



# Integrating Chinese and Western knowledge: a case of scholar Fei Xiaotong

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## Abstract

There is an increasing awareness of the significance of intellectual pluriversity worldwide in response to Western epistemic dominance in higher education. Yet, such a call has not been met by research that identifies concrete actions and structured efforts to promote diversity and the inclusion of knowledge. This article focuses on how to integrate Chinese and Western cultures and knowledge through the case of an exemplary Chinese scholar, Fei Xiaotong. It reviews Fei's scholarly writings, biographies, and interviews with him by others, as well as the literature on him, to study his life experiences, perspectives, and research. A fundamental cultural appreciation attitude, engagement with multiple knowledges, and conducting of culturally oriented research agendas are the three key elements to demonstrate how he grew into a scholar with high achievement in integrating Chinese and Western knowledge. Finally, it discusses the implications of the three elements and possible challenges in higher education.

**Keywords** Higher education · Intellectual pluriversity · Traditional knowledge · Chinese and Western knowledge · Fei Xiaotong

## Introduction

A fundamental challenge faced by many non-Western higher education systems today is the integration of their traditional knowledge with the Western knowledge that emerges from Euro-American contexts. Global connectivity blends the flow of various knowledges in ways that human beings could never have predicted. However, traditional non-Western knowledge has been subjected to epistemic violence from Western knowledge since the colonial era (Woldegiorgis, 2021), losing legitimacy and dominance within its own higher education systems. Even though China has never been

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colonised politically, its modern higher education system was built based on Western experience. The establishment of modern (Western) higher education put an end to its rich traditional knowledge institutionally, resulting in fundamental “divisions between formal curricula ... of Chinese education and China’s sociocultural realities” (Yang et al., 2019, p. 816). The challenge of integrating Western and non-Western knowledge has become even more salient today, as the global knowledge asymmetry persists, such that knowledge flows lopsidedly and one-dimensionally from certain academic centres in the West to (semi-) peripheries in non-Western societies (Altbach, 1987) and the international standard of knowledge production is largely established by the West (Li & Yang, 2020).

Amidst Western epistemic dominance, there is a growing awareness worldwide of the importance of intellectual pluriversality, which can be understood as a decolonial desire to break the dominance of Western epistemologies and universalising tendencies and a call for the coexistence of diverse epistemologies from many worlds (Mignolo, 2018; Oslender, 2018). As traditional non-Western epistemologies are suppressed in global academia, it is thus essential and urgent to explore ways to incorporate traditional non-Western knowledge in research and integrate them with Western knowledge.

Against this backdrop, this article investigates the personal and academic experiences and scholarship of a prominent Chinese scholar, Fei Xiaotong (費孝通, 1910–2005), to search for ways of integrating Chinese and Western knowledge in research. Fei was regarded as “China’s most important anthropologist and sociologist” (Arkush, 2006), playing a key role in establishing and developing the two disciplines in the country. His works, such as *Peasant Life in China: A Field Study of Country Life in the Yangtze Valley* (1939) and *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society* (1948), ushered in a new trend of studying local society and culture for sociologists and anthropologists and are now considered classics in these two fields internationally (Zhang, 2000). His insightful ideas, such as differential mode of association (差序格局), cultural self-awareness (文化自覺), and the sixteen-character maxim “Each appreciates its own best, appreciate the best of others, all appreciate the best together, to build greater harmony of all (各美其美, 美人之美; 美美与共, 天下大同)” (Fei, 2015a, p.34) have gained wide acceptance in and beyond academia (Sinha & Lakhanpal, 2022; Yang & Gao, 2020). Amongst his various accomplishments, his achievement in bringing Chinese phenomena and knowledge to the attention of the international community, his ability to strike a nuanced balance between using traditional Chinese and Western knowledge in his research, and his many reflections on how to integrate multiple cultures and knowledges merit our attention, particularly in this research.

Built on a wide range of literature and documents, including historical documents, Fei’s own scholarly writings, biographies, interviews, and other scholars’ research on Fei, this article explores Fei’s life experiences, perspectives, and research. Through Fei’s case, we identify three key elements of preparing researchers for integrating different knowledges in research. The first element is holding the cultural appreciation attitude specified by Fei, which lays the groundwork for this integration. The second is engaging with multiple knowledges through education and intercultural experiences. The third is conducting culturally oriented research agendas exemplified by those of Fei, which were premised on the first and second elements and led to Fei’s enlightening practices of incorporating Chinese and Western knowledge. Finally, we discuss the implications of these three elements for promoting intellectual pluriversality in research and possible challenges in their application.

## The perspective of intellectual pluriversality

This work understands knowledge, especially in the humanities and social sciences, as closely entangled with culture. It is difficult to draw a clear boundary between culture and knowledge (Kronenfeld, 2004). In discussing knowledge integration, the article pays special attention to culture. In particular, knowledge in a certain society on humans, virtues, values, and societies is a reflection of the society's culture. Western knowledge has three major epistemic and cultural roots—the Greek classics, Christian religion, and modern Enlightenment—whereas traditional Chinese knowledge has roots in Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism (Yang et al., 2019). It should be also emphasised that while this work uses the terms Chinese and Western cultures and knowledge, it acknowledges the heterogeneity within each of the two. Sometimes plural form “knowledges” and “cultures” reflect this heterogeneity. There is no intention to assume a homogenous Chinese or Western knowledge and culture.

In light of the widespread Westernisation and the emergence of decolonial projects in the global political sphere, intellectual pluriversality has been increasingly recognised by non-Western scholars as a means of altering epistemological frameworks and ultimately transforming collective praxis of inhabiting the world (Mignolo, 2018). Specifically, intellectual pluriversality indicates an attitude that critically reflects on the epistemic and cultural violence of Western centrism while anticipating a re-assessment of the world that is not premised on Western epistemology. Scholars in Asia, Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Latin America, as Gänger and Lewis (2013) argue, have attempted to refocus their intellectual endeavours on their own institutional and social circles rather than simply catering to the Eurocentric academic and literary world. “Asian as method” (Chen, 2010) and “China as method” (Yüzö, 2016) are perspectives that reject a Western-centric model and call for conducting research from one's own cultural position. Mutual respect, understanding, and learning between different knowledges are the preconditions of intellectual pluriversality.

Possible blueprints for fostering intellectual pluriversality emphasise creating epistemic products based on the integration of different knowledges (Woldegiorgis, 2021), such as by indigenising Western knowledge in local contexts through modification (Takayama, 2016) and transforming it on indigenous models (Harding, 2018). For example, West African oral traditions have helped in the re-examination of oral knowledge beyond the institutionalisation of academic disciplines (Ouattara, 2018). In evaluating an educational computer game, the philosophy and methodology of the Bantu people in South Africa have been combined with participative Western paradigms (Muwanga-Zake, 2009).

However, incorporating traditional non-Western knowledge in research, as a critical component of realising intellectual pluriversality, is not an easy task. In part, the “abyssal thinking” of modern Western thinking (De Sousa Santos, 2007, p. 45) hinders attempts to institutionally incorporate traditional knowledge in higher education curricula and research, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Modern Western abyssal thinking treats knowledge not fitting well into the Western knowledge system, including traditional non-Western knowledge, as non-existent. Institutionally, traditional wisdom that is rooted in local cultures and better positioned to tackle local problems is undermined by the Western academic standard that favours objective universalism (Ahmad, 2018).

Besides, even in the current era, when cross-cultural interactions have become common, global misunderstandings persist and are worsening, as is manifested in the global challenges and conflicts that linger (Marginson & Xu, 2023; Wu, 2019). As shown in China's

higher education, the differences and even conflicts between Chinese and Western cultures and knowledge pose extra difficulties for the pursuit of intellectual pluriversality (Marginson & Yang, 2022; Yang, 2022a, b).

Furthermore, it remains unclear how intellectual pluriversality can be realised in higher education, despite the growing awareness of the concept's importance. Discussions on, for example, global knowledge asymmetries, Western epistemic hegemony, and epistemic diversity primarily critique these phenomena and appeal normatively for intellectual pluriversality. In contrast, there is a lack of research that suggests concrete approaches to realising intellectual pluriversality (Yang, 2022a, b).

Nonetheless, there are scholars who have made significant progress in dealing with abyssal thinking and the dominance of Western knowledge and incorporating multiple knowledges in their research. Investigating how these scholars have managed to integrate different knowledges could be the first step in searching for ways to realise intellectual pluriversality in higher education. The pioneering and leading Chinese sociologist and anthropologist Fei Xiaotong is a notable example. Fei was, in his own words, “grafted with [different] cultures” (Fei, 2015c, p. 258). Unlike Huntington (1993), who argued that “the clash of civilizations” would occur but did not suggest possible solutions, Fei not only consciously reflected on global relations of cultures and knowledges, but also has much to offer through his attitudes, experiences, and scholarship in terms of integrating heterogeneous cultures and knowledges. Therefore, this paper draws on Fei's attitudes, experiences, and scholarship to shed light on how to integrate multiple knowledges and realise intellectual pluriversality in higher education.

## Materials and methods

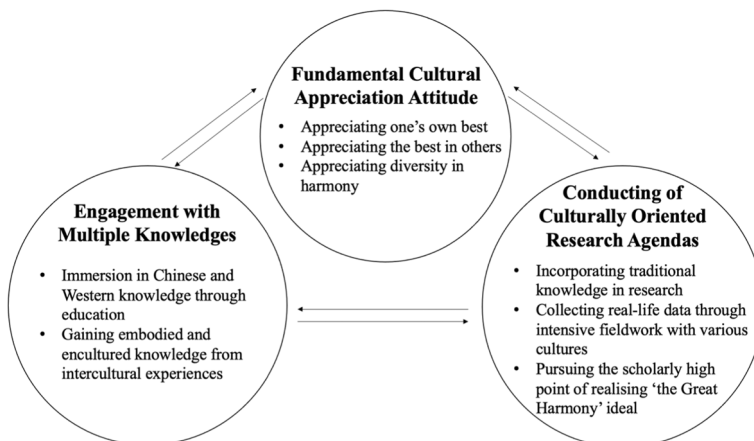
To examine how Fei grew into a scholar with high achievement in integrating Chinese and Western knowledge, this research conducted a case study of Fei. Case study research gathers detailed, in-depth data from multiple sources of information (Creswell & Poth, 2012), which is appropriate for this study. It should be highlighted that the article pays special attention to materials relevant to the research topic, rather than a thorough historical study or a bounded empirical investigation of the texts used.

Accordingly, this article draws on a wide range of literature: (1) Fei's academic publications, including *Peasant Life in China* (1939), *From the Soil* (1948), *Globalization and Cultural Self-Awareness* (2015h), and relevant journal articles; (2) Fei's non-scholarly writings and interviews, such as *First Visit to the United States* (1946), *Time Flies: Selected Essays of Fei Xiaotong* (1993), *Academic Self-Report and Reflection* (1996), *A Conversation with Fei Xiaotong* (interviewed by Burton Pasternak in 1988), and *My early years: A conversation with Fei Xiaotong* (Interviewed by Fang Lili in 2002); (3) Biographies of Fei, including *Biography of Fei Xiaotong (1910–1975): The Life of a Chinese Sociologist and Fei Xiaotong's Interview*, *The Biography of Fei Xiaotong*, and *My Uncle Fei Xiaotong*; (4) Other scholars' research (1990–2022) on Fei's integration of Chinese and Western cultures and knowledge, searched on the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and Google Scholar. These various sources of data have been useful for identifying corroborating evidence about Fei's perspectives and practices through data triangulation, which can support the validity of the findings (Mason, 2017).

Amongst various sources of data, we utilised more materials in Fei's later years (1980–2005) when he consciously reflected on and recaptured his early work and cultural

practices. The use of these materials was also related to the fact that his attitudes and views on culture and knowledge exchanges did not change much throughout his life. Fei's educational and intercultural experiences and academic development were affected by the social context. His academic career commenced during the Republican government era (1912–1949), wherein he was exposed to a diverse range of cultural and intellectual influences from the East and West. He availed himself of the opportunity to receive these influences and academic training from pioneering scholars at home and abroad, and he rapidly emerged as a leading figure in sociology and anthropology in the late 1930s and 1940s (Zhang, 2000). However, the early Communist era with intense Soviet influences followed by the Cultural Revolution disrupted his academic career as a sociologist and anthropologist, compelling him to focus on ethnological studies and subjecting him to political turmoil (Arkush, 1981). The advent of China's opening up in 1978, in his own words, marked the onset of his second academic phase, which lasted nearly 3 decades, during which he spearheaded the re-establishment of sociology and anthropology in China and continued his research in these fields while also reflecting on his prior academic career (Zhang, 2000). All this culminated in his formulation of the sixteen-character maxim in 1990 and the concept of cultural self-awareness in 1997.

Then, we used thematic analysis to identify patterns of meanings present in the text (Mills et al., 2009) and reported case themes. Specifically, we categorised all units, such as sentences or paragraphs that pertain to three major aspects: (1) Fei's views on how to deal with Chinese and Western knowledge, (2) Fei's personal experiences that may have been related to his scholarship and practices of integrating two cultures and knowledge, and (3) Fei's professional practices for integrating two cultures and knowledge. Subsequently, we coded these units to identify patterns (e.g. specific cultural attitudes, educational backgrounds, and research methodology towards the Chinese and Western cultures and knowledge). Lastly, we developed a more abstract level of analysis that connects the categories and patterns and corresponds to the three major aspects above. As Fig. 1 shows, we argue that three key elements—Fei's fundamental cultural appreciation attitude, engagement with multiple knowledges, and conducting of culturally oriented research agendas—were fundamental to his scholarship and integration of Chinese and Western knowledge. These three fundamental elements were neither hierarchical nor linear. Rather, they interacted



**Fig. 1** The dynamism of integrating Chinese and Western knowledge as exemplified by Fei Xiaotong

with one another throughout Fei's academic career. This interactive process took on three dimensions: attitudinal, educational, and epistemic, which are elaborated on in the following sections.

## Results

### Fundamental cultural appreciation attitude

The cultural appreciation attitude is a fundamental element for incorporating different cultures and knowledges in research (Fei, 1997). Fei assumed that what matters most in such attempts are not instrumental methods, strategies, or tools, but the researcher's appreciation of their own and other cultures (Fei, 2015a). During the late twentieth century, when extensive cultural encounters occurred worldwide, Fei constantly reflected on how he had dealt with his own (Chinese) culture and other cultures and advocated for a cultural appreciation attitude. We argue that the cultural appreciation attitude is not only a precondition of individual researchers' integration of different knowledges in research, but a potential facilitator of cross-cultural respect and understanding in global higher education.

### Appreciating one's own best: appreciating one's native culture

Appreciating one's own best, which denotes the appreciation of one's native culture, anchors the promotion of mutual understanding between different societies and knowledges. It is the first step in realising cultural and epistemic harmony in humanity.

Holding a cultural appreciation attitude toward one's native culture is particularly relevant and significant for non-Western societies. Before rapid globalisation and intense cultural interactions, it was an unavoidable mindset of a dispersed and isolated group of people (Fei, 1997). However, such appreciation may lead to a sense of self-centring or even self-superiority within a single cultural group and a rejection of and exclusion of other cultures, which is reflected today in the dominance of Western epistemology over other epistemologies (Fei, 2015a). Even worse, non-Western knowledge was silenced and made unfamiliar to the locals. In China, the trend toward Westernisation has long been detrimental to traditional Chinese knowledge before the 1990s. Fei's advocacy for appreciating one's own culture was inspiring in 1990.

Appreciation of one's native culture leads to self-knowledge in epistemic practices. Fei further formally proposed the notion of cultural self-awareness in 1997, emphasising knowing one's own culture, specifically in terms of "where they came from, how their culture developed, which are its distinguishing features, and how it is evolving" (Fei, 2015e, p. 43). Cultural self-awareness requires the individual's constant learning and self-reflexivity, which in turn enables people to have more control over their cultural choices and transformations in an ever-changing environment (Fei, 1997).

Cultural self-awareness should not be taken for granted, nor is it easy to gain. In the preface to Fei's *Peasant Life in China*, Malinowski (1939) commented that "the book ... contains observations carried on by a citizen upon his own people, it is the result of work done by a native amongst natives. If it be true that self-knowledge is the most difficult to gain, then undoubtedly anthropology of one's own people is the most arduous" (p. xix). He viewed the application of the anthropological approach from "the others", which is the world of the savages, to "self", which is the civilised community, as a milestone in the

field of anthropology. This comment indicated the challenge of developing cultural self-awareness, which was also true for Fei himself. Fei did not realise the significance of cultural self-awareness or his unconscious manifestation of such awareness until he re-read the preface in the 1990s (Fei, 2015g).

### **Appreciating the best in others: appreciating other cultures**

Appreciating other cultures is a step forward from appreciating one's own culture, which can facilitate respectful and equal interaction amongst heterogeneous cultures and knowledges. Regarding this attitude, Fei (2015a, p. 28) summarised:

The willingness to go deeply into an 'alien culture', to learn 'the other's' language and traditions, and to stand in 'the other's' shoes to see the world through 'the other's' eyes is itself an expression of respect and openness toward[s] the 'alien' culture. Any kind of exchange or communication is impossible without this basic attitude of equality.

Such an attitude does not mean uncritical imitation of other cultures or knowledge, but leads to "cultural other-awareness" (Zhao & Zhu, 2021) that emphasises understanding of cultural differences and reciprocal communication between civilisations. Without the willingness to respect and understand other cultures and knowledge, or a clear and accurate understanding of them, interactions between people from different cultural and epistemic backgrounds may turn into disputes or even conflicts (Fei, 1997).

In the face of contemporary power inequalities in global knowledge exchange, Fei (2015a) believed that modern people need to have a higher level of appreciation for various cultures than before. Fei compared the contemporary era with the Warring States period in ancient China (475–221 BCE), which was named for its constant conflicts and wars between states and dubbed the contemporary state of the world the "New Warring States". He envisioned each culture becoming more tolerant, appreciative, and understanding of the other. Typically, he urged the West to relinquish their colonial mindset and stop looking down on the East (Fei, 2015f).

### **Appreciating diversity in harmony**

To fully attain Fei's cultural appreciation attitude, one should foster an appreciation of diversity in harmony, such that "all appreciate the best together for the greater harmony of all" (Fei, 2015a). Specifically, Fei (1997) envisioned an environment that includes multiple cultural groups of people and a new Confucius capable of synthesising various epistemic sources, thus leading to agreement on human values and peaceful coexistence in a world of great harmony. The new Confucius "must understand not just his own people, but also those of other peoples and religions" and "must comprehend the relationship between nations and nations, religions and religions, and ethnics and ethnics on a higher mental level" (Fei, 1993, pp. 314–315).

We argue that the appreciation of diversity in harmony is a precondition for establishing bridges between different knowledges in epistemic practices. In humanities and social sciences research, although certain scholars may insist on their being onlookers and the importance of "pure objectivity" and "neutral observation", it cannot be denied that scholars conduct research from their own positionalities and through their own cultural and epistemic lenses (Rapple, 2020). The true cultural appreciation attitude goes beyond

objectively upholding the current paradigm of the global knowledge system regulated by the West, acknowledging and respecting diversity. Therefore, it opens a window to bridging and further integrating various knowledges.

Fei's reflection on the beginning of his academic career in his later years reveals that Fei had previously been influenced by the ideas of objectivity and value neutrality, partly due to his Western sociological and anthropological training (Fei, 1996). Yet, he had always held a cultural appreciation attitude, despite being unconscious of the fact (Fei, 2015g). It could be told that this attitude facilitated him to produce the scholarly work that unpacked Chinese society as it changed under complex and diverse influences and, more importantly, made the research relevant to global academia.

### Engagement with multiple knowledges

This subsection focuses on Fei's education and intercultural experiences and how they influenced him in relation to the integration of different cultures and knowledges. We argue that extensive and deep engagement with multiple cultures and knowledges—China and the West being Fei's main focus—is another precondition for integrating different knowledges in research.

### Immersion in Chinese and Western knowledge through education

Fei's educational background suggests that immersion in knowledges from multiple cultures forms a key foundation for scholars' awareness of the need to integrate these knowledges and for their attempts to do so. Having received his education in China and the UK, Fei had extensive and deep engagement with both Chinese and Western knowledge. This engagement inspired his lifelong self-reflexivity regarding integrating different cultures and knowledges and enabled him to conduct research that accomplished this feat.

Fei's early formal and informal education provided him with a solid foundation in both Chinese and Western knowledge. Fei grew up in a time when China was experimenting with various types of educational institutions, including traditional Chinese as well as modern institutions providing primary to university education. Fei's formal schooling took place in modern institutions that entirely imported their textbooks and courses from the West. His basic education started in his mother's kindergarten. He then moved on to a new-style primary school where he started to learn English and later studied at an American missionary high school.

While Fei's Western influence came from his formal school education, his traditional Chinese influence was primarily from his informal and family education. In Fei's spare time, his father, who was a member of the Chinese gentry, taught him traditional Chinese classics and to recite important writings in classical Chinese. During the holidays, he received private tutoring from well-known Chinese intellectuals, with whom he "studied [Chinese classics including] the *Records of the Grand Historian* and *Zhuangzi* by circling, which was a method of learning in the past that is by punctuating the text" (Fei, 2010, p.62).

It is fair to say that Fei's academic aspirations and pathway resulted from a combination of traditional Chinese and Western influences from his early education. He developed an aspiration for reality and application inherited from Confucian tradition while employing Western disciplinary knowledge and methodologies.



Following such an academic ambition, Fei studied sociology at Yenching University, where he expected to learn how to make society rich again. At the time, the discipline of sociology had just arrived at Chinese universities and was entirely imported from the West. Many scholars in the Department of Sociology at Yenching University were overseas returnees, including Wu Wenzao (吳文藻, 1901–1985) and Pan Guangdan (潘光旦, 1899–1967), who were the pioneering sociologists committed to Sinicising/indigenising sociology in China. Fei's close interaction with these sociologists left visible imprints on his integration of Chinese and Western knowledge in research (see more in the “conducting of culturally oriented research agendas”).

Fei also received extensive academic training from Western masters in his field, which enabled him to view the West from a Chinese perspective as well as study China from a distance and a Western perspective. Fei was deeply inspired by Robert Park, who was a visiting scholar at Yenching University and delivered a series of lectures there. Park instilled in Fei the idea that one can only discover the real world by going outside the library and immersing oneself in the field (Arkush, 1981). With this idea in mind, Fei moved on to Tsinghua University for his master's degree in anthropology, during which time he received rigorous training in ethnography under the supervision of Sergei Shirokogorov (Li, 1976).

After finishing his master's studies, Fei moved on to the London School of Economics (1936–1938) to study for his doctorate in anthropology and was supervised by Malinowski, a top anthropologist of the time. Fei's doctoral education in the UK introduced to him the frontiers of anthropological and sociological research in international academia, equipped him with the capacity to conduct research at a high global standard, and enabled him to have conversations with scholars from diverse, international backgrounds. Fei's *Peasant Life in China* (1939), which he developed from his doctoral thesis, soon gained acclaim in international academia (Zhang, 2000).

### Gaining embodied and encultured knowledge from intercultural experiences

Fei's intercultural experiences were beneficial to his integration of Chinese and Western knowledge. We argue that through such experiences, Fei developed certain tacit knowledge, including embodied and encultured knowledge (Collins, 1993). Embodied knowledge refers to implicit knowledge gained through bodily interaction with and interpretation of the physical world, while encultured knowledge is the shared understanding of individuals in a social group as a result of socialisation and acculturation, which may alter as society changes. Fei's intercultural experiences as unprecedented social transformations took place inside and outside China nurtured his embodied and encultured knowledge, which helped him develop a good sense of both Chinese and Western cultures and knowledge.

Fei's embodied and encultured knowledge about traditional social life in China was developed through immersion in the Chinese context, primarily from his family background and his own research. Fei was born into a gentry family. His maternal grandfather and father were both well-trained in the Chinese classics. They encouraged and even required Fei to learn and appreciate traditional Chinese knowledge and values. Fei was therefore highly familiar with indigenous Chinese gentlemen's traditional way of life outside modern cities. In his own words, “the traditions of ancient culture are still in my blood” (Fei, 1946, p. 44). He had early romantic memories of Chinese towns, including gentlemen's teahouses, flavourful snacks, large gardens, magnificent mansions, and artistic enjoyment (Arkush, 1981). Later in his research, Fei continued to pay attention to the grassroots of Chinese society and conducted anthropological studies in Chinese

villages, such as Jiang Village (1936) in Jiangsu Province for his doctorate and Lu Village (1938–1939) in Yunnan Province during the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). Through these studies, Fei gained valuable first-hand data and experiences about Chinese people's lives and local societies. It is fair to say that Fei's rich embodied and encultured knowledge about traditional Chinese society provided him with the sensitivity to conduct research on Chinese society, spurring his cultural self-awareness and reflexivity towards traditional culture and knowledge in his later years.

Fei's experiences during a time of turbulence and transformation in China, when indigenous traditions encountered Western modernity, helped him acquire embodied and encultured knowledge regarding integrating disparate knowledges. Fei was born right before the 1911 Revolution, which resulted in the collapse of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) and the founding of the Republican government (1912–1949). His maternal grandfather and father welcomed Western knowledge systems, achieving good positions in modernised industries, and further decided to send the family's children, including Fei, to modern educational institutions (Fei, 2015c). Fei's upbringing by his cultured and open-minded family made him a good observer of and participant in Westernisation experiments in China. In pursuit of education, he spent most of his life, beginning in his youth, in modern cities, specifically Suzhou (1920–1930) and Beijing (1930–1935) (Zhang, 2000). Fei's urban relocation reflected a distinctive evolutionary trend in the modernisation of China's society, namely "the old local gentry mov[ing] to the cities, accept[ing] Western ideas and transform[ing] into modern intellectuals, thus breaking away from the rural society that constitutes most of China" (Arkush, 1981, p. 1). Such cross-cultural encounters, albeit in a domestic environment, directly cultivated Fei's awareness of the diversity of knowledge, which may further influence his efforts to integrate Chinese and Western knowledge.

Fei's overseas life enriched his embodied and encultured knowledge about the West and the heterogeneity of cultures, which facilitated his research that incorporates Chinese and Western knowledge. The first time Fei left China was to go to the UK for his doctoral studies. When studying in London, he learned how to live in a Western sociocultural setting, such as by reading *The Times* and participating in social activities with Westerners (Arkush, 1981). Between 1943 and 1944, he went to the US as a visiting scholar. He became acutely aware of the importance of culture and formed his understanding of the differences and similarities between cultures and knowledges, reflecting upon the relationship between China and the West. For example, he started to contemplate Chinese people's life attitudes, such as their satisfaction with what they had, in contrast with the American people's spirit of progressive expansion (Fei, 1946). It was through his continual development of such comparisons and reflections that Fei deepened his understanding of Chinese and Western cultures and knowledge. Furthermore, the embodied and encultured knowledge gained through international mobility encouraged him to reconsolidate his commitment to addressing local concerns through research. In 1948, he published *From the Soil*, in which he developed the insightful notion of the "differential mode of association" to explain the relationship between local Chinese people.

**Conducting of culturally oriented research agendas** The third element that enabled Fei to integrate Chinese and Western knowledge was his conducting of culturally oriented research agendas, which revealed his appreciation of cultural and epistemological diversity as well as his lifetime experiences and reflections on the incorporation of diverse cultures and knowledges. In his early years, Fei intuitively and unconsciously conducted

a culturally oriented research agenda such as his work on peasants in China. In his later years, he consciously recapitulated and reflected on his early experiences and explored possible approaches to incorporating diverse cultures and knowledges in sociological and anthropological research. The three aspects of his culturally oriented research agendas are articulated as follows.

### Incorporating traditional knowledge in research

The first relevant aspect of Fei's culturally oriented research agendas was his incorporation of traditional knowledge in research. Fei (1996) argued that "it should be the responsibility of our sociologists ... to uncover [traditional knowledge] and to express them in modern language. In an era of increasing changes, when no one in the world can keep to themselves any longer, this is the knowledge that humanity urgently needs today" (pp. 224–225). Fei's experiences and scholarly endeavours, which have much to offer in terms of realising this responsibility, suggested three important approaches, using the example of traditional Chinese knowledge.

The first approach is to engage with traditional Chinese knowledge through extensive reading, which can raise the cultural self-awareness of contemporary scholars. Even in his 80 s, Fei brought small books, such as *The Analects of Confucius*, on research trips to flip through at any time (Zhang, 2000). His reading was not only limited to the Chinese classics but also included contemporary scholarly works on traditional Chinese society and knowledge, such as *The Outline of National History* by Qian Mu (錢穆, 1895–1990), and *Essays on the Political History of the Tang Dynasty* by Chen Yinke (陳寅恪, 1890–1969) (Zhang, 2000). Fei's extensive reading deepened his understanding of cultural phenomena and enabled him to harness them.

The second approach is to pay attention to the traditional knowledge that continues to be relevant in people's daily lives in modern society (Fei, 1996). In addition to rediscovering traditions through texts, Fei highlighted the paramount importance of studying traditions that are alive in contemporary life. In his view, traditions are not static and in contrast with modernisation. Rather, they are constantly evolving and can be revitalised (Fei, 2015e). The importance he placed on studying ongoing traditions in reality was manifested in his dedication to conducting fieldwork at the grassroots level of Chinese society, with the objective of developing a comprehensive understanding of Chinese society and cultures.

The third approach is to selectively adopt traditional knowledge in modern humanities and social sciences research, providing alternative discourses for the world knowledge system. Fei (2015b) believed that sociological studies on human communities require the observation of not only social structures but also human agents. He considered key notions in traditional Chinese knowledge, such as the "union of heaven and human", "human subjectivity", and "tacit knowledge sensed in a culture and mind" (Fei, 2015b), may help researchers develop alternative understandings of society from the perspective of "human beings". In addition, Fei (2015b) also explored the possibility of applying traditional Chinese study methods in social science research, including enlightenment ("wu", or "悟", which means achieving a direct understanding through intuition; see Cheng, 2017). Fei's approach posits that indigenous societies and knowledges can offer not only empirical data but also methodological and epistemological insights into the modern knowledge system.

## Collecting real-life data through intensive fieldwork with various cultures

Conducting intensive fieldwork echoes the cultural appreciation attitude of one's own and others' cultures and engagement with multiple knowledges. It is a core approach to understanding what occurs in various cultures, including the domestic communities with which researchers are unfamiliar and foreign cultures, and to observing real-life encounters between cultures and knowledges (Fei, 2015a).

Specifically, this approach boosts mutual appreciation and understanding in cultural interactions through embodied and encultured knowledge. While researchers have their own cultural and epistemological reservoirs, real-life data through intensive fieldwork may challenge the ideas in these reservoirs and thus serves as a test of researchers' attitude (Fei, 2015a). Fei's efforts to discard stereotypes and judgements and to move with openness beyond the thinking patterns inherent in his own culture were salient in his fieldwork and scholarly writings. Furthermore, Fei argued that researchers must attempt to understand diverse people's social lives and look for common concepts and views between different cultures and knowledges when they observe and aim to comprehend the cultures and knowledge of other communities (Fei, 2015a).

In addition, this approach also spurs scholars' reflexivity and use of an emic perspective in research and helps scholars develop an authentic understanding of reality. Fei followed the approach of his undergraduate supervisor Wu Wenzao, who believed that conducting fieldwork in various communities can help scholars gain a comprehensive understanding of Chinese society (Wu, 1982). He spent his life studying indigenous communities through fieldwork in rural China, and his widely praised work *From the Soil* (1948) grew out of intensive fieldwork conducted in the early stage of his career. In his later years, he expanded his horizons to encompass townships-provinces, cities, special economic zones, and other areas (Zhang, 2000). Therefore, his intensive fieldwork helped him gain a better grasp of Chinese society and promoted knowledge exchanges between various cultures.

## Pursuing the scholarly high point of realising “the great harmony” ideal

Fei's academic discussion of “the Great Harmony”, a traditional Chinese notion, provides insights into how traditional Chinese wisdom may contribute to the global knowledge system profoundly. Proposed in the *Book of Rites* over 2000 years ago, the notion of the Great Harmony envisions an ideal society in which every person lives and works in peace. This idea of a harmonious state of living was also extended to anticipate the coexistence of various cultures in traditional Chinese populations. Even after the mid-nineteenth century, when traditional ideas and institutions became greatly challenged by those from the West, Chinese scholars including Fei (2015f) still integrated the notion of the Great Harmony with their modern ideal of cultural interactions.

Fei also comprehended the notion of the Great Harmony in line with his teacher Pan Guandian's humanistic concept of “equilibrium and harmony, order and cultivation” (中和位育), which was also developed from the *Book of Rites*. According to Pan (1995), everything seeks adjustment and growth in the appropriate places. Division and unity thus evolve at the individual, national, and humanity-wide levels. It is thus possible to connect Chinese and Western understandings of human civilisation, which may in turn help tackle real-life problems. Following Pan, Fei (2015d) argued that this humanistic concept mirrors the possibility of opposites converging, which may point to ways for Chinese and Western cultures to avoid conflicts in globalisation and realise the Great Harmony.

Fei adopted the notion of the Great Harmony while re-examining traditional Chinese knowledge and Pan Guangdan's thoughts, pondering on what it can do for humanity's future development. He believed that this notion is markedly different from those of the West (e.g. subject–object dichotomy) and promotes the harmonious coexistence of diverse cultures in modern globalisation (Fei, 2015d). He developed the cultural appreciation of diversity in harmony to academically lay the groundwork for the world's unification and humanity's shared prosperity in the twenty-first century (Fei, 2015g).

Fei's ideas about the Great Harmony have been echoed by many researchers in various fields. In the field of higher education, scholars are also becoming increasingly aware of the role of the Great Harmony, including in the production of global collective goods in a diverse world knowledge system (Yang & Tian, 2022) and the development of students' cultural competence (Yang & Gao, 2020). Arguably, this idea can promote intellectual pluriversality by Chinese humanities and social sciences researchers in contemporary globalisation.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Fei's experiences and scholarship, which are expressed in the abovementioned three elements that enabled Fei to integrate Chinese and Western knowledge, have important implications for realising intellectual pluriversality and epistemic justice, especially in humanities and social sciences research. The potential challenges of applying these elements in research are also discussed.

Our study has three major implications. First, Fei's ideas and experiences suggest that developing a cultural appreciation attitude is a fundamental prerequisite for promoting dialogues between different cultures and knowledges. In contrast to the widely accepted and practised view of “value neutrality” in academia (McCarthy, 2005), this research acknowledges the positionalities and values of diverse cultures that inevitably influence researchers, particularly those in the humanities and social sciences. The cultural appreciation attitude involves the appreciation of all cultures and is much more inclusive and open-minded than objective and rational analyses of reality. Our analysis moves beyond highlighting the complex issues of dealing with various cultural traditions (Li, 2022) and marks a step forward from “trans-positionality” (Marginson & Yang, 2022; Sen, 2002) which rejects a single cultural standpoint in favour of normatively appealing for synthesising different positions. As the following contributions illustrate, it leads to concrete actions in integrating Western and non-Western knowledge and realising intellectual pluriversality through research.

Second, Fei's engagement with multiple knowledges sheds new light on the academic paths that scholars may take to integrate Western and non-Western knowledge. This study highlights that it is possible to attain both Western and traditional education and to accumulate embodied and encultured knowledge from intercultural experiences without forming a Westernised mindset or binary opposition. Indeed, Fei's situation is not exceptional. More Chinese scholars, including many of his teachers, students and colleagues (e.g. Pan, 1995; Wu, 2019; Zhao & Zhu, 2021), share certain similar traits and patterns in their attempts, struggles and efforts of integrating Chinese and Western knowledge. The case of Fei also sets an example for non-Western scholars' academic development as well as for Western scholars to learn from other cultures and knowledges.

Third, Fei's case indicates that culturally oriented research agendas deserve more attention in research. By conducting such agendas, researchers may adopt the cultural appreciation attitude and engage with multiple knowledges. Furthermore, the three agendas learnt from Fei have been increasingly recognised by both Western and non-Western scholars (Hayhoe, 2021; Zha, 2021). Incorporating traditional non-Western knowledge into research fuels non-Western scholarship in the humanities and social sciences while also serving as a global intellectual resource (Yang, 2022a, b). Huang (2015) argues that Western social sciences should not ignore traditional Chinese knowledge which could draw theoretical conclusions with universal application in social sciences, promoting a win-win situation. Collecting real-life data through intensive fieldwork with various cultures is critical for observing cultural manifestations and changes rather than how a culture has become a dead specimen (Zhao & Sun, 2017). The ideal of "the Great Harmony" in scholarly discussions provides an example to integrate traditional Chinese wisdom in order to realise cultural and epistemic harmony in the current globalisation (Yang & Tian, 2022).

Nevertheless, challenges remain in the integration of Western and non-Western knowledge. One major challenge is the non-Westerners' obvious lack of self-awareness about traditional cultures. Even for Fei himself, developing such cultural self-awareness was not easy. For example, in his later years, Fei reflected that early on, he felt few conflicts between Chinese and Western cultures and knowledge and did not recognise the importance of cultural self-awareness because of his complete and systematic training in Western-style schooling (Arkush, 1981). Fei (2015c) admitted that his early exposure to traditional knowledge had been insufficient, which might explain why some researchers consider his early works lacked historical and cultural context analysis (Sinha & Lakhanpal, 2022).

Today, non-Western scholars' training in traditional knowledge is more limited than Fei's due to non-Western education systems' being increasingly Westernised; many Western and non-Western scholars remain ignorant of the non-Western cultures and knowledges, further limiting the visibility of traditional cultures in globalisation (Yang & Gao, 2020). Fei's early immersion in Chinese traditional culture and knowledge may have become a luxury in contemporary China. Although his achievement in intergrating Chinese and Western knowledge was closely related to the people he encountered at home and abroad, the influence of traditional Chinese culture also played a significant role. This calls for education's nurturing of more (non-)Western scholars with self-knowledge and bicultural and even multi-cultural intellectual minds (Yang, 2019). There are indeed ongoing endeavours to promote cultural self-awareness and the incorporation of non-Western knowledge in research (Yang, 2022a, b; Yang & Tian, 2022), which is one of the initiative and effective steps in realising intellectual pluriversity and epistemic diversity.

Another challenge concerns the moral responsibility of knowledge integration in research. On the one hand, Fei's moral responsibility as a non-Western scholar led him to integrate Chinese and Western knowledge in globalisation. His adherence to the Confucian tradition of concerning reality and application (Zhang, 2000) explained his Chinese standpoint and pragmatic outlook in adopting a cultural appreciation attitude in research and anticipating the modernisation of "the Great Harmony" in globalisation. On the other hand, this inquiry has gone beyond merely academic research, which makes Fei's view of culture appear overly functionalist and pragmatic. Particularly, Fei's fieldwork in local areas instead of other cultures seems to be against pure anthropological commitment (Feuchtwang, 2015; Leach, 1982). Such concern remains challenging for non-Western scholars to address.

In sum, our research offers both theoretical and practical contributions by analysing Fei's ideas and research and through integrating them with his lived experiences and practical perspectives. This is in line with our deep-seated educational concern and objective of facilitating intellectual pluriversality. Therefore, it is crucial to continue engaging in discussions on and attempts in integrating Western and non-Western knowledge in future research.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

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