

Innovation in the Study of 'Jiangcun'

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Abstract: "Peasant Life in China" is not only a detailed description of various aspects of rural China, but also reflects the functional changes of deep-seated social elements, the historical changes of social structure, the innovation of community research methods, and the value scale of participant observation. From a theoretical perspective, the changes in the functions of various structures described in the book highlight the variability, fluidity, and historicity of social structure functions. From a methodological perspective, first, the flexible application of value principles under the participant observation method ensures the authenticity of data and the achievement of research purposes; second, the initiation of community research at the practical level.

1. Introduction

"Peasant Life in China" is undoubtedly a foundational work in Chinese sociology and anthropology. As Malinowski, Fei Xiaotong's teacher, said in the preface of this book, "Peasant Life in China" will be regarded as a milestone in the development of anthropological fieldwork and theoretical work^[1]. Undoubtedly, this reflects the breakthroughs and even revolutions made by "Peasant Life in China" in the fields of sociology and anthropology research. These breakthroughs are mainly reflected in the theoretical characteristics and research methods of the study. From the perspective of anthropological research, the anthropological research practiced by Malinowski and others is all about the field-recorded research of uncivilized foreign cultures. However, Fei Xiaotong's "Peasant Life in China" has entered the research on ethnic groups and communities with relatively advanced cultures. More importantly, it reflects the breakthroughs and innovations in research theory and research methods in sociology. Instead of regarding "Peasant Life in China" as an anthropological work, it is more appropriate to consider it as a sociological work on the economic structure and social relations of a specific community. My reasons are as follows: it has surpassed the research boundaries of anthropology in terms of research objects, research contents, research methods, and research purposes. In terms of research objects and contents, it is no longer an ethnographic description of all aspects of foreign cultures, but an anatomy of rural communities under native culture. In terms of research methods, traditional anthropological research is to explain foreign cultures and conduct comparative studies, while "Peasant Life in China" strives to conduct detailed research on one's own culture to make corresponding changes. In terms of research purposes, it has an obvious value orientation, which is to improve the actual lives of Chinese farmers. "Peasant Life in China" is not only a detailed description of various aspects of rural China,

but also reflects the functional changes of deep-seated social elements, the historical changes of social structure, the innovation of community research methods, and the value scale of participant observation. From a theoretical perspective, the changes in the functions of various structures described in the book highlight the variability, fluidity, and historicity of social structure functions. From a methodological perspective, first, the flexible application of value principles under the participant observation method ensures the authenticity of data and the achievement of research purposes; second, the initiation of community research at the practical level.

2. The Innovation of Theory and Method in "Peasant Life in China"

2.1 Theoretical Innovation of "Peasant Life in China"

2.1.1 Innovation of Functionalism

The most significant feature of "Peasant Life in China" lies in Fei Xiaotong's combination of theory and practice, and the combination of functionalism with the specific reality of China. The methodology of "Peasant Life in China" is functionalism under Malinowski, but in the process of using functionalism to analyze Jiangcun, Fei Xiaotong did not mechanically apply the theory. Instead, on the basis of absorbing its basic principles, he innovated in practice to make it conform to the actual situation in China. First, he analyzed the structure of rural China from a holistic and systematic perspective, regarding the countryside as a whole system with multiple elements, and analyzed and studied all aspects from a functional holistic perspective. He explained the mechanism of Chinese society and the driving force of social change from a functional perspective. The book describes in detail all aspects such as rural families, property and inheritance, kinship, households and villages, life, occupational differentiation, agriculture, land, and trade. While statically focusing on the social structure, it also dynamically pays attention to function, structure, and social change. Unlike traditional functionalists who overly emphasized the structural and balanced nature of the system, Fei Xiaotong discovered the variability of the system in specific in-depth investigations. For example, regarding the expansion of kinship discussed in the book, due to economic depression, people could no longer afford normal marriage unions and instead adopted a special form of marriage, "little daughter-in-law," for union. Although this weakened the traditional expansion of kinship, it was the best choice under specific changes.

The most important aspect of Fei Xiaotong's research in "Peasant Life in China" is still the innovation of functionalism. First, it is reflected in the effective application of functional analysis. In the research, the functional analysis used by Fei Xiaotong is inseparable from community research and is actually an operational method within community research. The research pays attention to the close connection and mutual construction between the economic structure and the social structure, as well as the influence of the cultural structure on the economic structure. For example, the act of paying rent does not originate from contracts but is constrained by traditional moral concepts. Also, for example, culture restricts individual consumption behavior in daily life, advocating a thrifty life, but on special occasions such as weddings and funerals, culture encourages conspicuous consumption. The innovation of structural functionalism is also reflected in the development of functionalism. The development is mainly reflected in the most prominent feature of functionalism, that is, what the academic community criticizes as overly emphasizing the static structure or synchronic characteristics. Simply put, it overly emphasizes the functionality, stability, and integrity of each part of society while ignoring the diachronic and conflictual nature of social structure. However, Fei Xiaotong did not mechanically apply the theory in his research but developed the theory in combination with specific realities. First, he paid attention to the adaptability and variability of functions. For example, under the marriage system, the gender of

children does not solely reflect the patrilineal principle. Instead, under specific needs, the surname of children can be changed. Second, he paid attention to the historicity of functions, that is, functions will disappear with the passage of time. The disappearance and existence of things are not the disappearance and existence of things themselves, but the change of their functions, that is, replacement, adaptation, generation, and disappearance. Third, he paid attention to the conflict of functions. In the analysis, Fei Xiaotong also paid attention to the conflicts caused by the changes of various social structures. For example, economic changes have led to the breakdown of people's kinship.

2.1.2 Theories of Social Change from the Perspective of the System

In specific research, Fei Xiaotong first regarded the community as a functional whole, that is, a system. This is the foundation of the research. Second, each component part under the whole has its own function. Third, the change of one or several structures leads to the change of other structures, and this change is generally manifested as social change. In the article "On the Theory and Method of Fei Xiaotong's Economic Sociology," the author, from the perspective of economic sociology, summarized the three major theoretical contributions of "Peasant Life in China," namely: the theory of the relationship between economy and society, the theory of rural industrial reform, and the theory of urban-rural relations^[2]. While statically analyzing the institutional connections between the economy and society in the community, the author also noticed the variability or dynamics of the economic - social system. It is believed that: "Peasant Life in China" also focuses on the study of the changes in the rural economy - the causes, processes, and extensive social consequences of rural industrial reform^[2]. Therefore, the change of the system is the focus discovered and concerned by Fei Xiaotong in the research. The driving force of change, the problems caused by change, and the functional changes of various elements within the system over time, such as in family, marriage, fertility, etc., thus changing the economic structure and social structure. Overall, it is manifested as the overall social change.

It is worth noting that today's social sciences, that is, Western social sciences, were formed in the process of "social change" in the West itself. It not only reflects the Westerners' self-understanding of this social change process in the West^[3]. The theory of social change in rural China constructed in "Peasant Life in China" is rooted in the specific experience of China's transformation, which also makes us rethink how to conduct research in the face of the rich empirical materials provided by China's social change. That is, the issue of how to achieve the localization of Chinese social sciences. "Peasant Life in China" can provide us with a lot of experience in this regard. It is one of the earliest attempts by the Chinese social science community to understand the fact of social change in China. The book adopts a systematic perspective, follows the changes, and attempts to further grasp the process of social change and possible countermeasures.

2.2 Methodological Innovation of "Peasant Life in China"

2.2.1 Innovation of Sociological Research Value Orientation

Weber, one of the three founders of sociology and a pioneer of the humanistic paradigm, proposed the principle of value neutrality in the research process in order to ensure the objectivity of sociological research, that is, in the research process, eliminating positions, value tendencies, and value involvements. Therefore, Weber's principle still adheres to the epistemology of objectivity, that is, the objectivity of matter. Therefore, from this perspective, it is still an objectivist paradigm. However, in specific "thick description" research, it is extremely difficult to always maintain value neutrality and value freedom. However, Fei Xiaotong did not get involved in this fictional

discussion in his research. Instead, he took the opposite path, that is, being guided by the authenticity of the research object and the research purpose to reflect the value orientation. In summary, Fei Xiaotong demonstrated the principles of value neutrality and value involvement in his research. First, the principle of value neutrality. In his research in Jiangcun, Fei Xiaotong discovered many events that did not conform to modern civilization. For example, many times it reflected the inequality of women, such as the suppression of new daughters-in-law by families and the prohibition of women from sleeping in rooms with ancestral tablets. Fei Xiaotong did not condemn and ignore these aspects with advanced values in his research, but objectively described them, which ensured the comprehensiveness, authenticity, and objectivity of the obtained data and research. Second, the principle of value involvement. This is mainly due to the particularity of the research in "Peasant Life in China," that is, native culture. Fei Xiaotong said that using the methodological approach of fieldwork research on Chinese culture to improve the actual lives of Chinese farmers is my purpose^[4]. The purpose of Fei Xiaotong's anthropological research is to promote the sinicization of sociology, to examine all aspects of traditional Chinese society, and to save the rural areas in crisis in China, rather than being a kind of "romantic escape" of culture like traditional anthropology^[4]. Fei Xiaotong studied native culture and had a strong sense of patriotism. He thought about the problems encountered by China and proposed solutions.

2.2.2 Revolution and Turn in Anthropological Research

Malinowski believed that the importance of "Peasant Life in China" lies in the fact that this book has changed the development trajectory of anthropology^[5]. The book advocates that the research scope of anthropology should shift from barbarians to civilized societies, and thus caused a wave of research on the East in the West^[5]. In the 1930s, under the influence of the Chicago School in the United States, anthropology underwent a shift to community research, that is, from uncivilized cultures such as tribes to civilized societies such as communities. "Peasant Life in China" truly achieved the transformation from foreign culture to one's own culture in this turning process and provided a model for the localization of anthropological research^[6]. At the same time, from a methodological perspective, before Fei Xiaotong, as Malinowski said, anthropological research always "otherized" the research object. However, Fei Xiaotong negated the method of object otherization through Jiangcun and thus opened up a new path for anthropological research, thus triggering a methodological revolution on this issue^[4].

2.2.3 Innovation of Community Research Method

The community research method was the dominant research method in the fields of anthropology and sociology at that time. The consensus reached in the academic community is that the community is a concrete manifestation of the actual lives of the people in a region, has a substantial foundation, and is naturally easy to observe and describe^[2]. Of course, when social researchers observe the community, in addition to observing and summarizing social, economic, cultural and other social facts in the community as in traditional anthropology, they should also pay special attention to "the interlocking relationships between various parts of the community, as well as the organic relationships or sympathetic processes between parts and the whole^[2]." Fei Xiaotong highly agreed with this and put it into practice in the specific research process. He once pointed out that sociological research is preferably a comprehensive study rather than a study of a certain social aspect such as education, kinship or customs, because all aspects are interrelated. This is exactly in line with the functional analysis discussed in the previous part. While describing in detail the various elements of Jiangcun, such as marriage, fertility, trade, agriculture, property, family, etc., he also analyzed the functions they perform and formed a whole. "Peasant Life in China" provides a

methodology for the study of rural communities in China. Under the shadow of war, Chinese society was deeply affected. Jiangcun was actually a microcosm of the rural society in China at that time. Through his research on Jiangcun, Mr. Fei provided a participatory research method for the intellectual community at that time^[4]. This participatory research method is not only to go deep into the actual situation, eat, live and work with the research object, but also to be sensitive to any thing. And describe the data in detail. For example, in Chapter 10 of the article, Fei Xiaotong described in detail the distribution of farmland and waterways. Of course, Fei Xiaotong did not just stop at description. He also adhered to the paradigm of phenomenon - cause. While discovering the appearance, he dug out the reasons behind the phenomenon. When analyzing the occupational distribution, he found that the personnel in the handicraft and service industries accounted for 7% of the total number of households in the village. Such a low percentage is astonishing^[1]. Fei Xiaotong also explained this phenomenon. First, these industries are not completely professional, and most families are self-provided, so the demand is relatively small. Second, some people's needs are met in other villages or towns. Third, all the people engaged in these industries are foreign migrants in the village, and foreign migrants only account for one-third of the total population in the village.

3. Conclusion

Since the restoration of sociology in China more than 40 years ago, what contributions have been made to sociology in terms of theory and method^[7]? When it comes to contributions, Fei Xiaotong cannot be bypassed. And when it comes to the book "Peasant Life in China," what are the contributions and characteristics of this book? The academic community generally believes that it is the revolution and turn in anthropology, the development of community research methods, and the application of the type comparison method^[8]. Through the reading of the original work and my thinking, I believe that first, the innovation of structural functionalism, that is, paying attention to the historicity, variability, and conflictuality of functions. It is not difficult to see from any detailed description in the book that Fei Xiaotong's discussion of functions follows such a logic: functions originate from people's survival needs, survival fears, etc. Once functions are generated, they have variability. In the process of change, conflicts will arise and eventually disappear. Second, the innovation of research methods. The innovation of research methods is rooted in the specific reality of the research object. That is, it is not that there is a complete method framework first and then knowledge output, but that the richness of specific phenomena leads to the differentiation of methods. First, the overall observation and analysis perspective, and the research covers all aspects of the villagers' lives. Second, detailed description and analysis. Third, the innovation of value principles. Just like the aforementioned research methods, the innovation of research value principles is also based on specific realities. The research process is not a process in which passive objective things are recognized by active subjective individuals, but a specific practical process, a two-way interactive practical process between the researcher and the researched. The researched themselves are rich in characteristics, waiting to be discovered by the researcher. Therefore, in such a process, the value principle is not a rigid standard, but a flexible method. That is, it changes according to needs. If we want to obtain real, detailed, and objective data, we should try our best to maintain value neutrality. And if we want to think for a purpose like Fei Xiaotong, we need to be value-involved and have concerns for the achievement of the purpose.

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