

# Fei Xiao Tong

## A public intellectual in Communist China

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The following article, which is intended to complement other assessments, focuses on a significant dimension to the legacy of the prominent Chinese anthropologist Fei Xiao Tong:<sup>1</sup> his role as a public intellectual in Communist China. It was a role which had its origins in Republican China (1911-1949) with the struggle against Japanese imperialism (1937-1945) and for which Fei, a patriotic Chinese, was equipped, at least partially, by doctoral study in London in the late 1930s. It took definite shape following the People's Liberation of China in 1949, with the coming to power of the Chinese Communist Party under the leadership of Mao Zedong.

However, Fei's career was to receive a dramatic setback when Maoist ideology was at its most fierce, especially during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Nevertheless, the end of Maoism in China and the country's 'Opening to the World' under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping saw Fei Xiao Tong re-enter public life, both as a respected academic and as a public intellectual commentator on a China faced by many social problems. Fei believed that the social sciences provided a rational means for analyzing such problems and for finding solutions. This prompted him to comment publicly on social policy, particularly as it concerned the people of rural China; something which was to have serious personal and important professional consequences as the article shows.

### Who was Fei Xiao Tong?

Fei Xiao Tong, born on 2 November 1910, was one of China's best known and most respected anthropologists. By the end of his life, on 24 April 2005, he had gained both an international professional reputation as a pioneering anthropologist and sociologist, and something approaching popular cult status both in China and elsewhere. In the manner of the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, Fei became known outside the profession, although it was argued in a recent discussion of Fei's legacy to world anthropology that still '[f]ar too few social theorists know about Fei; knowledge of his work is largely confined to China scholars' (Hamilton & Chang 2011: 21).

In 1937 Fei received a scholarship that allowed him to prepare a doctoral thesis at the London School of Economics under the supervision of Bronislaw Malinowski. In a memoir of this period he reflected on the ideological impact, or what we might now call 'soft power', of this experience. Fei observed that '[i]t was not incidental that people like Nehru were permeated throughout with the British spirit' (Fei 2002: 21). He continued, '[w]hen I look back on the sort of "education" that I received from Malinowski, I would say the crucial point was how I was, in various ways, being influenced in terms of world outlook and methodology. It was not done by way of persuasion, but by exerting a gradual imperceptible influence on one's mind and soul with social and academic activities' (ibid: 23).

This encouraged Fei to regard himself as an intellectual bridge between Chinese culture and Western social science. This article is intended to stimulate fresh interest in his attempt to function as an anthropologist and as a public intellectual in a China in which Maoist ideology was *total*. It might be of value given continuing concern – not only in contemporary China – about academic freedom, the relationship between intellectuals, public opinion, the state, and human rights and democracy. The article thus considers Fei's precarious status as a public intellectual,

his place in the 'red or expert' struggle, his fate during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and his cautious return to academic prominence and as an influential public figure in post-Maoist China, not least as a prominent member of the China Democratic League.

### Fei Xiao Tong as public intellectual

Fei was active politically in the China Democratic League, a party of intellectuals which saw its role as providing an informed and rational middle way, in the manner of the British Fabian Society, standing between the nationalist Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party. In March 1949 he remained in mainland China, believing, perhaps naively, that he could give critical support to the communists in the construction of a 'New China'. He claimed that he began 'to understand a little that perhaps it was only in the process of "serving the people" that one could speak of reform' (McGough 1979: 11). Fei argued that '[t]he fundamental end is evident; it is the satisfaction of the basic requirements common to every Chinese... 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 judgement based on reliable information' (Fei 1939: 4-5).

Fei now acquired public recognition through popular articles on policy issues, written from a social science perspective. He had the facility of writing quickly and clearly which enabled him to produce very many such 'opinion pieces'. An example is the collection of newspaper and magazine articles brought together as *Xiangtu Zhongguo* (Rural China) in 1948. These dealt with a wide range of topics such as '[b]ringing literacy to the countryside', '[t]he morality of personal relationships', '[r]ule by elders', and '[a]n inactive government' (Fei 1992). This was Fei's first period as a 'public intellectual' during which he argued for the potential contribution that social sciences could make to China's development. However, the Chinese Communist Party considered formally educated intellectuals to be class enemies and began a systematic programme to 're-educate' them, accompanied by direct attacks on those who stepped too far out of line.

At the beginning of the First Five Year Plan (1953), Mao Zedong instructed Communist Party cadres to encourage those intellectuals 'capable of working honestly and of knowing their work' (Spence 1990: 566). Fei's personal optimism was encouraged in January 1956 when Zhou Enlai, then next in power only to Mao, called for intellectuals and other experts to be given better material conditions, for their knowledge and expertise to be respected, and for their integration into the Communist Party's programme. This seemed to offer the possibility of collaboration with the Communist Party on the rational partnership lines that Fei envisaged. Mao himself seemed to endorse this when, in May 1956, he declared '[l]et a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools contend' (MacFarquhar 1960). During this 'Hundred Flowers' period some of China's most famous scholars began 'to publish articles of astonishing frankness' with Fei noted as being '...among the most outspoken' (Spence 1990: 571).

Fei spoke of his misgivings about Maoist rural policies. He argued that: '[t]o doubt the superiority of collectivization is incorrect. But to recognize the superiority of collectivization and at the same time believe that it solves all problems is in, my opinion, incorrect as well. The one way is as incorrect as the other. If we think too simplistically,

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1. Also transliterated as Fei Hsiao-Tung, Fei Hsiao-t'ung, Fei Xiaotong.

**Fig. 1.** On a field visit to Kai Xian Gong village.

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- 1954b. Report of an investigation into the peasant movement in Hunan. In *Selected works of Mao Tse-tung* vol. 1, 21-59. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

we will be in greater danger of error. Please excuse me if I go on about this: I hope that I can keep the reader from seizing on one or two of my sentences to argue that I am being negative' (Fei 1979: 62). In '[a] few words on sociology' and '[e]arly spring weather for intellectuals', both written for a general readership, Fei called on academics to be outspoken and active in public life. In the first, published on 29 February 1957, he considered the relationship of bourgeois social science to Marxism-Leninism and the potential for informing public policy. He commented:

I have had opportunities to carry out concrete investigations of the social life of minority peoples. On the one hand, I have studied Marxism-Leninism and have reformed my own position, viewpoint and method, while, on the other hand, I have still been able to use my past training and have continued my academic work (Fei 1979: 33).

In the second, published in the *Renmin Ribao* (The People's Daily), Fei compared the atmosphere in which intellectuals worked, with the promising climate of early spring and argued for intellectual leadership in scientific work, for greater participation by intellectuals in public affairs, and encouraged a more critical view of the Communist Party and its policies (McGough 1979: 12; Hawtin 1958: 170).

However, it was naïve to believe that the Communist Party's line on intellectual freedom had changed. Indeed, it has been observed that: '[t]he working out of a revolutionary epistemology was a key aspect of Mao's thinking about education, culture and the path to communism' (Morgan 2003: 110). This had been the focus of the Communist Party's Yenan Forum on Art and Literature in 1940, at which Mao stated the ideological relationship between communists and bourgeois intellectuals. The latter, said Mao, must understand that '[o]nly by speaking for the masses can he educate them and only by becoming their pupil can he become their teacher'. If not 'then no matter how great his talent may be, he will not be needed by the people and his work will have no future' (Mao 1954a: 73-75).

The Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957) demonstrated that the Communist Party had not moved from the ideological position laid down at Yenan in 1940, while the Hundred Flowers period, whether deliberately or not, had identified independent-minded bourgeois experts, such as Fei Xiao Tong, and isolated them from the red peasant and proletarian masses led by the vanguard Communist Party. Fei and other Western-trained academics comprised an endangered species after People's Liberation in 1949. Intellectuals such as he were considered representative of a reactionary culture, in the service of imperialists and of the Chinese feudal class. In a polemic reminiscent of the hegemonic analysis developed by the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci, Mao argued that: '[t]he new culture and the reactionary culture are locked in a struggle in which one must die so that the other may live; there is no construction without destruction, no flowing without damming, no moving without halting' (Mao 1954c: 141). There were, according to Mao, only two kinds of knowledge: '[t]hat which concerns the struggle for production and that which concerns the class struggle' (Mao 1954d: 32). It was this ideology that that determined the 'red versus expert' campaign.

It has been argued, from a neo-Durkheimian perspective, that the 'red versus expert' dichotomy revealed an opposition of mechanical and organic forms of social and power relations in Maoist China and that 'measures of redness applied when creating hierarchies of leadership implied that redness is not only about equalitarian sameness; some were redder than others. But redness contests still produced mechanical solidarity. They were forms of model competition in which everyone strived for the same



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ideal with the best moving slightly further in that direction than the rest' (Kipnis 2005: 80). However, '[i]n contrast to exemplars of redness, experts were good at a particular speciality. Their authority was by nature organic; their skills were of value only when used in concert with those of other differentially trained people' (ibid: 81). Many problems followed from this emphasis on *redness* and the devaluation of *expertise*. The disasters that accompanied the utopian experiment of the Great Leap Forward (1958) were due, it is argued, to Mao's attempt to industrialize 'without empowering experts' (ibid.), and that '[t]he degradation of expertise reflected a wider problem of the overvaluation of redness – the mistrust of difference. Experts' knowledge made them different and hence untrustworthy' (ibid: 82).

### The Proletarian Cultural Revolution: 1966-1976

Fei was noted by Mao Zedong personally because he was an anthropological expert on peasant life. This was an aspect of Chinese society to which Mao had given particular revolutionary attention when a communist organizer among the Chinese peasantry, during which he had prepared a '[r]eport of an investigation into the peasant movement in Hunan' (Mao 1954a). On 13 October 1957, Mao singled out Fei for criticism saying:

A good many of the rightists are talented people; on this point I actually have considerable respect for them. But it would not be acceptable for them to use their talent to oppose Communism and to oppose socialism. How can we transform them? Take Fei Hsiao-t'ung for example. I had a chat with him, and I said, 'Can you change a bit?' (Laughter). He has learned our method, putting down roots and forging links, which was used in [the campaign for] land reform. Altogether he has more than two hundred friends who are high-level intellectuals. They are everywhere – Peking, Chengtu, Wuhan, Shanghai, Wusih. He says that he is at a disadvantage precisely in this respect and that he can't get out of that circle. Not only is he unable to get out, he intends to organize these people and represent them in [the course of] the great blooming and great contending. I said 'Don't deal with that two hundred; find another two hundred; go among the workers and peasants and look for two hundred'. (Mao 1957: 48-49)

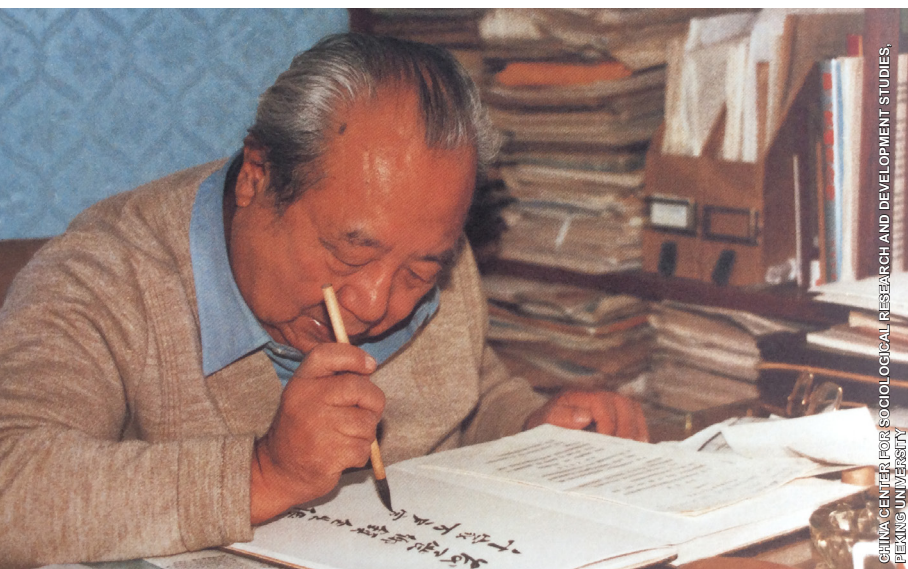
The perspectives of Fei and of Mao on peasant life differed fundamentally. In a recent analysis of the epistemological rift that separates the Maoist years from the present People's Republic, it is said that Fei's research had shown that: '[t]he predominant image of struggles in the countryside had been tied to consanguineal and affinal concerns. Social relations in rural China had always been relations of kinship' (Liu 2012: 150). It was through using such anthropological knowledge that Fei looked for solutions to the problems of the Chinese peasants. On the other hand, '[t]he Maoist challenge was to make peasants realize that their hardships and conditions in life had nothing to do with bad luck but were instead a material effect of class inequality



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**Fig. 2.** With rural school children.

**Fig. 3.** Visiting the Inner Mongolia grasslands, with members of the China Democratic League.

**Fig. 4.** In his study.

inflicted by society' (ibid.). It is added crucially that '[t]he question was not simply about *what* to believe; it was about *how* to make the belief into praxis, that is, a habituation of what must be' (ibid.). This is again close to the hegemonic analysis of Gramsci. Such epistemological and ideological differences over a fundamental political issue marked Fei Xiao Tong out for special attention.

Two examples are considered here. Li Ta's article '[c]riticizing Fei Hsiao-t'ung's comprador sociology' combines a polemic against bourgeois sociology with a bitter personal attack which alleged that 'a group of right-

wing intellectuals headed by Fei Hsiao-t'ung have openly clamoured for the restoration of bourgeois sociology in order to carry out their anti-party and antisocialist political schemes' (Fei 1979: 142). It concludes with a damning comparison by which Fei and his colleagues were said to want 'to substitute the viewpoint of the comprador class for that of historical materialism; in the realm of politics they want to substitute bourgeois democracy for the democracy of the working class and the masses of the people; in the realm of economics they want to substitute capitalism for socialism, turning the wheel of history back to the era of semi-colonialism and semi-feudalism' (ibid.).

There is also Lin Yüeh-hua's notorious '[t]he sinister and detestable Fei Hsiao-t'ung', originally a wall poster at the Central Institute of Nationalities, before its newspaper publication on 2 August 1957. Two short quotes will suffice to give its tone and content. It begins: '[t]he group known as the Chang-Lo Alliance [leaders of the China Democratic League] has at its nucleus the deputy director of our Institute, Fei Hsiao-t'ung. Just what role does he play, after all, in this conspiratorial organization? He is the hawk for their black-magic, song-and-dance routine. For instance, in the last two years he shuttled back and forth, from north to south, propagandizing everywhere for reactionary opinions, all under the pretext of investigations' (Fei 1979: 143), and concludes: '[o]nly if he truly and completely bows his head to the people in admitting his crimes can this justly accused rightist adventurer Fei Hsiao-t'ung not "invite the contempt of the people", and only then can he earn the people's pardon' (ibid: 151).

Fei bent before the storm in a public speech to the National People's Congress on 13 July 1957, published as a 'confession to the people' (Fei 1979: 75-84). The setting for this required self-humiliation was chosen by the Communist Party; the National People's Congress being designed to maintain the illusion of nationwide democratic participation. Fei admitted his political 'guilt', saying that he had damaged relations between the Communist Party and the peasants. He ended saying: 'I deeply detest what I have done, and I must change my viewpoint. I am grateful to the Party for unhesitatingly opening wide the doors of reform and for magnanimously educating those of us who committed errors and fell into the rightists' morass' (ibid: 81).

He was stripped of honours and status; banned from teaching, researching and publishing; was intellectually and socially isolated; and spent two and a half years undergoing 'political re-education' in a 7 May Cadre School, similar to those used in the 'political re-education' of intellectuals in 1950 and 1951. Fei's personal account is harrowing. He said: 'I didn't think I should live on. It was all nonsense. I considered suicide, but I didn't do it. We believed that China would eventually get back on the right course, and I actually lived to see it happen' (Pasternak 1988: 662). Fei disappeared from public view and many outside China believed him to be dead. He had, in fact, eventually returned quietly to the Central Institute of Nationalities in Beijing.

### Fei Xiao Tong's return as a public intellectual

In the years that followed, China experienced dramatic changes, especially with Deng Xiaoping's 'opening-up of China'. Many issues with which Fei had been concerned again became current and this enabled his renewal as both an academic and influential public intellectual. In 1948 he had written:

The basic methods of human interaction in rural society rest on familiarity. These methods cannot be used with a stranger. China is undergoing a rapid transformation that is changing a fundamentally rural society into a modern one. (Fei 1992: 44)

By 1988 Fei described his influence as a commentator on rural society in these terms:



1988年费孝通访问美国时与同行进行学术交流

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**Fig. 5.** Meeting American academics during visit to the United States in 1988.

I have become a high level promoter. I analyse what is going on, describe it, and advise those who control policy. That's actually a very important and constructive role. What I write about these developments, about their accomplishments and problems is widely read. (Pasternak 1988: 656)

He was able to call upon both his academic knowledge and his bitter personal experiences to inspire and mentor fresh generations of Chinese social scientists, and to engage in the education of both policy-makers and the Chinese public through his popular articles, lectures and broadcasts.

However, to be a public intellectual it is not enough to be a celebrity, which Fei Xiaotong with his engaging personality certainly was. A public intellectual also aims to influence opinion and policy in a consistent and *pro bono* way, through the popular dissemination of professional expertise. The failures and the successes of Fei's attempts to do this in Communist China raise questions about the capacity of public intellectuals in authoritarian states, and of definitions of the public good and of public policy in such societies. He was both an academic anthropologist and a popular educator who aimed to bring social trends, problems, and possible solutions to the attention of China's Communist Party rulers and, significantly, to that of the Chinese people generally. Fei did this through popular articles and books on social issues such as the rural economy, small towns, national minorities, and the development of frontier areas. One example, noted by Hamilton and Wang, is the survey of his research which Fei gave in his book *Small towns in China* (Fei 1986, 1992: n3).

His efforts influenced the Chinese government to promote rural industry, the rapid growth of which in the 1980s raised the income of hundreds of millions of villagers throughout China. Fei commented:

Now I have support from the population, from the farmers themselves, and that gives me a sense of worth and confidence. Confidence comes from society, from social influence! I am getting new ideas, very practical ideas, and am encouraged by others, by people with responsibility. They appreciate that we sociologists have the ability to point out important relationships, to describe functional relationships that are easily overlooked by others. (Pasternak 1988: 656)

The potential of Fei's ideas for rural community development also received international recognition. For example, on 31 August 1994, he received the Ramon Magsaysay Award in the Philippines and the following day, led a panel on '[t]he practical contribution of the social sciences to rural development'.

Fei considered anthropology and sociology to be policy tools and his public intellectual mission was to ensure that they were used as such. An example is the discussion he initiated in China about 'the big problem of small townships', noted by Wang Hui, a voice from the Chinese New Left (Wang 2009: n215). However, while urbanization and the decline of the rural economy and society continue to be major social issues in contemporary China given the huge surplus of rural labour power, Fei's suggested solutions have given way to studies of urbanization and of the possibilities of absorbing the growing numbers of rural migrant workers; a problem which would be aggravated with an economic downturn (ibid.).

## Conclusion

Fei ended his life as a high-profile and respected Chinese academic based at Peking University – one of China's most prestigious academic institutions – and as a public intellectual, writing, lecturing and also broadcasting. He travelled outside China – for example to Columbia University and to his *alma mater* at the London School of Economics – and received international honours including the Bronislaw Malinowski Award of the Society of Applied Anthropology, at the University of Denver in 1980. In his acceptance speech he set out his thinking on how to achieve a 'people's anthropology' (Fei 1981).

In 1988, Fei was also to receive the Encyclopedia Britannica Award which again enhanced his international profile. Most significant perhaps, was the invitation from the Chinese University of Hong Kong to give the Tanner Lectures on Human Values, which was very important symbolically, as well as intellectually (Fei 1988). Such invitations and awards added to his significance as a prominent Chinese public intellectual both *before* and *after* the Cultural Revolution. Even so, Fei moved cautiously, assessing post-reform Chinese sociology as having been too 'rapidly accomplished' (*su cheng*) and lacking an adequate knowledge base from which to develop theory and policy (Fei 2001; Wang 2005: 185). On Mao, he said:

Quite honestly, I still don't think that Mao Zedong initiated the Cultural Revolution without a certain real vision. He was attempting to do something very deep, but it got out of control. And the problems he wanted to solve have not yet been solved. (Pasternak 1988: 653)

Fei was a man pledged to reason, as the following statement quoted by Wong shows:

History is not always rational. But in any historical circumstance, there exists a rational solution. The rational development of history depends on the rational behaviour of men. One who is recognized as an 'academic' has the duty to point out the rational direction. But whether it can materialize into history or not, that should be left to the politician. (Wong 1979: 109)

Fei was not, of course, an isolated case, although he may be considered an exceptional one because of his personal encounter with Mao Zedong himself over the problems and policies that should be followed in developing Chinese rural society. Unfortunately, space does not permit a comparative consideration of other public intellectuals in China during this period, such as Fei's fellow anthropologist Zhang Liaotao or the outspoken dissident Wei Jingsheng. Such a discussion would place Fei Xiaotong in his intellectual and political context yet more firmly, enabling us to develop a deeper understanding of the fundamental social and political issues raised in this article. This may be attempted on another occasion. Fei Xiaotong's personal dilemma, as a Chinese public intellectual living under a ruthless and ideologically determined regime, was when to speak and when to remain silent. He survived and, as a patriot, did what he could in the service of the Chinese people. ●

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