

Document 1.2: Excerpts from *Peasant Life in China* by Fei Xiaotong, 1938

Fei Xiaotong (1910–2005) is recognized in China and the United States as a leading expert on China's agricultural society. Educated at Christian mission schools and a graduate of Yenching and Tsinghua universities, he earned his doctorate from the London School of Economics in 1936. Fei originally wanted to become a doctor but decided, "China's problem was not sickness, not a medical problem. It was a social problem and a political problem. So I went into the social sciences."

Fei spent July and August of 1936 studying Kaixiangong, a village set on the lower course of the Yangzi River about 80 miles west of Shanghai, in Jiangsu Province. The region and village have many navigable waterways, including canals. The growing season is long: 300 days of the year. The village had a small public school and a silk factory. The census in 1935 counted 771 men and 684 women.

[An individual] passing through that region, would not lose sight of the rice fields for more than intervals of a few minutes. In Gaixiangong, according to estimates, more than 90 percent of the land is used for rice cultivation. This single village produces, on the average, 18,000 bushels of rice every year. Only a little more than half of the produce is consumed by the people themselves. Very few households in the village are entirely free from agricultural work. About 76 percent of the total number of household are engaged in agriculture as their main occupation. The time spent in cultivating rice amounts to six months in the year. From this crop the people earn more than half of their income.... But rice is not the only produce of the land. Wheat, rapeseeds and various vegetables are grown, too, although they are insignificant as compared with the chief crop. Moreover, the water provides fish, shrimps, crabs, and different kinds of water plants which are all used locally as food.

The mulberry tree plays an important part in the economic life of the villagers. It enables them to develop their silk industry....

The Village Site

The land occupied by the people in this village consists of eleven *yu*. *Yu* is the local term for the unit of land surrounded by water. Each *yu* has its own name. Its size is determined by the distribution of streams and thus varies. The total area of land of this village is 3,065 *mow* or 461 acres.... The land can be roughly divided into two parts; namely that used for cultivation and that used for dwellings. The residential area occupies rather a small portion....

In this region, boats are extensively used for heavy and long-distance traffic. The land routes connecting different villages and towns are mainly used pulling the boats against unfavorable currents and winds. People usually come to the village by boats, except a few peddlers. Nearly every household possesses at least one boat.... Roads are built for communication between the houses. In this case, the streams represent obstacles to communication and the separated *yu* must be connected by bridges.

The road system of this village does not form a complete circle. In the northern part... there are only small paths among the farms, and they are not convenient for walking, especially during wet weather.... [I]n the village plan, there is no special place where the public life of the people is concentrated. Except for the informal gatherings in the summer evening around the bridges....

***Jia* as an extended family**

A *jia* is essentially a family but it sometimes includes children even when they have grown and married.... *Jia* emphasizes the inter-dependence of parents and children. It gives security to the old who are no longer able to work. It tends to ensure social continuity and cooperation among the members....

The most common type [of *jia*] is that which consists of a nucleus of a married couple and several dependent patrilineal relatives. In fact, more than half, or 58 percent of the total are of this type.... An average *jia* in the village consists of four persons. This is by

no means an exception, and indicates the smallness of the group. Evidence from other rural districts in China give a similar conclusion....

Continuity of “incense and fire”

The parent-child and husband-wife relations are two fundamental axes in the family organization. But in the *jia* the former seems more important. The essential character of the *jia* is that married sons do not always leave their parents, especially when either father or mother is dead....

The main purpose of marriage, in the village, is to secure the continuity of descent.... [T]he full status of a woman is acquired after the birth of her child.... The importance of the posterity is conceived in religious and ethical terms. The local term for the continuity of descent is “continuity of incense and fire;” this means a continuing of ancestor worship. Beliefs connected with the relation of living descendants to the spirits of their ancestors are not clearly and systematically formulated among the people. The general view is that the spirits live in a world very similar to ours, but that economically they are partially dependent on the contributions of their descendants, which are made by periodically burning paper money, paper clothes, and paper articles. Therefore it is essential to have someone to look after one’s well-being in the after-world....

The desire to have children is backed up by a two-fold motive; it ensures, in the first place, the continuity of the line of descent; and, in the second place, it is a concrete expression of filial piety by the future father¹ towards his ancestors....

The economic value of the child is also important. A child starts contributing very early to the family welfare, often before he is ten years of age, in such tasks as collecting grass to feed sheep. A girl is especially useful in the daily house work and in the silk industry. Moreover, when a boy grows up and gets married, his parents are relieved by the young couple of the full burden of work on the land and in the house. When the parents are old and unable to work, they are supported by their sons. This is illustrated by the following

¹ Traditionally men, not women, conduct the ancestor worship rites.

fact: there are 145 widows in this village who are unable to live on their own resources, but this does not constitute a serious social problem because most of them are supported by their adult children. Children in this sense are insurance for old age....

During childhood both male and female children are cared for by their parents. Both assume their father's surname, but when they grow up, and get married, the son will continuously live in the parents' house before division [of the property] while the daughter will leave her parents and live with her husband. She will add her husband's surname to her own. She has no claim on the property of her parents except what she gets as dowry. She also has no obligation to support them except by offering periodical gifts and occasional financial help... Property is inherited by the son whose obligation it is to support the old....

Population control

In spite of the fact that villagers recognize the importance of posterity, there is a limiting factor for population. It is true that children can contribute labor to the domestic economy, but there must be enough work on which it can be utilized. With land holding of limited size, and with limits to the extent of silkworm raising, surplus members of a *jia* will be merely a burden to the unit....

The total area of cultivated land is 3,065 *mow* or 461 acres. If this area were equally allotted to 360 households, it would mean that each household could only occupy a piece of land about 9.5 *mow* or 1.2 acres in size. Each *mow* of land can produce in a normal year six bushels of rice. About twenty-seven bushels of rice is needed for the consumption of one man, one woman, and one child. In other words, to obtain sufficient food, a family group needs a piece of land of about five *mow*. The present size of land holdings is hardly sufficient to provide an average household with a normal livelihood which requires sufficient food and other necessities. The pressure of population on the land is thus a strong limiting factor on the number of children. For example, a family, with a small holding of nine *mow*, will face a serious problem if a second boy is born. According to local custom, the [male] children when grown up will divide the estate. This will mean

poverty for both sons. The usual solution is infanticide or abortion. The people do not attempt to justify these practices and admit that they are bad. But there is no alternative except poverty and “crime.” The result can be seen in the figures of the total number of children in the village: there are only 470 children under 16 years of age, 1.3 per *jia*.

The practice of infanticide is more often for the female children.... A girl is of less value in the eyes of the parents because she cannot continue the “incense and fire” and because as soon as she is mature, she will leave her parents. In consequence, the ratio of females in the age group 0–5 is unusually low. There are only 100 girls to 135 boys....

Since population control is considered as a precaution against poverty, families with comparatively large estates are free to have more children. They are proud of their numerous children, and these are taken as a sign of wealth in the eyes of the people....

Parents and children

Infant mortality is also [like that of women after childbirth] high.... In the ceremony of *menyu*, literally “child-reaching full month,” the child will be shaved and given a personal name by his maternal uncle. This is usually a name of abuse, such as dog, cat, or monk. The people believe that the lives of the children, particularly those who are specially regarded by their parents, are sought by devil spirits. A way of protecting the child is to show the spirits that there is no one interested in it; the theory is that spirits, being sadists, will then discontinue their intervention.... The parents’ outward expression of love of their children is thus carefully concealed.

The attitude of the parents and elder relatives towards children must be understood in relation to these factors—the need for population control due to economic pressure, the small number of children, the high infant mortality, the belief in spirit sadism, the desire for posterity and the connected religious and ethical ideas. As a result of these factors, we can see that the children who survive are highly valued, even though there is an outward show of indifference....

Education

Children receive their education from their families. Boys of fourteen begin to learn the technique of agriculture from their fathers by practical instruction and participation in the farm work. They become full workers before they are twenty. Girls learn the technique of the silk industry, sewing and other household work from their mothers....

The public school is conducted according to general prescriptions of the Minister of Education. The total term for attendance is six years. Instruction is exclusively literary. If a child start his school days at six, he will still have enough time to learn his main occupations, in agriculture and the silk industry, after twelve. But in the past ten years, sheep raising has become an important domestic industry.... [T]hese sheep are kept in huts and their food must be collected for them. This has become the children's job. Thus the village economy comes into conflict with the school curriculum.

Furthermore, literary training has not been proved to be very useful in community life. Illiterate parents do not take school education very seriously. Without the help of the parents, primary school education is not very successful. The enrollment is more than a hundred but the actual attendance as some students told me, rarely exceeds twenty, except when the inspector visits the school. Vacations are long. My stay in the village covered a period longer than the school vacation, but I had had not opportunity to see the school at work. The literary knowledge of the students, so far as I could test, is surprisingly poor.

Chen, a village head, who had himself been a schoolmaster, complained to me that the new school system cannot work in the village.... [T]he school terms are not adjusted to the calendar of work in the village.... The leisure periods in the calendar of work are two; from January to April and from July to September. But during these periods, the school is closed for the vacation. While the people are busy at the silk industry and agriculture, the school is open....

Agrarian problems in China

The above account of the economic life of a Chinese village is the result of a microscopic examination of a specimen.... But [the observations] also have wider significance because this village shares a common process with most other Chinese villages.... The essential problem in Chinese villages, putting it in the simplest terms, is that the income of the villagers has been reduced to such an extent that it is not sufficient even to meet the expenditure in securing the minimum requirements of livelihood. It is the hunger of the people that is the real issue in China.....

Source: Fei Xiaotong. *Peasant Life in China: A Field Study of Country Life in the Yangzi Valley*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1946, 15–19, 27–39, 282.

For more information about Fei Xiaotong, see “A Closer Look” at the end of chapter 10 and read his obituary in People’s Daily Online:

http://english.people.com.cn/200504/27/eng20050427_182925.html