London: Routledge, 1939. Pp. xvii+300.

Earthbound China. By Fei Xiaotong [Hsiao-Tung Fei] and Zhang Zhiyi [Chih-I Chang]. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945. Pp. xv + 319.

Barbara Celarent*
University of Atlantis

Fei Xiaotong was born in the last years of the Qing dynasty. In his lifetime, China would see revolutions, wars, and invasions. It would see empire, republicanism, nationalism, and communism. By his death, China had been not one but many Chinas, and Fei himself not one but many Feis. For man as for country, the question remains: Should we see continuity or difference?

In Fei, at least, many readers have seen difference. For them the first Fei was a Westernized academic researching the countryside, the second Fei a

* Another review from 2051 to share with *AJS* readers.—*Ed.*

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Wed, 17 Apr 2013 19:05:58 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

popular writer forcibly adjusted to New China, and the third Fei an elder statesman who brokered the reemergence of Chinese sociology after 1978. But Fei himself saw not separate phases but a continuous line of development. In reading him, then, we must mingle these conflicting views.

This mingling is the harder since language constrains us to the early Fei. As she has mentioned, your reviewer must maintain the appearance of particularity, and so considers only works accessible in certain languages (English, French, and to a certain extent Spanish). She must otherwise rely on translation. But Fei wrote nothing substantial in English after 1945, and little of his later work is translated. Yet that we read only from Fei's early, Westernized period should not limit our view. Those books are part of a larger intellectual and practical life.

Fei Xiaotong was born November 2, 1910, in Wujiang, just south of Suzhou in coastal China. His people had been small gentry: minor landlords, low-ranking officials, and a surprising number of teachers. After attending local primary and middle schools, Fei went first to Suzhou University, then to Yanjing University in Beijing, the best of the missionary colleges. He chose social science early, drawn by the American-trained Wu Wenzao. He was also strongly influenced by foreign scholars like S. M. Shirokogoroff and R. E. Park.

Fei married Wang Tonghui in 1935, and the couple went to study the Yao tribes in Guangxi. They became lost in the mountains, Fei was desperately injured in a tiger trap, and his bride died while seeking help. After a painful recovery, Fei spent two months studying the village of Kaixiangong near his hometown, where his elder sister was an extension specialist for the local sericulture school. Through Wu's influence he then went to the London School of Economics, where he worked for two years with the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, himself then drifting toward the functionalism of his later years. Fei's Kaixiangong fieldwork became a dissertation and eventually *Peasant Life in China*, published in 1939 after Fei's return to China and dedicated to the memory of Wang Tonghui.

The Japanese invasion drove the Beijing sociologists to Kunming in southwestern Yunnan province, where Fei quickly became professor, head of department, and leader of several research projects. A comparative ethnography of three villages—one studied by Fei, the two others by his student Zhang Zhiyi—became *Earthbound China* in 1945. Fei spent much of 1943–44 in the United States on a trip funded by the U.S. State Department. He found the United States active and creative, but also heartless, even soulless.

In the late 1940s, Fei combined active academic work with extensive popular writing and political activity in the Chinese Democratic League. Narrowly escaping assassination by Nationalists in Kunming, he traveled again abroad, visiting Britain and observing the rise of postwar socialism. Like most Chinese academics and intellectuals, Fei underwent thought reform after the Revolution, enduring the long process of study and small group discussion that had evolved in earlier phases of the Chinese Commu-

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Wed, 17 Apr 2013 19:05:58 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

nist Party. At the same time, sociology was abolished, partly following the Russian claim that the discipline was unnecessary in a Marxist-Leninist society, but also because of Party skepticism about the politics of a noncommunist sociology. Fei's career derailed. He was shifted into work with national minorities. He published little, although he retained some official positions. During the Hundred Flowers Campaign, Fei emerged as a respectful proponent of sociology's rehabilitation, but in the immediately subsequent Anti-Rightist Campaign he was denounced. He confessed errors publicly and at length. In the 1960s he was largely invisible, spending two years at physical labor at the close of that decade, but by the late 1970s sociology was being recreated, with Fei as leader, his return to eminence signaled by service as a judge in the Gang of Four trial. Fei finished his career as an honored leader of Chinese sociology, particularly known for the concept "Chinese Nation" (*zhong hua min zu*), and served as vice president of the National People's Congress. He died in 2005.

Peasant Life in China reports two months of fieldwork at Kaixiangong in 1935. The chapters recite the classical topics of early 20th-century anthropology: The Chia (the main kin structure), Property, Kinship Extensions, Household and Village, Livelihood, Occupational Differentiation, Character of Work, Agriculture, Land Tenure, Silk Industry, Marketing, and Finance. There is an impassioned closing chapter on agrarian problems. The book was written in English and, according to Fei's wishes, was removed from sale by its English publishers in 1963. It was, however, twice translated into Japanese during the Second World War and eventually into Chinese after the rehabilitation of sociology.

As Malinowski's introduction emphasizes, the importance of the book lies in its wealth of description and detail. So we hear of *siaosiv* marriage (elsewhere known as *tongyangxi*), in which a couple raises a girl from early childhood as a bride for their son, thereby avoiding expensive wedding preparations and exchanges. We hear that five generations are venerated. (After that, coffins and their contents are removed from family burial sites to make room for new occupants.) We hear that the three local calendars for agricultural and ceremonial affairs (Western, lunar, and solar) interact in such complicated ways that locals must purchase a "little red booklet" to enact their culture properly. Although the Nationalist government has made the booklet illegal in order to enforce the Western calendar, villagers buy bootleg copies anyway. Similar unexpected effects undermine other Nationalist policies. Laws ordaining equal inheritance across genders simply scatter farm ownership faster than ever. The revival of the Pao Chea (*baojia*) system (as an administrative structure and an anticommunist mobilization mechanism) is doomed by its irrelevance to existing local structures.

But although we hear these and many other interesting facts, the village seems to fit oddly within Malinowskian functionalism. There is a "functioning" village life in the foreground, to be sure, but many of its parameters are determined by the village's unhappy encounter with the Nationalists and the world markets. The book moves toward a historical posing of its problems,

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Wed, 17 Apr 2013 19:05:58 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

and once we get to agriculture, land tenure, and industry, the changeover is complete, and we see a village fully contextualized in historical time and place.

Despite its magnificent rice lands, the village is unable to live on agriculture alone. Abortion and infanticide provide a certain local population control, but partible inheritance guarantees that even families with large holdings and extra children inevitably slide back toward the impoverished mean. The local silk industry has in the past provided necessary supplementary income, but is now dying because of the worldwide depression and the competition of higher-quality and lower-price Japanese silk. Erratic prices for silk and rice often leave villagers without ready money for taxes and other regularly recurring costs. They must turn to usurers (the local usurer is "Sze, the Skin-tearer"; p. 279), and with interest rates exceeding 50% per month, land is quickly lost. Landlordism is thus rapidly spreading, while the village descends into absolute poverty. The reform of the silk industry via a cooperative factory seems the only way out of the problem, but brings its own unintended consequences: unemployment of many women and consequent continued outmigration, as well as a general disappointment because the promised benefits are so long in coming.

Like Mao Zedong, Liang Shu-ming, and many others, Fei saw that rural problems were central for China, and the book starts and ends with the claim that rural hunger is so large a problem that it will inevitably produce revolution in the present circumstances. But Fei has a Deweyan faith that information will suffice to produce change:

> A systematic presentation of the actual conditions of the people will convince the nation of the urgent policies necessary for rehabilitating the lives of the masses. It is not a matter for philosophical speculation, much less should it be a matter for dispute between schools of thought. What is really needed is a common-sense judgment based on reliable information. (P. 5)

This is the Progressive and Fabian creed, whose lineage is clear in the vocabulary of the book—phrases like "definition of the situation," "lack of adjustment," and so on. When Fei was condemned in the 1950s, a key text would be a remark in his peroration: "I have tried to show that it is incorrect to condemn landowners and even usurers as wicked persons. When the village needs money from the outside to finance [its]production, unless there is a better system to extend credit to the peasants, absentee-landlordism and usury are the natural products" (p. 284).

While the critics were perhaps unjust in singling out this one sentence in a book unrelentingly critical of the existing state of affairs, they had identified thereby the central problem of postprogressive sociology of both the Chicago and the British functionalist schools. Although hard ethnographic work enabled those scholars to undermine some of the ideological pieties of colonialism and other forms of domination, their analysis lacked an account of action. The ecological metaphors of the Chicagoans and the systematic abstractions of the functionalists may have "explained" many social behaviors, but they in-

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Wed, 17 Apr 2013 19:05:58 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

clined their practitioners to treat those behaviors as "natural," when in fact they were to a considerable extent shaped by human action itself.

Earthbound China is considerably more sophisticated than *Peasant Life*. The book's comparative design aimed to investigate explicitly the dynamics only implicit in *Peasant Life*. Three villages were studied, one with little industry and no landlordism, one with well-developed rural industry, and one of mixed type adjacent to and influenced by the local urban center. Fei contributed the design, the conclusion, and the first study.

Fei's earlier book had rested on thin evidence: two months' work and overreliance on key—and probably elite—informants. But Fei's sections of *Earthbound* (the study of Luts'un [pinyin, *Lucun*] and the conclusion) evince a far more skeptical sifting of data and a great deal more primary information: quotes, budgets, and so on. Again there are many interesting details—particularly about the elaborate collective staggering of planting and other agricultural tasks in order to smooth out labor demand. Fei uncovers a tiny leisure class, living marginally above subsistence. It is all male, for the women are treated simply as farm laborers: "[Male idleness] is made possible through the cutting down of labor costs on the smaller farms by means of work performed by the women of the family" (p. 74). The portrait of this marginal leisure class—and its willingness to be idle even at the cost of obvious pleasures—is unforgettable. "If I work in the field it will save us only 30 cents [the hire of a laborer]. If I don't smoke [opium] tomorrow, we shall save the same amount. So I won't go to the farm" (p. 82).

At first it seems that Luts'un is immune to the larger social forces transforming Kaixiangong, although its basic realities are the same: partible inheritance and overpopulation guarantee the reduction of any family to poverty over time (here including even those who have returned from successful careers in the cities, who were nonexistent in Kaixiangong). But the particular dynamic of Kaixiangong is absent in Luts'un; there is no rapidly emerging landlord class. Yet here emigration is producing serious labor scarcity and consequent sharp readjustments. And much more important, it gradually becomes clear to the reader (Fei merely tells us in passing) that Luts'un has recently lost its basic cash crop (and pleasure source): "Since Luts'un produced opium of an exceptionally good quality before its cultivation was made illegal, the use of the drug required no expenditure of money" (p. 104). Even if Fei's calculations are wrong by a factor of two, the village's 38 addicts spend an amount equaling 20% of the cash value of the village's entire rice production. The real force behind the impending transformation of Luts'un is thus its ongoing agricultural restructuring in response to an external legal change.

More than *Peasant Life*, *Earthbound* captures the dilemma of social scientific detachment. On the one hand, we get a subjective sense of a world unknown, a world where people make lives profoundly different from our own and do that making with a recognizable and very human resilience. On the other, that world includes exploitation and callousness small scale and large. Women work in the fields while their husbands smoke opium. Roofs

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Wed, 17 Apr 2013 19:05:58 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

fall in on poor families eating dinner. Bodies of poor laborers are thrown to the dogs. One understands why some revolutionaries had little patience with an investigator who could see these things without rage and radicalization.

To be sure Fei's conclusion is quite radical. It delineates the many forces leading to the concentration of wealth. It notes the importance of power and violence in that concentration of wealth, alongside the market forces, inheritance practices, and customary expenses that maintain peasant poverty. And Fei has a remedy—rural cooperative industry. In all this, however, he follows an engineering model of social science: "We firmly believe that scientific knowledge should be helpful in promoting the good of the people and serving as a guide for our actions in the future" (p. 313). He quotes Mannheim, for whom social scientists are the thoughtful teachers of an informed public: "There will be no effective Democracy until the man in the street adopts the concepts and results of rational social analysis instead of the magical formulae which still dominate his thinking on human affairs" (p. 313; from Mannheim, *Diagnosis of Our Time* [London: K. Paul, Trench and Trubner], 1943, p. v).

But Fei's remedy lacks a practical politics, and the arguments sustaining it lack the persuasiveness of the fieldwork. Moreover, the notion of a thoughtful man in the street seems noble but naive, then as later. By contrast, the communists began from the premise that the current situation was morally and politically wrong and deduced from that premise—and a few of their own magical formulae—the analysis of peasant life necessary to mobilize the peasantry and command the allegiance of a militant party that transformed China over the next 40 years. The notion that landlords and usurers were simply the natural result of grand social forces no doubt struck them as absurd. If we believe social life to be natural and beyond our control, then it will be so; if not, then it will not.

How then are we to think of Fei's life and thought? To a Western liberal the story is one of oppression. Fei started as an standard Western academic and produced distinguished work. Although he moved rapidly left, it was not far enough for the party, so he was eventually forced to publicly recant. After many years of obscurity, he reemerged in the late 1970s, acknowledging some continuities with his earlier work, but in large measure disowning it as insufficiently "useful," by which many understand him to mean insufficiently "politically correct in the current official party line." By contrast, Fei's own retrospective vision in translated talks after 1980 has focused on shortcomings of his earlier work; the lack of any analysis of agency and indeed the weakness of its normative and political argument more generally. He explicitly rejected the engineering model with its independent experts and insisted that scholarship is part of the process of reform itself and has no reality outside that process. This is the classic Marxist position on theory and practice, but it also follows from the notion that the social process is a process of values and that therefore an absolutely value-free social science is not only difficult but logically impossible.

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Wed, 17 Apr 2013 19:05:58 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Is there something fundamentally different between the purely intellectual history of Fei and that of many Western academics, setting aside for the moment the amplitude of the political swings? Political fashions blow through the West as well. Over the course of the 20th century not a few famous and distinguished academics trimmed their sails to all kinds of political whims—Marxism, fascism, neoliberalism, and so on. The American discipline of economics was just as surely purged of critics of capitalism in the period 1890–1910 as was Chinese academia purged of sociologists in the early 1950s, although to be sure the Americans sent their radical economists to the gentler Siberia of academic irrelevance and, ironically enough, to professorships in the weaker and ignorable discipline of sociology.

But there is a broader issue involved. That one should live a highly consistent and progressively focused life is the personality ideal of very particular parts of very particular societies—the western societies of the 19th century, whose elites had the luxury to envision and sometimes even to realize this particular ideal. In much of the world, being many different versions of oneself over the course of a life or even in the various simultaneous compartments of an ongoing life has been not only acceptable but also normative. The "consistent and progressive" personality ideal does have echoes in many parts of the world, but many of those societies also recognize and even value lives constituted of the complex and the inconsistent: of betrayals and conversions, of compartmentalization and multitasking. One person's "duplicity" is another's "adjustment." Only in formal biographies are these multiple and sequential selves rationalized into particular, progressive life courses.

Fei protested both in the 1950s and later that his Western friends should not speak for him. In responding the Karl Wittfogel's review of *China's Gentry*, Fei wrote, "Wittfogel's tactics are pretty despicable. He tries to put me in a position of finding it hard to plead for myself. If I write something to refute him, he can say I have no freedom of speech, no moral fibre. What is worse is that he goes beyond concocting rumors and allegations to pretending that he is in a better position to know my innermost feelings than I am myself" (*Encounter* 6, no. 2 [1956]: 69).

But by 1980, in accepting the Malinowski Award, he told his listeners,

> I found myself warmly received among the minority people after liberation. These people were sincere with me and I had the feeling that I was talking with my kinfolk. It was simply because the people I investigated knew that I meant to help, to help solve their problems so that what they dreamed of could come true. The terms "researchers" and "investigators" and the "objects of study" or "the investigated" thus were no longer suitable. For both parties were actually working hand in hand to observe and explain truthfully the existing social phenomena. (*Toward a People's Anthropology* [Beijing: New World Press], 1981. p. 15).

Although he had contested Wittfogel's right to speak for him, Fei himself had no difficulty speaking for the Chinese minorities, and his language often drifted in a direction that could be read as quite ominous.

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Wed, 17 Apr 2013 19:05:58 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

> We tried to understand things and study theories for practical reasons, namely, for the purpose of producing scientific, factual bases for the minority peoples to carry out social reforms, for the purpose of making suggestions that were in the interest of the minority peoples. . . .The purpose of this broad branch of study [anthropology] is, if I may look into the not-too-distant future, to make the broad masses understand full well the society they live in, to organize their collective life in accordance with existing social laws, and to help satisfy their ever-growing needs. (*Toward*, pp. 14, 19).

On one reading, this is a blueprint for totalitarianism. On another, it is little different from the language of the American John Dewey in *The Public and Its Problems*. One could, to be sure, say that these are merely formal statements, and that what makes Fei and Dewey different is the presumed substance of phrases like "existing social laws," "ever-growing needs," "what they dreamed of," and "interests of the minority peoples." But that substance is profoundly contested.

That there is no resolution of this reversing perception of difference and similarity is one of the great insights of modern social science. But like all insights, it too has inevitable practical implications. There is no mere watching of social life. Willy-nilly, one lives it.

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Wed, 17 Apr 2013 19:05:58 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions