

# An Optimist's Life

*by Anne F. Thurston*

When Fei Xiaotong died in April 2005 at the age of 95, most of China's ranking leaders attended the funeral. President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao were there, and so was former president Jiang Zemin. Fei was China's leading sociologist. But he was also one of the country's most revered public intellectuals, a man who descended often from the ivory tower to reach a broader public. He spoke persuasively and colorfully to both China and the West, educating his English readers about rural China and using his native language to inform China about the West. He served for years as the chairman of China's Democratic League. He was also a longtime member of the National People's Congress, China's nominal legislature, and one of its vice chairmen from 1988 to 1998.

For many years, Fei's colleagues in the West assumed he was dead. In the spring of 1957, when party chairman Mao Zedong launched a massive campaign against China's intellectuals, Fei was designated one of the country's leading "rightists." It is hard now to believe how tightly China was controlled back then, how little news seeped out. Nothing was heard of the once vocal and active Fei. When the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, and China's intellectuals again came under attack, there was still no news of Fei.

Fei Xiaotong was not dead. But sociology in China was. And in 1979, Fei was given the task of reviving it.

I first met Fei Xiaotong on the tarmac of Dulles International Airport in April 1979. China and the United States had re-established diplomatic relations in January of that year, and Fei was a member of the first delegation of social scientists and humanists to visit America since the hiatus in relations had begun some 30 years before. The visit was an occasion of joy rarely experienced in academia. Three decades of silence between friends and colleagues were suddenly broken.

Several of China's finest scholars were members of the delegation, and the American academics with whom they met were charmed. But Fei Xiaotong—rolly-poly, ebullient, outgoing, and invariably smiling—was my favorite. I found him dazzling. He changed my life. Fei had something to say. He made China real.

Born in 1910, a year before the collapse of the last of China's dynasties, Fei grew up in a time when only a tiny elite received a higher education. Fewer still had the opportunity to study abroad. Fei was extraordinarily privileged. After studying in Beijing, where he graduated from American-founded Yanqing University and received a master's degree at



*After years of government-enforced obscurity, a newly favored Fei Xiaotong was sent to America as part of a delegation of scholars after the restoration of diplomatic ties in 1979.*

Tsinghua University, he was given a fellowship to the London School of Economics, where he received his Ph.D. in 1938 under the mentorship of the esteemed anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski. Fei's dissertation, published as *Peasant Life in China*, remains a classic.

Fei's pursuit of his chosen profession brought him repeated tragedy. In the summer of 1935, accompanied by Wang Tonghui, his new wife and fellow sociology student, he went to Guangxi Province for what both expected to be a year of fieldwork. The area was mountainous, remote, and desperately poor, and the couple traveled on foot, accompanied by porters and guides. They were in particularly rugged terrain, separated from their guides, when Fei fell into a tiger trap, plunging into a deep pit as stones crashed down upon him. Wang Tonghui set off alone to find help for her badly injured husband.

She never returned. A week later, her body was found in a river. Depressed and burdened with guilt, believing that his wife had died for him and wishing that he had died instead, Fei spent months in a hospital. Instead of returning to Guangxi, he joined his elder sister in the village of Kaixian-gong, on the banks of Lake Tai in his native province of Jiangsu. It was there that he conducted the research that would become *Peasant Life in China*.

Fei was already a professor at Tsinghua University when the People's Republic was established in October 1949. The reality of the Chinese Communist Party confronted him, as it did many of his generation, with difficult choices. In the mid-1940s, the rivalry between the Communists and Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party was building toward civil war. Fei had joined the Democratic League, a group of prominent intellectuals searching for a third, more democratic way. When the third way failed and the corruption and misrule of the Nationalists became intolerable, Fei came finally to welcome the Communist victory. The account he wrote of his first year living under Communist rule contained a mixture of acceptance and enthusiasm. Fei was not a revolutionary. He was not a proponent of violence. His propensities were democratic. But he found much to admire in the newly victorious Communist Party—its focus on the poor, its insistence that education be practical, its critique of isolated, arrogant academics, its widespread popular support. He welcomed his own participation in the party-directed process of “thought reform” as a means of divesting himself of his “bourgeois” past and joining his compatriots in pursuit of a common, socialist goal. He was swept up in the patriotism of a united China free from the vestiges of foreign intrusion.

Fei's second professionally induced tragedy came shortly thereafter, in 1951, when sociology was declared a “bourgeois pseudoscience.” The discipline was abolished. The only true science in China, as Fei's biographer, David Arkush, points out, was Marxism-Leninism. Without a profession, Fei was sent to the newly established Central Academy of National Minorities to become one of its three vice presidents. He could no longer teach or do serious research.

Fei Xiaotong was granted new life in 1956, when the policy toward China's intellectuals began to change. Zhou Enlai, China's sophisticated and cultured premier, began calling for greater appreciation of the country's intellectuals, and Mao Zedong promoted a new blossoming of academic freedom. “Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend,” Mao proclaimed.

Fei became active again in the newly revived Democratic League, traveling the country to meet with fellow intellectuals, becoming a public spokesman for their academic and economic interests. Then, cau-

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tiously at first and following the lead of his senior colleagues, he began to build a case for the reintroduction of sociology. He did not regret the dissolution of sociology, nor, he said (disingenuously, perhaps), had it affected his ability to do research. But social development is inevitably accompanied by problems. Better to study those problems than to claim they do not exist. The label of the discipline did not matter. Call it social investigation rather than sociology. But rely on educated specialists to conduct the research.

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Fei Xiaotong was able to conduct his first significant research in well over a decade when, in the spring of 1957, he returned to Kaixiangong. His report combined the necessary lip service to the miracles of socialist collectivization with a profound critique of its consequences for the peasants of that village. The changes that had occurred since his first visit, 21 years earlier, in 1936, he wrote, were absolutely unprecedented. The society of exploitation of man by man had been transformed, and a new era of prosperity and happiness was at hand. But Fei, as always, focused on problems—and how best to solve them. The reality was that many in Kaixiangong thought that they had been better off when Fei first visited. Many village children could not even afford to attend school.

A major reason for the decline in peasant welfare was the absence of sideline occupations—activities such as raising silkworms and transporting goods—that had been banned as “capitalist” with the introduction of agricultural collectives. Villagers could never prosper through farming alone. The collectives were creating a new psychology as well. Peasants had become dependent on the state, unable to make their own economic decisions. Morale was suffering.

While Fei was in Kaixiangong, the tide was turning against him. In the spring of 1957, the policy of greater academic freedom had merged with Mao’s campaign to reform the Communist Party. Concerned that the party had become corrupted by power, Mao encouraged, then prodded, China’s intellectuals to identify the party’s faults. Initially, the criticisms were mild and slow to come, but when the floodgates opened, the party was subjected to wholesale rebuke. Intellectuals, it seemed, still preferred genuine democracy to a dictatorship that called itself democratic. After a mere six weeks, Mao suddenly reversed course, launching an “anti-rightist” campaign against those who had spoken out. Hundreds of thousands of China’s intellectuals were declared rightists. Many lost their jobs. Others spent decades in labor reform or in exile in poor rural areas. All were silenced.

Two leaders of the Democratic League, Luo Longzhi and Zhang Bojun, were deemed China’s most egregious rightists, accused of leading a nationwide plot against the Communist Party. Fei Xiaotong was accused of having been a member of their clique. He became rightist number three.

The evil genius of Mao was his ability to turn Chinese against one another, and neither Fei nor other Chinese intellectuals were immune. In a stilted language unlike anything he had previously penned, Fei confessed to a crime of rebellion against the state, divorcing himself from the “adventurist” leaders of the Democratic League. Fei’s colleagues also spoke out against him, their attacks ranging from erudite, well-footnoted academic crit-

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iques of the “reactionary functionalism” of Malinowski, and hence of Fei, to vicious personal attacks. One of Fei’s closest colleagues asserted, preposterously, that within a week of the death of Wang Tonghui, Fei had fallen in love with another woman and completely forgotten his wife.

Fei’s fate was less extreme than others’. He lost his job, but he continued to live on the campus of the Central Academy of National Minorities. He was never sent to a labor reform camp, though he did spend several years laboring in the fields at a “May Seventh Cadre School” during the Cultural Revolution. But for 22 years, during which some 30 million peasants died in the famine brought on by Mao’s Great Leap Forward and the country was ripped apart by the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, Fei Xiaotong was silent.

Then, in 1979, Hu Qiaomu, president of the newly established Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and a close associate of Deng Xiaoping, asked Fei to begin a process that would lead to the reintroduction of sociology in China. Hu told Fei that the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences had been asked to send a delegation of scholars to visit the United States. He wanted Fei to be a member.

“We did not know what had happened in sociology outside China during those years,” Fei told me later. “It was my task both to learn something of recent developments in Western sociology and to begin to establish some contacts with Western scholars.”

Fei’s task was daunting. Restoring sociology to China meant training a new generation from scratch. But there were no Chinese faculty members to train them and no books. Fei turned to Chinese sociologists from the United States and Hong Kong, who led a series of workshops that were crash courses on the rudiments of sociology. The best and most enthusiastic participants were sent abroad to study.

Fei was determined not to repeat the mistakes of his past. He never repudiated his previous work, but he accepted much of the criticism against it, coming to see his writings as a Chinese intellectual’s view of the peasantry. To the consternation of some of his American colleagues, he rejected the notion of a “universal” social science, arguing instead for “a people’s



*Fei's heirs may be China's new social entrepreneurs, such as Zhu Yongzhong, shown here in a school sponsored by his Sanchuan Development Association.*

anthropology” or a Chinese sociology—“a sociology in the service of the Chinese people, a sociology in the service of Chinese socialism.” The ultimate purpose of Chinese sociology, he believed, was to help ordinary Chinese people solve their problems. The determination of what those problems were would be made not by sociologists but by the people who were living them.

Many say that China today is in the throes of a moral crisis, as an entire generation rejects every value but self-interest. Fei Xiaotong's generation faced constant moral dilemmas—the daily choice, as Václav Havel would say, of how far to compromise in order “to get along.” But there were values that Fei held constant. His fundamental concerns were the concrete problems of everyday life. He believed that intellectuals have a responsibility to understand and help the less fortunate. And more than 40 years after joining the Democratic League, he still believed in the basic democratic values that had led him there.

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Thus, in the spring of 1989, he could hardly avoid the great political upheaval that rocked the country to its core. Massive protests broke out in Beijing, led by students and fueled by popular anger against the corruption



of the Communist Party and the growing sense that millions of ordinary Chinese people had yet to share the fruits of economic reform. Democracy was the protesters' watchword. Fei stood clearly on their side. When the students staged a hunger strike in Tiananmen Square, he wrote to party chief Zhao Ziyang urging China's leaders to enter into a dialogue with the students and embrace their just demands. Later, he visited the square, supporting the students, yes, but exhorting them, for the sake of China and their health, to call off their hunger strike and return to their schools. On May 19, when Premier Li Peng declared martial law, Fei joined the chorus of his colleagues calling for an emergency session of the National People's Congress to end military authority and bring about a peaceful resolution to the confrontation.

The special session was never convened. Instead, on the night of June 3–4, 1989, the People's Liberation Army marched into Beijing, to considerable resistance from its residents, and retook the city by force.

Three weeks later, I visited Fei at his home. He was at the time sufficiently high ranking to merit a bodyguard, but he was not certain whether the guard was solely for his protection or had the additional task of monitoring his activities. He had deliberately chosen a Sunday for the visit. The guard was off on Sundays.

What I remember most about our conversation is not recorded in my notes. Perhaps I misremember. But I think not. I think that Fei, like many Chinese officials, waited until the end of our conversation, when my notebook was closed and we were walking to my car, to speak off the record and from

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the heart, to say what was uppermost in his mind. What I remember him saying is, “We were so close, so close.” And what I interpreted him to mean was that if he and his colleagues had been successful in convening an emergency session of the

National People's Congress, overturning the declaration of martial law, meeting many of the students' demands, and thus transforming the National People's Congress into more than a rubber stamp, China's democratic breakthrough would have begun.

My notes from that day record a Fei Xiaotong sick at heart—“walking in darkness” were the words he used. The country had suffered a huge setback, he thought, and the future was uncertain. His mood changed as he weighed one possible future against another. He proclaimed himself too old to solve this latest of China's puzzles. He was pessimistic about the future of sociology in China. Research would be too difficult. The brightest students would go abroad.

He was right about sociology. Many of the best did leave. And during the 1990s, research in China suffered. As American sociologist Richard Madsen points out, Chinese scholars kept unearthing unpleasant facts—

which is what Fei wanted, of course. And because so many of China's sociologists are American trained, Fei's hope for a distinctively Chinese sociology, focused more on what is important than merely on what can be measured, has yet to be fulfilled. Still, there are now 120 sociology departments in Chinese postsecondary institutions, and many of the promising sociologists who left China do return periodically to teach.

Part of Fei's tradition continues. The problems in China's countryside today are serious and growing worse. Yu Jianrong, a researcher at the Rural Development Center at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, is documenting widespread rural protest against excessive taxation, confiscation of land, and corrupt local officials. He echoes Fei in criticizing China's contemporary intellectuals for prescribing on behalf of China's farmers while excluding them as actors in their own right. He would have the farmers represent themselves.

Increasingly they are. Dotting the social landscape of China today are "social entrepreneurs" with values not greatly different from Fei's—an acute sense of responsibility for the disadvantaged and a mission to find solutions to society's ills. They are generally young, between 30 and 45 years old, and have middle or normal school educations. Many are former teachers, and some are disillusioned former officials. Some have formed small nongovernmental organizations to carry out their goals, thus contributing to the development of civil society in China and to a third, more democratic way. They focus on alleviating poverty and bringing primary schools, water delivery systems, or fuel-saving solar cookers to poor rural villages. A growing number of local organizations are devoted to environmental protection, and some address the rapidly expanding problem of HIV/AIDS.

I saw Fei only rarely during the last years of his life, but the change he wrought in my life is permanent. He taught me that understanding China requires being there, at the country's grassroots, away from officials and guides, listening to the stories of people's everyday lives. When I traveled in America with his delegation in 1979, the stories I heard that made China real were about the political persecutions so many in the group had suffered, particularly during the Cultural Revolution. I determined to go to China and listen to those stories, so that they could be told and never forgotten. In 1981, Fei made arrangements for me to do just that. I saw him often during the 1980s and helped edit several of the pieces he wrote for the West. The two calligraphy scrolls he made in my honor hang prominently in my home, and I still follow the admonition he inscribed for me in one of his books: to remember him always.

Because of his role in my research, and because we were friends, some people think that buried in my 1987 book about China's cultural revolution, *Enemies of the People*, is the story of Fei Xiaotong. But Fei Xiaotong never told me the more heart-rending parts of his story. I learned about them from others. He was an optimist at heart. He looked forward rather than back. □