



CHINA STUDIES SERIES


SMALL TOWNS in CHINA

— Functions, Problems & Prospects

By Fei Hsiao Tung & Others



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EDITOR'S NOTE

As the political, economic and cultural centres of rural China, currently accommodating nearly 80 percent and in earlier times an even larger proportion of the nation's population, small towns have a vital bearing on the overall social and economic life of China. They are essential to the solution of the country's emerging problems of population, employment, commodity production and circulation. Also depending much on the development of small towns are the rationalization of the nation's economic and administrative structure and the redivision of rural labour and trades. The construction of small towns has become ever more significant in China's present modernization drive to build a socialist society with Chinese characteristics.

The present book represents a most authentic and up-to-date study of the subject by Professor Fei Hsiao Tung, a Chinese authority in the field, and members of his research groups.

Professor Fei first became aware of the existence of small towns as an independent social entity and their far-reaching significance to the entire society during field study in the 1930s in Kaixian'gong Village in Wujiang County of southern Jiangsu Province. It had been his long-cherished hope that he could one day expand his research on individual villages to cover entire areas with small towns as their centres. However his chance for such a comprehensive and systematic study did not come until 1983. This research project on small towns is, therefore, his "dream come true".

Since the beginning of his studies in 1983, Professor Fei Hsiao Tung has led research groups on four investigative tours in the rural areas of Jiangsu Province, covering its vast areas in southern, central and northern sections. His two 1983 trips

to southern Jiangsu, one of the most affluent areas of the country, include Wujiang County, which has the greatest number of small towns, and the four municipalities of Changzhou, Wuxi, Nantong and Suzhou. His early 1984 trip to northern Jiangsu, used to be a relatively underdeveloped area by the national standard, covers the five municipalities of Xuzhou, Lianyungang, Yancheng, Huayin and Yangzhou. His trip to central Jiangsu in October 1984 covers the Nanjing-Zhenjiang-Yangzhou region, commonly known as the silver triangle. The four essays by Professor Fei Hsiao Tung in this book are based on the findings of the above-mentioned four investigation tours.

During the research, a standard was set that all studies must be based on first-hand information and on-the-spot investigation. The procedure was to analyse collectively the conditions of the areas to be investigated to determine the concrete problems and research topics to be assigned to each individual and group accordingly.

The nine other papers included in the book were chosen personally by Professor Fei from among dozens of papers by individual researchers and groups. They are either case studies of small towns of different classifications or papers focused on specific problems or social phenomena.

The research has been a multi-disciplinary project which involves the participation of people engaged in social and natural sciences, university teachers and people from the relevant departments of the central government and the provincial, municipal and county levels. It is unprecedented in both the number of towns studied and the personnel involved. We are convinced that the book will be of great help both to specialists and the general reader in a better understanding of the social and economic life of China.

SMALL TOWNS, GREAT SIGNIFICANCE

— A Study of Small Towns in Wujiang County

Fei Hsiao Tung

In the late spring and early summer 1983, I conducted a month-long field study of the history and present situation of about a dozen small towns in Wujiang County, Jiangsu Province. I had initially planned to write a paper based on my findings concerning the various types and levels of these small towns, the vicissitudes they have undergone, and their distribution and development. However, upon returning to Beijing I found that my busy schedule did not afford me sufficient time to write the paper I had originally planned. Therefore, my presentation today is just a collection of impressions and afterthoughts about my stay.

It was first decided to convene the present symposium at the beginning of this year. Through the joint efforts of all present, we have not only been able to hold meetings as scheduled, but have also selected a few dozen amongst the research papers which were submitted as outstanding. Everything is difficult at the beginning, and to have achieved such excellent results in merely half a year was indeed no easy task.

These research papers are valuable because they are all concerned with the construction of small towns, and explore, from different angles, concrete problems encountered in the course of their development. I believe that the direction we have taken in research is correct. Our social sciences must make sure that their research is closely connected with China's social reality and will serve the nation's socialist modernization programme. However, historical experience tells us that

fulfilling this task is no easy job. For quite a long period in the past, many of our social scientists, though well-versed in Marxist-Leninist theories and sincerely intent on doing a good job, failed to link their bookish theories with their actual work. This in turn has prevented our thinking from keeping pace with the changing realities. Therefore, when confronted with practical problems, we could not offer any realistic suggestions, but rather always fell back on our past practice or mechanically copied foreign experience. The price which we have paid for such incompetence is the extremely round-about course our work has taken.

However, people learn from their mistakes. We are now through with the errors of the past, and have begun to adopt the scientific attitude of combining theory with practice and seeking truth from facts, as has been advocated by Comrade Deng Xiaoping. It is only in this way that we can get to know China's actual characteristics.

I

In our study of small towns, we have from the very beginning broken away from the conventional pattern of going "from abstract concepts to abstract concepts". Rather, from the very start we have stressed conducting field studies and gradually deepening our understanding through carrying out on-the-spot investigations. We can say that our research on this subject was an experiment in combining theory with practice.

Understanding based on actual experience is certainly much more concrete and meaningful than that based on mere book knowledge. Although the papers included in this collection are a bit rough and perhaps not completely comprehensive in their analysis, yet all the facts they present objectively reflect reality. They are not theoretical deductions from abstract concepts, and still less arbitrary assumptions based on our imagination. In fact, the value of these papers lies in their objectiv-

ity. Being factual sketches of towns which they cover, they constitute a reliable historical record which will serve as valuable historical reference material decades or even hundreds of years from now. They are particularly valuable because they provide the basis for future studies, which will in turn represent their continuation.

Of course, it is impossible for people's subjective understanding to conform entirely with objective reality. As objective reality is constantly changing, people's understanding of it, even if imperfect, has to keep pace with such changes as well. Each new generation of scientists or social researchers furthers its predecessors' understanding of the world of reality. If one day we look back at our present findings concerning the small towns and find that this understanding was superficial and naive, this will only be evidence of progress in our understanding.

The study of small towns is a long-term research project. It is not only a major research project in China's Sixth Five-Year Plan, but it will be continued in the Seventh Five-Year Plan as well. The on-going study being carried out in southern Jiangsu is only the start of this long-term project. In order to extend our research, we must consider what the next step should be; we should make out a specific plan for the coming year and begin drawing up tentative plans for the Seventh Five-Year Plan.

In engaging in scientific study, the most dangerous tendency that people must guard against is to have one's view of the important overshadowed by the trivial, and to take a narrow view of things. We should keep in mind that both in terms of depth and scope, the research we have done on small towns this year is far from enough. Up to now, we have neither made any comprehensive examination of any specific small towns; nor have we gone beyond the limit of Wujiang County. We have merely examined, as if through a microscope, one "cell" of the entire subject of small towns, and have not even had a clear look at this. Hu Yaobang, General Secretary of the C.P.C. Central Committee, coming back from an inspection

tour of northwest China, proposed to develop this vast area by expanding grazing land and carrying out afforestation. This proposal had a very eye-opening effect, as before this it had scarcely occurred to anyone that this area had such great development potential. The mere fact of China's being such a large country doesn't allow us to take a very narrow view of things. Even if the scope of our research extended to include the whole of Jiangsu Province in future, it is still a small spot to the whole country. In order not to be deceptively contented with our limited view, or try to substitute our limited experience of the part for the whole, we should always keep in mind the concrete position which Jiangsu occupies in the entire country, that of Suzhou in the province of Jiangsu, as well as that of Wujiang County in Suzhou Prefecture. We must therefore be aware of the limitedness of our present knowledge of the subject, and the special characteristics of the small towns of Wujiang County.

Though the part can never substitute the whole, it is nevertheless a portion of the whole. Despite their special features, the small towns of Wujiang County also possess the common characteristics of all small Chinese towns in general. If we can scientifically analyse the part in light of the whole, and properly handle the relationship of the two, then our studies of the part will, to some extent, reflect the basic features of the overall situation. Wujiang County is located in southern Jiangsu, one of China's most affluent areas. By taking Wujiang's small towns the object of investigation and making an in-depth analysis of their problems, we have perhaps touched the heart of China's small town problem. By this we mean that the present construction efforts in Wujiang's small towns point the way for the future development of other areas, and the problems which have arisen here might crop up in other areas in the future. Such being the case, our scientific analyses of the problems encountered during this investigation will surely provide useful reference material to those engaged in the construction of small towns in other areas of the country in the future.

In undertaking any scientific research, there should always be a clear objective as well as a plan for carrying it through. Similarly, to make headway in our research of small towns, we must in the first place draw up a specific plan. The focus of our studies should still be on the areas that we have investigated before. On the one hand, we will further elucidate the problems we have already touched upon, and on the other, we should check to see if there are any previous research topics which we overlooked. At the same time, we may set up new bases for investigation in areas of different types in order to make comparative analyses and obtain the index necessary to advance from qualitative analysis of the investigated areas to quantitative analysis of the small towns throughout the nation.

In actuality, the process of drawing up research plans is the process of defining the aim and the requirements of a given research project. Only when the aim and requirements of research are clearly defined, can concrete and workable plans be drawn up. Our symposium made new attempts in this connection. Apart from sociologists this symposium was also attended by people engaged in the study of various disciplines of both the social and natural sciences, as well as university teachers. Furthermore, we have also specially invited to our symposium people who actually work in small towns, people from the relevant departments of the central government, and people from the policy-research bodies at provincial, municipality, and county levels of Jiangsu Province. To consult people from such a variety of branches of learning, and have the participation of so many organizations and people from so many levels of government in one research project, has been a novel and encouraging experience for me.

Such wide-ranging co-operation has at least two strong points: in the first place, it provides us with an opportunity to hear many different opinions, thus widening the horizons of our thought. The second strong point is that it establishes close links between scientific study and the actual demands placed on it in practice. The former problem of theory losing touch with reality was attributable to both subjective attitudes of the

individuals concerned as well as irrational organizational set-up, which resulted in a severe lack of exchange and communication between scientific research institutions and the various departments engaged in practical work. Therefore, intellectuals engaged in research turned their backs to one another, and those in practical work were completely separated from one another. As a result, the former were willing to put their knowledge into practice, but did not know where it could be used; while the latter, badly in need of scientific knowledge to guide their work, did not know where to acquire it. Now both sides have established direct contact with each other. People engaged in practical work present the scientific researchers with the problems which they encounter in their work, thereby helping them to clarify the aims of their research, rationalize their plans and give more practical value to the result of their research. Scientific researchers, on the other hand, by making the results of their research available to those engaged in actual work and offering them feasible proposals, ensure that the latter will be carried out according to objective laws, and that this work will have a scientific foundation.

It is my hope that our present symposium can put forward some concrete proposals as to how to effectively implement the policy of "vigorously developing small towns". That is, on the basis of our previous studies, to arrive at some kind of agreement concerning the solutions to the most urgent problems in the building of small towns, to be offered for the consideration of the policy-makers.

The realization of our modernization programme demands knowledge. That is to say, we need knowledge, the product of scientific research which reflects reality, to solve the various kinds of problems we may encounter during the course of the modernization process. To do this, there must be unimpeded communication between persons engaged in scientific research and social construction so that the problems which crop up in construction will be included in the research projects. Therefore research which accurately reflects these actual prob-

lems provides the policy-making bodies with advice concerning their solutions. The policy-making bodies will then, in light of the actual circumstances, make the appropriate policies which, when implemented by administrative organs and carried out by the masses, will solve the problems. However, the effectiveness of these policies and measures can only be determined as a result of putting them into practice. It is the rule rather than the exception that the resolution of the old problems gives rise to new problems. Gauging the effectiveness of these policies and investigating the occurrence of new problems create new topics for research. This shows that in promoting our modernization drive, scientific research, consultation, policy-making and practice form an interdependent circulatory system. These four elements are linked together closely, and interact continuously, in response to the constant demands for the study of new situations and the solution of new problems.

China's policy-making bodies are the leading organs of the Chinese Communist Party. The ever expanding scope of our modernization programme requires that the policy-makers have a penetrating understanding of the situations they must deal with. This is why it is now being demanded that cadres possess a wide range of intellectual knowledge. By emphasizing this, we have placed policy-making on a scientific basis. To take scientific research and consultation as necessary links in the entire system in fact embodies the essence of the Party's traditional mass line.

Scientific research and consultation, as necessary links in the system, are relatively independent of the other related links. The Party, in exercising its leadership, always follows the principle of seeking truth from facts. Therefore, its policies are drawn up on the basis of investigation and study of actual situations. For this reason, it has set up policy-study departments at all levels of the leading government bodies. This is a fine tradition of the Party.

There is no doubt that scientific research must serve politics. By this we mean that science and scientific research ought

to help politicians to root their policies in reality. Nevertheless, the fundamental principle of scientific research of "seeking truth from facts" cannot completely eliminate the possibility of one-sidedness. Experts in fact tend to have an even more one-sided point of view than others. In order not to let our policy-making be distorted by such one-sidedness, there should be a middle link between the final policy-making and scientific research. Establishing such a middle link would mean employing the knowledge and research results of a variety of branches of learning to diagnose the same one problem, and on the basis of such group consultations, submit concrete, constructive proposals to the policy-making bodies. Of course, we as yet have had little experience in either organizing or conducting this kind of group consultation. However, I suggest that we experiment by setting up special consultation groups composed of deputies of both the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and other related specialists for the solution of important construction problems. Such consultation groups should identify themselves with the masses and approach the problems from the perspective of each different branch of learning, thus drawing a comprehensive picture of the whole. On the basis of such multi-faceted research, these groups should then make suggestions and report to the Party's leading bodies the true requirements and opinions of the masses, which they may then use as references in policy-making decisions.

After the policies are drawn up, the administrative departments are to put them into practice. In the process of implementing them, questions will inevitably arise concerning what effects they have had on practice and the changes which have taken place in objective reality, presenting new subjects for scientific research and study. Thus, the above-mentioned cycle repeats itself once again, namely, going from practice to scientific research, from study to consultation and from there finally to policy-making. The essence of this cycle has been summed up in the phrase "from the masses to the masses", which