PEASANT LIFE IN CHINA

A Field Study of Country Life in the Yangtze Valley

By

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With a Preface by

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To My Wife
TUNG-WEI WANG

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Finally, let me remember my wife, who died for Anthropology in our expedition to the Yao Mountains in 1935. Her solemn sacrifice leaves me no alternative but to follow her always. To her this book is dedicated.

PREFACE

By B. MALINOWSKI

I VENTURE to foretell that *Peasant Life in China* by Dr. Hsiao-Tung Fei will be counted as a landmark in the development of anthropological field-work and theory. The book has a number of outstanding merits, each of them marking a new departure. Our attention is here directed not to a small, insignificant tribe, but to the greatest nation in the world. The book is not written by an outsider looking out for exotic impressions in a strange land; it contains observations carried on by a citizen upon his own people. It is the result of work done by a native among natives. If it be true that self-knowledge is the most difficult to gain, then undoubtedly an anthropology of one's own people is the most arduous, but also the most valuable achievement of a field-worker.

The book, moreover, though it takes in the traditional background of Chinese life, does not remain satisfied with the mere reconstruction of the static past. It grapples fully and deliberately with that most elusive and difficult phase of modern life: the transformation of traditional culture under Western impact. The writer is courageous enough to cast away all academic pretence at scientific detachment. Dr. Fei fully realizes that knowledge is indispensable to the right solution of practical difficulties. He sees that science, in rendering real service to mankind, is not degraded. It indeed receives the acid test of its validity. Truth will work, because truth is nothing else but man's adaptation to real facts and forces. Science becomes only prostituted when the scholar is forced, as in some countries of

Europe, to adapt his facts and his convictions to the demands of a dictated doctrine.

Dr. Fei as a young Chinese patriot is fully alive, not only to the present tragedy of China, but to the much bigger issues involved in the dilemma of his great Mother-country to westernize or to perish. And since as an anthropologist he knows how difficult a process is that of readaptation; how this process must be built on the old foundations, and built slowly, gradually, and wisely, he is deeply concerned that all change should be planned, and that the planning be based on the solid foundation of fact and knowledge.

Some passages of this book can indeed be taken as a charter of practical sociology and anthropology. "The need of such knowledge has become more and more urgent in China because the country cannot afford to waste any more of her wealth and energy in making mistakes." Dr. Fei sees clearly that with the best intentions and the most desirable end clearly in view, planning must remain faulty if the initial situation of change be misconceived. "An inaccurate definition of a situation, either due to deliberate aberration or to ignorance, is dangerous for a group," because it presupposes forces which do not exist, and ignores obstacles which obstruct the way of progress.

I feel I have to quote one more paragraph from the Introduction. "An adequate definition of the situation, if it is to organize successful actions and attain the desired end, must be reached through a careful analysis of the functions of the social institutions, in relation to the need that they purport to satisfy and in relation to other institutions on which their working depends. This is the work of a social scientist. Social science therefore should play an important rôle in directing cultural change." This expresses well the greatest need, not only of the Chinese but of our own civilization, the need, that is, to recognize that even as in mechanical engineering only a fool or a madman

would plan, design, and calculate without reference to scientific physics and mathematics, so also in political action, reason and experience must be given the fullest play.

Our modern civilization is perhaps now facing its final destruction. We are careful to use only the most qualified specialists in all mechanical engineering. Yet as regards the control of political, social, and moral forces, we Europeans are yielding more and more to madmen, fanatics, and gangsters. A tremendous arraignment of force, controlled by individuals without a sense of responsibility or any moral obligation to keep faith is accumulating on the one side of the dividing line. On the other side, where wealth, power, and effectives could still be made overwhelmingly strong, we have had during the last few years a consistent and progressive display of weakness, lack of unity, and a gradual whittling down of the sense of honour and of the sanctity of obligations undertaken.

I have read Dr. Fei's clear and convincing arguments as well as his vivid and well-documented accounts with genuine admiration, at times not untinged with envy. His book embodies many of the precepts and principles which I have been preaching for some time past, without, alas, having the opportunity of practising them myself. Most of us forward-looking anthropologists have felt impatient with our own work for its remoteness, exoticism, and irrelevancy—though perhaps these may be more apparent than real. But there is no doubt that my own confession that " Anthropology, to me at least, was a romantic escape from our over-standardized culture," was essentially true.

The remedy, however, is at hand. If I may be allowed to quote some of my other reflections, " the progress of anthropology towards a really effective analytic science of human society, of human conduct, and of human nature, cannot be staved off." To achieve this, however, the science of man has first

and foremost to move from so-called savagery into the study of more advanced cultures of the numerically, economically, and politically important peoples of the world. The present book and the wider work in China and elsewhere, of which it is a part, justifies my forecast: "The anthropology of the future will be . . . as interested in the Hindu as in the Tasmanian, in the Chinese peasants as in the Australian aborigines, in the West Indian negro as in the Melanesian Trobriander, in the detribalized African of Haarlem as in the Pygmy of Perak." In this quotation is implied another important postulate of modern field-work and theory: the study of culture change; of the phenomena of contact, and of present-day diffusion.

It was therefore a great pleasure when some two years ago I received the visit of a distinguished Chinese sociologist, Professor Wu Wen-Tsao of Yenching University, and learnt from him that independently and spontaneously there had been organized in China a sociological attack on the real problems of culture change and applied anthropology, an attack which embodies all my dreams and desiderata.

Professor Wu and the young scholars whom he was able to train and inspire had realised first of all that to understand the civilization of their great country and to make it comprehensible to others, it was necessary to read in the open book of Chinese life, and learn how the live Chinese mind works in reality. Just because that country has had the longest unbroken tradition, the understanding of Chinese history must proceed from the appreciation of what China is to-day. Such an anthropological approach is indispensable as a supplement to important historical work carried out by modern Chinese scholars, and by a body of sinologists in Europe, on the basis of written records. History can be read back, taking the present as its living version, quite as much as it can be read forward, starting with the archæological remains of the dimmest

past and the earliest written records. The two approaches are complementary and they must be used concurrently.

The principles and the substance of Dr. Fei's book reveal to us how sound are the methodological foundations of the modern Chinese School of Sociology. Take the main subject-matter of the book. It is a field-study of country life on one of those riverine plains which for thousands of years have nourished the Chinese people both materially and spiritually. It is axiomatic that the foundation of an essentially agrarian culture will be found in village life, in rural economy, and in the needs and interests of a peasant population. By becoming acquainted with the life of a small village, we study, under a microscope as it were, the epitome of China at large.

Two main motives dominate the story of this book : the exploitation of the soil, and the reproductive processes within the household and the family. In this book, Dr. Fei limits himself to the fundamental aspects of peasant life in China. He proposes, I know, in his subsequent studies, to give a fuller account of ancestor-worship ; of the more complicated systems of belief and knowledge which flourish in village and township alike. He also hopes sooner or later to make a wider synthesis of his own works and that of his colleagues, giving us a comprehensive picture of the cultural, religious, and political systems of China. For such a synthesis, monographic accounts such as the present one are the first step. Dr. Fei's book and the contributions of his fellow-workers will become valuable pieces for the mosaic which it will be possible to construct from them.[1]

[1] The work already completed, mostly in Chinese, includes such subjects as: *The Marketing System in Shangtung*, by C. K. Yang; *Litigation in a Village Community of Hopei*, by Y. S. Hsu; *Peasant Custom in Hopei*, by S. Huang; *A Clan-Village in Fukien*, by Y. H. Lin; *Chinese Rural Education (in Shangtung) in Change*, by T. C. Liao; *The Social Organization of Hua Lan Yao (in Kwangsi)*, by Dr. and Mrs. Fei. Further studies are now being made of Land Tenure in Shansi, by Y. I. Li; and problems of emigrant relations between Fukien and overseas outpost, by A. L. Cheng.

It is not the task of a preface writer to retell a story so admirably told as the one of this book. The reader will find himself introduced into the setting: the charming riverine village of Kaihsienkung. He will be able to visualize its lay-out with its streams and bridges, its temples, rice-fields, and mulberry trees. In this the excellent photographs will prove an additional help. He will appreciate the good balance of concrete, at times numerical data, and the clear descriptions. The account of agricultural life, of the means of livelihood, and the typical occupations of the villagers; the excellent seasonal calendar, and the precise definition of land tenure, give a type of intimate and at the same time tangible information not to be found anywhere else in the literature on China.

I am allowed to quote from a statement by Sir E. Denison Ross, who read the book in manuscript, and thus defines its position in scientific literature: "I regard this treatise as quite exceptional. I know of no other work which describes at first hand and with intimate understanding the full story of life in a Chinese village community. We have had works dealing with statistics, economic studies, and novels full of local colour—but in no book have I found the answer to every kind of inquiry which the curious stranger might make." The "curious stranger," when he appears in the person of Sir Denison Ross, is a man of science, a historian, and one of the world's experts in Oriental Studies.

To me personally, the chapter on the silk industry is perhaps the most significant achievement of the book. It is an account of a planned change from domestic industry into a readaptation to co-operative work compatible with modern conditions. It vindicates some of the claims of sociology to be a practical and relevant study for social engineering. It raises a number of collateral questions, and will become, I

think, the starting point of other inquiries both in China and elsewhere.

In the argument of this chapter and in many other passages we can discover a moral quality of the book which I may be allowed to underline. There is no trace of special pleading or self-justification, although the book is written by a Chinese to be placed before Western readers. It is rather a criticism or self-criticism. Thus in the chapter on " Agrarian Problems in China " we read " The national government with all its promises and policies on paper was not able to carry out any practical measures owing to the fact that most of the revenue was spent in its anti-communist campaign, while, as I have pointed out, the real nature of the communist movement was a peasant revolt due to their dissatisfaction with the land system. Despite all kinds of justification on either side, one thing is clear : that the conditions of the peasants are getting worse and worse. So far no permanent land reform has been accomplished in any part of China since the recovery of the Red Area by the government." That a type of sociological work which openly criticizes the inadequacy of government action is yet carried on with the encouragement of the government speaks for itself. It proves on the one hand the integrity of the young sociologists in China and on the other the goodwill and wisdom of their official patrons.

A dispassioned, detached, and dignified attitude characterises all the Author's observations. That a Chinese must to-day have bitter feelings against Western civilization and the political rule of Western nations, is understandable. Yet no trace of this will be found in the present book. In fact, throughout my personal acquaintance with Dr. Fei and some of his colleagues, I had to admire the absence of national prejudice and national hatred—a moral attitude from which we Europeans could learn a great deal. The Chinese seem to be able to distinguish between nation-

hood and the political system. There is no hatred even of the Japanese as a people. On the first page of this book the Author refers to the invading country only in terms of dispassionate appreciation of its rôle in consolidating the Chinese nation and forcing it to build up a united front, and to readjust some of its fundamental problems, economic and social. The very village which we have learnt to know, to appreciate, to which we have almost become attached, has probably now been destroyed. We can only echo the writer's prophetic desire that in the ruin of that village and many others, "the internal conflicts and follies should find their last resting-place" and that "from the ruin a new China shall emerge."

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