

# Fei Xiaotong's Theory of Rural Development and Its Application: A Critical Appraisal

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*Following a systematic reading of Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong's works published in the 1940s and 1980s, the author puts forth the following theses. First, it will be demonstrated that Fei's "theoretical thread" of his long career remains that of functionalism, a conceptual orientation which views every social institution as connected to other institutions, and together meeting critical needs of the encompassing social structure. Second, it will be shown that, given his functional orientation, he was unable to spell out the full theoretical relationships between Chinese rural enterprises and their host small market towns that occupied most of his attention in the 1980s. Indeed, this flaw has invited scholars to attempt to compensate in two ways: one is parallel to the theory of anthropologist G. William Skinner's marketing hierarchy; the other involves another key factor, the administrative hierarchy, and reconsiders the possibility of a built-in conflict between administrative logic and economic development. Third, a critical assessment will be made of the extent to which his disciples' empirical research matches the subtleties of his stimulating, albeit underdeveloped, theory of China's rural development.*

**Keywords:** functions; patterns; systems; rural enterprises; small market towns

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Fallen flowers are not without love,  
 they become the spring earth to nourish buds.<sup>1</sup>

In his recent paper, eighty-seven-year-old social anthropologist Fei Xiaotong reaffirms his intention to "reflect upon the academic road that I

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<sup>1</sup>Fei Xiaotong, "A Talk to Friends in Sociology," *Guangming Daily* (Beijing), June 22, 1986.

have been taking for more than sixty years."<sup>2</sup> He recalls that the value of anthropology for him has always been its "starting from reality . . . [and] aiming at applicability." His position therefore stands in opposition to that of his student-day cohort, the late Professor Edmund Leach (1910-89) who, in Fei's words, insisted that "anthropology is a purely intellectual exercise."<sup>3</sup> This article intends to participate in the reflection on Professor Fei's academic legacy, focusing on his views of the functional analysis and its relationship with his study of China's rural economic development in the 1980s. Moreover, our appraisal is more or less Leachian: from Fei's work we will sort out his theoretical framework, which is an embedded organic model, and examine how well Fei's and his disciples' rural research corresponds to the framework.

However, our review is not entirely "a purely intellectual exercise." Given China's rapid economic transformation, scholars need a comprehensive framework which can guide their formulation of research questions and eventually help them compare regional variations in China. Fei's functional model comes close to meeting this need if, as we will argue, three revisory steps can be taken. First, Fei's recent notion of "patterns" must be reformulated so that it will include a subordinate concept of function and embed itself in the overarching notion of systematization (see table 1). That is, one must think through a vocabulary of functionalism—a perspective stressing the *connectivity* between a phenomenal whole and its constituents—which is internally coherent and consistent. Second, one must expand Fei's economic functions, whose operation binds institutions (i.e., a rural enterprise) with communities (i.e., a market town), to incorporate the political dimension. Only a framework of *politico-economic* functions can help scholars grasp the dynamics of China's rural development. With the conceptual apparatus revised, one is finally ready to embark upon the comparison of different rural politico-economic *systems*, a comparison that, unlike what Fei and his students have been doing, can yield truly in-depth knowledge about contemporary Chinese rural life.

### Functional Orientation

Being a student of Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski, one of the first ad-

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<sup>2</sup>Fei Xiaotong, "Reconsideration of Human Values" (Paper presented at the Conference on the Application of Social Sciences and Chinese Modernization, cosponsored by the Chinese University of Hong Kong and National Huatung University in Taiwan, Hong Kong, April 22, 1997), 1.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 2. Both Leach and Fei were Ph.D. students under the guidance of Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski (1884-1942) in the London School of Economics and Political Science.

**Table 1**  
**Fei Xiaotong's Embedded Organic Model of Functionalism**

	Level of Location	Level of Operation	
Collective Needs	institutions	functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>internal: means (functional equivalents)</li> <li>external: structure (unintended consequences)</li> </ul>
	communities	patterns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>internal: structure</li> <li>external: ?</li> </ul>
	systems	[systematization]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>internal: management</li> <li>external: exchange</li> </ul>

vocates of functionalism in social anthropology, Fei Xiaotong once said that "there is a theoretical thread," that is, functionalism, running through his five-decade-long empirical research.<sup>4</sup> Just as his mentor never systematized his functional theory,<sup>5</sup> Fei's views of functionalism remain scattered in his many essay-styled publications. Our task here is to first establish the thesis that although Fei claimed in the early 1980s that he wanted to restore Chinese sociology in a socialist line, he actually practiced a functionalist sociology. Second, we will attempt to reconstruct from his available work a coherent framework of functionalism by elaborating on the relevant concepts of *functions*, *patterns*, and *systems*. This reconstruction will concretize Fei's theoretical orientation as what we call an embedded organic model of human collective life (see table 1).

In 1982, when he fulfilled the state's mission and basically restored the discipline of sociology, which had been canceled by the Chinese government in the period 1952-78, Fei reflected upon the nature of Chinese sociology in the current socialist society. He stated: "Sociology should be based on the guidance of Marxism-Leninism and Maoist thought. It should be closely geared to Chinese reality so that it can serve socialist construction."<sup>6</sup> The partisan tone probably revealed Fei's caution about the political situation in

<sup>4</sup>Fei Xiaotong, *Fei Xiaotong xueshu lunzhu zixuanji* (Fei Xiaotong's academic writings: Author's selection) (Beijing: Shifan xueyuan, 1992), 123.

<sup>5</sup>Adam Kuper and Jessica Kuper, eds., *The Social Science Encyclopedia*, revised edition (London: Routledge, 1989), 481.

<sup>6</sup>Fei, *Fei Xiaotong xueshu lunzhu zixuanji*, 13.

the early 1980s, but it also encapsulated well his thinking at the time, for in terms of the base-superstructure schema of Marxism-Leninism, he did mention that "social sciences are part of social ideology. In an age when there exist different countries and institutions, the reality reflected in social sciences is also limited [to a particular country or institution]."<sup>7</sup> That is, sociology as an ideology can only mirror a reality ultimately determined by a nation's political economy. Moreover, in terms of Maoist thought, Fei paid particular attention to Mao's village surveys in the early 1930s and characterized them as face-to-face qualitative investigations based on which modern large-scale survey research should be supplemented.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it seems that in the early 1980s, Fei imagined his new career of sociology as being faithfully in the socialist line, but this was entirely different from what he thought in the late 1940s, when he was the pontiff of (by current standards) "bourgeois" sociology.

In the postscript to the famous collection of his theoretical essays on rural China (published in 1948),<sup>9</sup> Fei outlined a "synthetic" approach that sociology should pursue. The approach was composed, first of all, by a formal or pure branch devoted to the study of universal forms of interaction, such as cooperation, conflict, exchange, and domination. Combinations of different forms made up different institutions whose functions were to satisfy different needs—economic, political, social, or cultural—of human life. Hence came the second branch of the synthetic sociology: what Fei termed "community analysis," which studied the interrelationships among the various institutions. Fei also specified a distinctive methodology for this study: in-depth descriptions of the institutional structures which were manifested in the particular community at hand; and the comparison of communal patterns based on these descriptions. While the descriptive method could be informed by historians' research, the comparative method could make use of social anthropologists' studies.

Before we discuss the key concepts—functions, patterns, and systems—contained in Fei's synthetic sociology, we should compare this early version with the late socialist version of sociology that we have mentioned. In both versions, what stands out is Fei's persistence in studying China's rural communities. He writes, "My lifelong goal is to understand Chinese society. . . .

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 26.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>9</sup>Fei Xiaotong, *Xiangtu Zhongguo* (Rural China) (Shanghai: Guanchashe, 1948), 102-5.

And to understand it correctly, we must first know the peasants who make up 80 percent of the population."<sup>10</sup> But what contrasts the two versions is the theoretical orientations that Fei (at different times) claims to guide Chinese sociology. Hence the question: Which is his real orientation, socialism or functionalism? It is our thesis that, his proposal of a socialist sociology notwithstanding, both Fei's theoretical inspiration and empirical research actually follow, to a critical point, the functionalist line first advocated by Malinowski. To demonstrate the point, we will begin by looking into the meanings and relationships of the key functionalist concepts used by Fei. In the following section, we will critically evaluate the "fit" between Fei's conceptual apparatus and his empirical research concerning villages, small market towns, and cities.

Fei once stated, "To know objective things, we subjectively need a conceptual apparatus as a tool."<sup>11</sup> For him, the tool is the theoretical orientation called "functionalism," whose constituent concepts include functions, patterns, and systems:

*Functions.* To the author's knowledge, Fei seldom formally defines his key notions; rather, he embeds the meaning of his concepts in his prose. The following is the way he treats "function": "If we want to organize an effective action and to realize our purpose, we must carry out a detailed analysis of the functions of social institutions, of the needs which these institutions are intended to satisfy, and of the connections of institutions upon which the operation of a specific institution relies."<sup>12</sup> That is, a social institution such as education is intended by one generation to train the next generation so that it may one day succeed its predecessors. To ensure this, it is up to the first generation both to inspect what means are available for the educators to train their students and base its inspection on an understanding of the educational environment, which is joined with other institutions (economy, polity, culture, etc.). To use Fei's own example, he once explained why Chinese peasants live together in their villages by indicating that their cooperation meets the needs of irrigation and security.<sup>13</sup> In both examples, function is either "internally" the means at an institution's disposal (i.e., pedagogy and cooperation) or "ex-

<sup>10</sup>Fei, *Fei Xiaotong xueshu lunzhu zixuanji*, 45-46.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 35-36.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 55-56.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 353. Note that this is a typical functional explanation: the "cause," i.e., cooperation, actually happens *after* the "effect" of living together has come into being, but the continuation of cooperation keeps cohabitation possible by constantly meeting the needs of irrigation and security.

ternally" the way different institutions are connected (i.e., educational environment and the needs of economic and political institutions), which Fei specifically calls a "structure."<sup>14</sup> With this basic connotation of means and structure, function gives rise to two derivative concepts—functional equivalents and unintended consequences—that, as we can see in the next section, Fei often employs without even naming.

Functional equivalents refer to the alternative means that will satisfy the same collective needs. To continue our example, private tutoring is an equivalent to public schooling; they both serve the same function. While functional equivalents appropriate the internal "means" component of function, unintended consequences tend toward the external "structure." That is, when an institution functions in association with others which comprise its immediate environment, they may produce some chance results which were not foreseen by any institution involved. Thus, for example, a functionalist sociologist may argue that public high schools in an urban slum unintentionally worsen the crime rate in the area because the schools, in recruiting students from the slum, contribute to the spread of juvenile delinquent behavior. Both of these derivative concepts will show up time and again in Fei Xiaotong's study of anomalies in the development of Chinese rural enterprises in the 1980s.

*Patterns.* This has definitely been the most important concept throughout Fei's career. However, his understanding of the term in the 1940s is so different from that in the 1980s that the latter usage somehow cancels out his notion of function. In a 1948 postscript, he stated:

Every community has its social structure, or ways of coordinating different institutions. . . . In comparing social structures of different communities, one often discovers that every social structure follows its coordinating principles. Different principles manifest in different forms of structure. Hence the concept of "pattern" is produced.<sup>15</sup>

Compared to functions, which include need-satisfying means and connectivity, or what Fei now calls "structure," we note that Fei's "patterns" overlap in that they contain structure as one of their defining elements. However, patterns are in a sense more abstract than functions, for they also incorporate the principles of structural coordination which determine a community's outlook. Unfortunately, Fei has never specified what these coordinative principles are, not even in the 1940s when he was at his intellectual zenith.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Fei, *Xiangtu Zhongguo*, 102. More on the notion of structure in the following text.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 103.

<sup>16</sup>The judgment is based on Fei's own confession. See Fei, *Fei Xiaotong xueshu lunzhu zixuanji*, 45.

In 1989, when Fei began to conclude his decade-long project of studying rural enterprises and small market towns, he defined patterns as "the characteristic process of economic development due to [a community's] specific locational and historical conditions."<sup>17</sup> Here patterns are, on the one hand, deprived of a connection with the abstract principles of coordination and thus made concrete if not theoretically infertile. On the other hand, concern over principles is replaced with that over spatio-temporal conditions, the brute natural forces which constrain every human community. That is, from now on, each communal structure, in pursuing economic prosperity, will show its "pattern" simply because it happens to stand at a specific spatio-temporal coordinate; Fei's theoretical ambition in the 1940s seems to have been exhausted by his practical concerns over enriching his people. Worse, Fei's current use of patterns reveals his expedient intent to cancel functions altogether. He states:

At first, I used the functions of the small market towns, such as being an agricultural trade center, administrative center, or industrial center, to classify them. Later, I saw that the development of the rural enterprises homogenized the functions of different types of the small market towns. I therefore proposed the concept of patterns as a major criterion for doing comparative studies.<sup>18</sup>

While Fei and his students want to claim that patterns were a "new" concept ushered in by the occurrence of "objective historical facts," namely, rural enterprises,<sup>19</sup> our biographical explication suggests that not only was the term renewed from Fei's far intellectual past, but it was renewed in a way which was short of theoretical sophistication and disintegrated the distinction between patterns and functions.

*Systems.* Just as the notion of patterns, there are also two versions of this term in Fei's thinking. But unlike patterns, whose conceptual distinctiveness degenerated from the 1940s to the 1980s, systems have remained the most comprehensive category in Fei's orientation and have even received finer elaboration in recent years.

Fei previously defined systems as "an abstract pattern . . . [which is] a categorical concept."<sup>20</sup> They are theoretically more abstract than patterns,

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 650.

<sup>18</sup>Fei Xiaotong, "Village, Small Market Town, and Regional Development," *Fuyin baokan ziliao: Shehuixue* (Reprinted Journals' Material: Sociology) (Beijing), 1995, no. 3:83.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 82; Wu Dasheng and Ju Futian, "The Sunan Pattern," in *Zhongguo chengxiang xietiao fazhan yanjiu* (Studies of the development of rural-urban coordination), ed. Zhang Yulin and Zhou Erlu (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1994), 24.

<sup>20</sup>Fei, *Fei Xiaotong xueshu lunzhu zixuanji*, 360.

which in turn are more abstract (because they concern coordinative principles) than functions. Although in what sense systems are more comprehensive than patterns was not yet spelt out in Fei's writings in the 1940s, the whole range of his functionalist vocabulary was already in stock. At the lowest level, systems are comprised of social institutions with their distinctive functions; that is, internally they apply means to satisfy collective needs, and externally they connect with each other to form, at a higher level, a definite structure, which is empirically called a community. The principle of "structuring" different institutions (whose theoretical elaboration remains missing) is called a pattern of a community, whose further theorization is entailed by systems.

The further theorization of systems was actually carried out by Fei in 1984-85. In viewing a rural enterprise as a system, he specifies its external and internal conditions which allow it to remain efficient, open, and stable:

A highly efficient social system is always open because it keeps its steady development by constantly exchanging flows of material, energy, and information [with outside]. Thus it is highly adaptive to the changes of the environment and tries to influence the environmental system in a purposeful and efficient way. . . . [Internally], whether an enterprise can triumph in the market economy depends on the structural rationality of the enterprise as a social system; that is, its effective, expedient, and scientific management.<sup>21</sup>

If we compare this definition of systems not with patterns but with functions, we note that the construction of both concepts, albeit different at the abstract level, is isomorphic: to fulfill some collective needs, the function of an institution is, internally, to put available means into practice and, externally, to coordinate with other institutions so that a structure is formed. For the same purpose, the operation, or "systematization," of a system focuses on management from within and on exchange from without. This isomorphism further contrasts with Fei's failure to develop the notion of patterns to its logical conclusion, for while he specifies the internal dimension of how a communal pattern works—that is, locating the principles of structuring its constituent institutions—he never manages to theorize the external dimension of patterns in connection to their theoretical superior—systems.

In sum, our explication of Fei Xiaotong's functional orientation clearly shows an embedded organic model whose content may be schematized as table 1. The model is embedded because, except for the undeveloped external dimensions of patterns, the exterior of a location at the lower level tends to be incorporated into the interior of an upper-level location; it is organic be-

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 278-79.



cause the whole model is analogous to a biological organism whose operation is to meet vital needs concerning self-preservation; i.e., the model functions in order to *maintain* its very functioning, a point to which we will return shortly. The rationale for this kind of functional reasoning lies in the emphasis on the *connectivity* between locations, with their own operations, at different levels of abstraction; what matters is the networking that holds every piece of human collective endeavor together. In this emphasis, the holistic tendency of Fei Xiaotong's functionalism is revealed.

### Research of Rural Enterprises and Small Market Towns

One of the major research projects that Fei Xiaotong put into practice in the early 1980s after he restored sociology was to study the relationships between rural enterprises (REs) and small market towns (SMTs) in south Jiangsu, his home province. He chose south Jiangsu, or Sunan for short, for his research site since it had been his "home base" where he collected material and wrote his dissertation under the guidance of Malinowski.<sup>22</sup> More importantly, he saw in his hometown the rise and prosperity of the SMTs, which seemed to be related to the appearance of the REs, which were initially commune- and production brigade-run industries before 1984, the year when the commune system was abolished. As we will see, Fei's decade-long research ended up with a twofold image which, on the one hand, delineates Sunan both as an economic system structured by the locations of villages, SMTs, and cities, and as an administrative system held together by the operation of towns, counties, and prefectural cities. That is, it is an image which accords with his functional schema in terms of highlighting the connectivity among the constituent elements of a system. On the other hand, the image renders the schema simplistic by bringing in complexities and contradictions that cannot be easily fit into the theory. The possible cure for this simplicity, we suggest, is in alternative modeling both of the economic system (i.e., G. William Skinner's marketing hierarchy) and of the new local administrative system (*shi-guan-xian*), which went into effect in 1982, and in which a city government replaces its former prefecture counterpart in controlling several counties.

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<sup>22</sup>Published as *Peasant Life in China* by Routledge in 1939.

### *The Image of an Economic System*

In Fei's analysis of the SMTs in Wujiang County, Sunan, he first classified them horizontally in terms of five traditional functions: whether an SMT is a commercial transit stop, a town with specialized trades, a political center, a tourist point, or a traffic node.<sup>23</sup> He then ranked them vertically in terms of five levels of both administrative and circulative complexities; thus, from top down, there are towns which host the county government (county-town, *xiancheng*), county-administered towns (including those new towns which were established after 1978; they are called established towns, or *jianzhi zhen*), strategically-invested commercial towns (*zhongdian zhen*), regular commercial towns (*yiban xiang-zhen*), or village-towns (*xiao shiji*).<sup>24</sup> In other words, Fei's complicated categorization is meant to encapsulate the dramatic differentiation of the SMTs' commercial and political functions since Deng Xiaoping's economic reform in 1979. But why did the SMTs' functions in Sunan undergo such a dramatic change, and how did they contribute both to the connection of cities larger than county-towns with villages smaller than village-towns, and the structuring of the whole economic system? To answer both questions, Fei answers by throwing the REs, the notion of unintended consequences, and that of functional equivalents into relief.

According to Fei, the SMTs differentiated their functions because the REs which they hosted, and which initially concentrated on light industries and the processing of agricultural produce, required many services. However, the emergence of the REs themselves was due to the historical conjunction of the household registration system, the household responsibility system, and particularly, cadres and technicians who were sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution;<sup>25</sup> it was the unintended consequences of these policy factors that ushered in the REs, but once they came into being, they became the model that subsequent entrepreneurs could plagiarize, just as anthropologist Benedict Anderson speaks of the development of what he calls the Creole nationalism.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Fei Xiaotong, "Small Market Towns, Big Problems," in his *Xiangtu chongjian yu xiangzhen fazhan* (Rural reconstruction and rural development) (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1994), 147-51.

<sup>24</sup>Fei, *Fei Xiaotong xueshu lunzhu zixuanji*, 209.

<sup>25</sup>Fei, *Xiangtu chongjian yu xiangzhen fazhan*, 275; Philip Huang, "The Paradigmatic Crisis in Chinese Studies: Paradoxes in Social and Economic Reform in China," Chinese translation in his *Zhongguo yanjiu de feifan renshi weiiji* (The paradigmatic crisis in Chinese studies) (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1994), 36.

<sup>26</sup>Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 77-79.

Now the question can be asked: Why did this handicraft-type of REs emerge and not others? Given Sunan's population density, the current REs, just like the traditional handicrafts, have been necessary for the peasants to raise their income so they can support the whole family.<sup>27</sup> From the peasants' viewpoint, the RE is a functional equivalent to handicrafts. Moreover, the past Sunan commune system, whose own petty industries (i.e., commune-brigade enterprises) served as the precursor of REs before Deng's reform,<sup>28</sup> was also a functional equivalent to the traditional peasant household. As Fei puts it, "The emergence, management, and principles of recruitment and distribution of the commune-brigade enterprises all find their counterparts in the patterns of the traditional family."<sup>29</sup> Implicitly, Fei is arguing for the correctness of the commune system's policies and of the recognition of the REs, for both were accepted (and even welcomed) by the peasants in that they were functionally equivalent, and hence familiar, to their traditional ways of livelihood. Fei seems to forget (implementation of the commune system aside) that since the emergence of REs was unintended, the policy of recognizing them as legitimate businesses in 1979 was at best a *post hoc* rubber stamp.

As for the question of how the SMTs contributed to the connection of cities with villages and hence to the structuring of an economic system, Fei's answer again relies on the REs and the concept of the unintended consequences. He illustrates his answer with the example of Yangzhong County in the lower Yangtze River. The REs apparently appeared in the county's countryside before Deng Xiaoping's reform, at a time when the term "commodity economy" was still opposite from a "planned economy." Out of the political concern of being bashed as "capitalists," early entrepreneurs in Yangzhong tried hard to cooperate with state-run enterprises, almost all of which were located in the large and medium-sized cities; their politically correct action thus unintentionally tightened the economic relationships between cities as an industrial commodity outlet and local villages as the site of production.<sup>30</sup> Specifically, the ties of economic complementarity were maintained in the following ways: first, Yangzhong produced materials which were needed in the cities but which, due to their small demand, state-run factories did not manufacture; second, it produced specific parts which were subcontracted to

<sup>27</sup>Fei, *Fei Xiaotong xueshu lunzhu zixuanji*, 108.

<sup>28</sup>Fan Xiumin and Ma Qingqiang, eds., *Xiangzhen qiye fazhan lun* (On the development of rural enterprises) (Beijing: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, 1994), 37.

<sup>29</sup>Fei, *Fei Xiaotong xueshu lunzhu zixuanji*, 654.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 268.

it by the state-run firms; and finally, it kept a keen eye on satisfying the demands for articles in the surrounding areas.<sup>31</sup> All these productive efforts not only consolidated an economic system consisting of cities, towns, and villages, but also differentiated commercial functions of the SMTs where REs were located.

In short, within Fei's home base of Sunan, his functional framework, particularly the notions of functions and systems with their derivative concepts, explains the post-1979 economic connectivity of the REs and SMTs. The unintended results of prior policies, especially sending technicians to the countryside, gave rise to REs whose entrepreneurs, for fear of being branded as "capitalists," sought cooperation from state-run enterprises, which tightened the economic ties between cities, market towns, and villages as a system and differentiated the commercial functions of the SMTs. However, in redefining, or concretizing, his notion of patterns so to compare the Sunan "pattern" with other regions, Fei deviates from his theoretical orientation. As he expanded his fieldwork to literally cover all of China,<sup>32</sup> Fei put the administrative system on a par with the economic system, and his theory was further shot through with contradictions that it could not cope with. It is to these two deviations, and their possible remedies, that we now turn.

In 1989, Fei concluded his comparison of the Sunan pattern with that of Wenzhou in south Zhejiang province and of Zhujiang in Guangdong. He stated:

The initiative of the Sunan pattern came both from the agricultural capital accumulated in the rural areas during the period of the commune system and from the returned technicians in the Cultural Revolution; the initiative of the Wenzhou pattern came both from the domestic circulative network created by the export of [Wenzhou] workers [to other provinces] and from the commercial capital accumulated [by the workers-turned-peddlers]; the initiative of the Zhujiang pattern came from the differences of wages and land values between Hong Kong and the interior [China], which caused the landing of Hong Kong-styled investment.<sup>33</sup>

To reiterate, Fei understood patterns at this point as a region's characteristic economic development constrained by geographic and historical conditions. Thus, in the above quotation, he can compare the three "patterns" strictly in terms of how the REs' initial capital was accumulated in the three regions in accord with their different spatio-temporal situations. He does not even ask how the connection between REs and SMTs emerged in Wenzhou and

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 263-64.

<sup>32</sup>Fei, "Village, Small Market Town, and Regional Development," 84-89.

<sup>33</sup>Fei, *Fei Xiaotong xueshu lunzhu zixuanji*, 675.

Zhujiang,<sup>34</sup> let alone compare the variances in the connections. The image of an economic system constituted by different levels of locations with their differentiated functions from Fei's Sunan studies is nowhere to be seen in his discussions of either Wenzhou or Zhujiang. This leaves his readers to wonder if Fei's lifelong functional framework, which put so much emphasis on connectivity, cannot properly explain the variations in the three "patterns," thus forcing him to resort to an economic explanation, i.e., variations in the accumulation of initial capital.

In order to render Fei's image of an economic system convincing, in our previous explication we deliberately bypassed discussion of Fei's categorization of SMT functions, but since his comparison of the three patterns seems to be detrimental to his functional framework, we may ask if there is in some way we can revise Fei's categorization so that we can still compare the patterns of rural economic development along functional lines. In this regard, G. William Skinner's marketing hierarchy seems helpful.

From Skinner's point of view, Fei's list of the functions suffers from two drawbacks: one is that it is too simplistic and the other is that it is too complicated. We recall that Fei initially classifies the Sunan SMTs horizontally in terms of the five single salient functions, but no one salient function serves to characterize any SMT. According to Skinner, even a traditional SMT (Standard Market Town in Skinner's terms) in China is typically characterized by four functions: "the range of goods available in its markets that are unavailable in lower-level markets, position in transportation networks, level of postal service available . . . and level of financial service available."<sup>35</sup> The differential combination of these four items is what really characterizes an SMT; Fei's single-function criterion is too simplistic. In addition, the location of any level in Fei's economic system may also be ranked in terms of these four functions. That is, a city is supposed to manifest more advanced and complicated functions than an SMT, which in turn has more sophisticated commercial functions than a village. In other words, Skinner is suggesting that regardless of whether they are horizontal or vertical, the classification of

<sup>34</sup>Shiaw-Chian Fong, "Studying Rural Enterprises in Sunan and Wenzhou," *Zhongguo dalu yanjiu* (Mainland China Studies) (Taipei) 40, no. 2 (February 1996): 36-42.

<sup>35</sup>Daniel Little, *Understanding Peasant China: Case Studies in the Philosophy of Social Science* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 81; G. William Skinner, "Cities and the Hierarchy of Local Systems," in *The City in Late Imperial China*, ed. G. William Skinner (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1977), 347-51. Note that Skinner later dropped one function—timing of market schedules—from the original five functions of the traditional SMTs. See G. William Skinner, "Rural Marketing in China: Repression and Revival," *The China Quarterly*, no. 103 (September 1985): 412.

locations should be based on *identical* commerce-related functional criteria. This contrasts with Fei's approach, in which he distinguishes among different SMTs with only one salient function. Moreover, he applies two different types of political and commercial functions to classify villages, market towns, and cities. Without universal criteria of functions, it is no wonder that Fei runs into trouble when comparing the Sunan pattern with others.

Skinner's universal functions also help Skinner construct a nesting hierarchy of market locations, for in Fei's terms, a city necessarily contains several SMTs because it functionally complements the deficiencies or underdevelopment in subordinate locations; the relationship between an SMT and its villages functions in a similar manner. This nesting principle not only fundamentally agrees with Fei's functional orientation summarized in table 1, it also points out the insufficiencies in Fei's idea of patterns. In Fei's early formulation, patterns might be viewed as an internal principle of coordination, but he has never specified the principle to the extent similar to Skinner's nesting of functions. In his late formulations, he gave up theorizing this principle completely and opted for a location at a particular spatio-temporal juncture as its pattern. If Fei really wants to compare regional patterns in the functionalist line, it seems to this author that Skinner's nesting principle should be his point of departure.

Therefore, we suggest that Fei's comparison of the different patterns of rural economic development is not satisfying because he has given up his functional framework entirely, and in order to carry out a true functional comparison, Skinner's expanded ranking criteria of commercial functions and their derivative nesting principle are essential. Admittedly, even Skinner's expanded functions are restricted to *traditional* SMT commercial activities. They do not shed light on how, with the boom of the REs within SMTs, one should rethink the new SMTs' industry-related economic functions and which will be empirically applicable. The task of constructing an authentic functional theory about the connectivity between REs and SMTs remains unfinished.

### *The Image of an Administrative System*

We have discussed how Fei ranks five levels of the SMTs in Sunan in terms of both administrative and commercial complexity and have argued that, from Skinner's viewpoint, two sets of criteria instead of one set of commercial functions are too complicated to specify SMT characteristics. However, there were substantive reasons why Fei used these criteria in 1984, two years after the central government had created prefectural cities by whole-

sale.<sup>36</sup> Cities which were a new level under the provincial government but above the county and *xiang* governments hence increased the original three-level local administrative system by one level, seriously impinging upon the operations of both SMTs and REs. Fei did note the contradictory influences from the new prefectural city-over-county system on the economic system, but as we will see, his analysis remains vague; for an in-depth politico-economic explanation, we must turn to other subsequent studies.

What Fei first noticed at this new prefectural city level was its comprehensive administrative power, which practically placed it immediately above his economic system of county-cities, small market towns, and villages and expanded a fundamentally *economic* system into an eco-administrative one. He immediately recognized the built-in conflicts between prefectural cities and county-administered towns on the one hand and within the established towns themselves on the other, conflicts which were due to the clashes between administrative and economic logic.

Fei demonstrates the conflicts between prefectural city and county town with an example taken from Sunan. Yangzhou and Taizhou in Sunan were formerly two county-administered cities each with their economic hinterlands and circulative areas. The promotion of Yangzhou to the level of a prefectural city devastated the equal economic relationship between the two cities in two ways. On the one hand, Yangzhou's administrative apparatus was not sophisticated enough to coordinate its economic affairs with its new subordinate, Taizhou City; this was what local people dubbed the phenomenon of "a small horse carrying a big wagon."<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, Taizhou was seriously deprived of its economic bases because "its administrative status [was] now identical with the adjacent counties with which it used to have economic influence. [That is], their old economic connections are more or less constrained by the new administrative rezoning."<sup>38</sup> Fei here is very vague about how exactly the prefectural city-over-county system affects local economic development, an issue that we will return to shortly.

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<sup>36</sup>Since 1958, prefectural cities have been created by turning the administration of adjacent counties to a large or medium-sized city as economic hinterlands. In 1982, the central government decided to promote the system. As then-Premier Zhao Ziyang put it, "[The prefectural city-over-county] system asks the large and medium-sized cities to structure their economies so that the problems of the urban-rural segregation, the segregation of vertical and horizontal levels of administration, the redundant production, the blocking of the marketing channels . . . may be overcome." See *Xinhua yuebao* (New China Monthly), 1982, no. 12:32-51.

<sup>37</sup>Fei, *Fei Xiaotong xueshu lunzhu zixuanji*, 281.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*

In terms of the conflicts within the established towns, Fei focuses on the influence of too many lines of administrative command. Originally, newly-established towns already hosted their own town government *and* subordinate *xiang* governments. With the addition of a prefectural city government came another layer of bureaucracy; thus Fei argues, "In these towns, due to the co-existence of several sets of administrative organizations, urban-rural connections have been artificially divided to the extent that the coordination and development of the urban-rural economy have been [negatively] influenced."<sup>39</sup>

Although Fei keenly senses the impingement the prefectural city-over-county system has on the local economic system, he is reluctant to criticize it harshly. Whether this is due to political prudence or insufficient research is hard to say. However, it is certain that the influence needs to be specified and, in this regard, Zhong Qian and Deng Yongcheng's research is highly valuable.<sup>40</sup>

In Zhong and Deng's structural account of the changing relationships between the local administrative and economic system, they argue that with the implementation of the prefectural city-over-county system, extraction of SMT and village resources by the cities has actually increased, and that resource transfers are practiced through *both* vertical and horizontal channels. Before the new administrative system was implemented on a large scale, the state influenced the economic life of both urbanites and villagers by dual means. First, it collected taxes from both groups and then gave profits only to the urbanites in terms of subsidies or reinvestment in state-owned industries located in the cities. Second, the state, with guaranteed low prices, monopolistically purchased agricultural produce from villages and sold them in the cities. By means of this vertical transfer, the administrative system impinged upon local economic life and contributed to the disparity of incomes between cities and the countryside.<sup>41</sup>

Since 1982, the new reality of the prefectural city-over-county system has meant that the state allows the city partial autonomy over its economy by letting it control its economic hinterlands. That is, the new system has created a channel of horizontal transfer within which village resources flow directly

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 209.

<sup>40</sup>Zhong Qian and Deng Yongcheng, "The Reform of the Prefectural City-over-County System and the Urban-Rural Relationship in China," in *Zhongguo quyu jingji fazhan mianmianguan* (Different views of the development of regional economies in China), ed. Li Siming et al. (Taipei: Population Research Center, National Taiwan University, 1996), 307-33.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 317-19.



into the city. This transfer is double-edged: for example, when rural enterprises initiate cooperation with their urban counterparts, the transfer of resources ultimately benefits the countryside, but in cases where enterprise links are forged by the new prefectural city government by decree, the result is almost always detrimental for the village. Furthermore, the vertical extraction by the state has remained intact. That is, with the new administrative system, the local economic system has actually been exploited by both the state (through the vertical channel) and by the prefectural city (through the horizontal channel).<sup>42</sup>

Zhong and Deng's account illuminates what Fei vaguely alluded to about the effects of the new local administrative system: setting up a new horizontal structure with extraction of rural resources on top of a vertical one. However, we note that Zhong and Deng use only nationally aggregated data or simply data from Sunan to support their argument. Whether their structural explanation holds in either the Wenzhou or Zhujiang pattern that Fei investigated will depend on the collaboration of further regional studies.

To conclude our discussion in this section, we should comment on the fit between Fei's theoretical framework and his empirical research in the 1980s. His embedded organic model, as we suggested, suits the Sunan economic system best: the prior policies of household registration, responsibility, and urbanites' rural reform unintentionally resulted in the emergence of rural enterprises, which in turn functioned unexpectedly to connect small market towns with both cities and villages. However, once Fei wants to compare different "patterns" of economic development in Sunan, Wenzhou, and Zhujiang, the manner in which he redefines patterns compels him to deviate from the functional model. Here we suggest that for revision, he should appropriate both the universal criteria of commercial functions and Skinner's nesting principle of the marketing hierarchy. Fei's research further deviates from the functional line when he considers the impingement of the new local prefectural city system on the economic system. Although he has pointed to conflicts in the administrative and economic logic, we suggest that, taking recent studies into consideration, his explanation can be enhanced with a structural account of vertical and horizontal resource transfers.

However, to incorporate administrative concerns into Fei's original functional framework and hence guide further research, the author thinks that several major revisions should be made. First, one should expand the univer-

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 321-24.

sal economic functions of different locations to include politico-administrative functions. Unless we come up with a theoretical understanding of the latter functions and their relationship with the economic ones, we cannot re-rank locations with various degrees of complexity in a meaningful way. Hence comes the second step: a synthesis of both the series of towns, SMTs, and villages on the one hand, and that of local provincial governments (i.e., prefectural city, county, and *xiang*) on the other, to form a new *system of locations* (see table 1). Although they both appear to follow a nesting principle of functions which in theory should dictate a new synthesis, the relationships among locations of the synthetic system have been fundamentally determined by the expanded criteria of the eco-administrative functions. With the first two steps taken, one is finally ready to sort out different eco-administrative systems and compare them with the same functional criteria. In short, given that Fei's functional framework is applicable only within the Sunan area, we propose that to carry out a thoroughly functional and comparative analysis, one should follow these three revisory steps.

### Research Without the Functional Framework

In his postscript to the collection of papers *Zhongguo chengxiang xietiao fazhan yanjiu*,<sup>43</sup> Fei Xiaotong expresses his gratitude to the authors who, following his "first run," went to the sites of different "patterns" and continued Fei's research. Admittedly, these authors were heavily influenced by Fei's idea of patterns, which emerged in the 1980s instead of the 1940s in his work. Thus, as can be expected, their collective work, although confirming Fei's insight in depicting rural enterprises as the single most important factor that has given rise to the boom of SMTs, suffers from the lack of a plausible theoretical framework. In the following explication, we will sort out the universal categories (in table 2) that the authors who studied the patterns of Sunan, Wenzhou, and Zhujiang used to organize their material. We will then compare their arguments with Fei's framework and pinpoint the areas which further research may address: where politico-economic functions which maintain the RE-SMT nexus and connect it both to institutions and systems in a nested fashion are well specified.

In table 2, we notice that the ways different authors define their eco-

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<sup>43</sup>Zhang and Zhou, *Zhongguo chengxiang xietiao fazhan yanjiu*, 283.

Table 2

## A Comparison of Three Patterns of Rural Economic Development in China

	Sunan	Zhujiang	Wenzhou
<b>Patterns</b>	Sunan's rural community connects large and medium-sized cities through REs	based on REs to open up to domestic and international markets	originated in household petty industries with strong salespersons to market products
<b>Conditions</b>	developed agriculture; historically advanced commodity economy; well-suited geotrafic sites; stringent person-land ratio	close to Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Macao; favorable 1970s international trade opportunities; Guangdong government's laissez-faire policy	developed economy of agriculture and commerce; traditional thought stressing performance; stringent person-land ratio
<b>RE-SMT Case</b>	Kunshan (county-administered city)	Dongwan (prefectural city)	Longgang (established town)

**Source:** Zhang Yulin and Zhou Erlui, eds., *Zhongguo chengxiang xietiao fazhan yanjiu* (Studies of the development of rural-urban coordination) (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1994), 24-129.

conomic patterns and specify their conditions of emergence faithfully follow Fei's later notion of patterns, as all of them emphasize the key role of the REs in encouraging the commodification of local economies.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, conditions for the rise of their REs and patterns are concretely located in geographic or historical terms, the notable exception being Zhujiang's laissez-faire policy. There is no attempt in their analyses, just as in Fei's later work, to theorize these concrete conditions so that they may be connected to Fei's original framework as shown in table 1.

Even when the authors attempt to explain the relationships between REs and SMTs in terms of a specific town in their respective patterns, they do not go beyond the mechanisms identified by Fei himself. Thus, for example, we recall that in discussing Yangzhong County in Sunan, Fei specifies the satisfaction of small demands, of subcontracted parts from large firms, and of articles for daily use as the productive means by which REs made Yangzhong a prosperous area and connected it to both larger cities and villages. In Wu Dasheng and Ju Futian's subsequent study of Sunan, they take a county-administered city, Kunshan, as an example and generally find that Sunan's

<sup>44</sup>Since March 1984, the privately-owned industries in the countryside, as those in Wenzhou, were incorporated into the category of rural enterprises in the state's statistics. See Fan and Ma, *Xiangzhen qiye fazhan lun*, 1.

REs contribute to the connection of SMTs with different locations in exactly the same productive ways; in addition, the REs join urban firms to form conglomerates of enterprises.<sup>45</sup>

In Yang Ming's account of the Zhujiang pattern and particularly the prefectural city of Dongwan, he explains this relationship in simple terms: build the factories, then small towns will emerge.<sup>46</sup> In the case of Dongwan, local REs process or assemble the imported material and, from their profits, pay the welfare taxes which fund the construction of SMTs. Finally, in the case of Longgang, an established town chosen as a model of the Wenzhou pattern, various authors demonstrate that the construction of the new town was almost exclusively funded by private industries in and out of Wenzhou, suggesting that "[d]eveloping the rural commodity economy is a powerful force for promoting small town construction."<sup>47</sup> Any subtle concepts, such as the unintended consequences which Fei explains prompted rural entrepreneurs to bring in the booming SMTs by initially seeking cooperation from state-run factories (lest they should be accused of being "capitalists"), are nowhere to be seen in these subsequent studies.

In sum, the subsequent studies that closely follow Fei's steps have come up both with an understanding of patterns in terms of how spatio-temporal conditions give rise to REs and specify the relationships between REs and SMTs couched in productive or taxational means. The results of these studies have not exceeded the standards that Fei achieved in the late 1980s. They have also been subject to the same criticisms that we have leveled against Fei—deviation of the functional line, lack of a synthesis of both marketing and administrative hierarchies, and an immature comparison of not patterns but systems. However, there remain several problems which were already implicit in Fei's work and which are thrown into relief in his disciples' subsequent research. Let us consider these issues along with the revisory steps we have suggested in the end of the last section.

The first issue concerns the role of functional analysis in Chinese rural development. In Fei's account, several prior policies unintentionally caused the preceding system—commune-brigade industries—to occur; the subsequent

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<sup>45</sup>Zhang and Zhou, *Zhongguo chengxiang xietiao fazhan yanjiu*, 40.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>47</sup>See Pei Xiaogo, "Small Town Construction: An Alternative Path," in *Market Force in China, Competition and Small Business: The Wenzhou Debate*, ed. Peter Nolan and Dong Fureng (London: Zed Books, 1990), 160; and Zhang and Zhou, *Zhongguo chengxiang xietiao fazhan yanjiu*, 103.

studies also focus on the causes of REs in each pattern. But in a previous paper, this author follows the line of thinking pioneered by Jon Elster and Arthur Stinchcombe which argues that, given the validity of a causal sequence has already been established, functional analysis is best suited for identifying the forces that *maintain* the validated causes exerting the same influences over effects which they induced in the first place.<sup>48</sup> It is not to the search of concrete spatio-historical conditions which give rise to a specific RE that functional analysis is applied; rather, once the RE exists, it is used to study how, through the productive or taxational means which it gathered in the process of emergence, it contributes to the cohesion of an economic system (often misnamed as a "pattern"). This is why, in view of our previous discussion, the universal criteria of economic and/or administrative functions are important, because they help a researcher locate "maintaining" means in concrete cases and pave the way for comparing findings with those gathered in other cases.

If this argument of functional analysis' proper place is acceptable, we may ask the second question: What are these "maintaining" factors that connect REs to SMTs and to other levels in the same economic system? We have suggested that in Fei's account of Yangzhong County, he has already identified what we call the productive means which bind the county together with larger cities and villages. We have further suggested that in the subsequent study of the prefectural city, Dongwan, the taxational means was singled out as one such "maintaining" factor. However, on the whole, our understanding of such factors in the RE-SMT nexus is fragmented. The remedy for this poor understanding may come from a recent collection of papers produced by Fei's former colleagues and students at the Institute of Sociology and Anthropology at Beijing University.<sup>49</sup> In this collection, five REs in Sunan were intensively studied to understand their operations and specifically their profitability. All the studies reveal that the board of directors in an RE is made up by party cadres and professionals,<sup>50</sup> and the board decides how much share of their profit should be retained both as taxes and as SMT's construction fund.<sup>51</sup> At

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<sup>48</sup>Shiaw-Chian Fong, "Maintenance of Social Mobilization and Functional Analysis," *Dongwu shehui xuebao* (Sochow Journal of Sociology) (Taipei), no. 6 (March 1997): 263-64; Jon Elster, *An Introduction to Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 32; Arthur Stinchcomb, *Constructing Social Theories* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), 106.

<sup>49</sup>Ma Rong et al., eds., *Jiushi niandai Zhongguo xiangzhen qiye diaocha* (Survey of Chinese rural enterprises in the 1990s) (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 258, 321.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 232-33, 288-89, 331.

the conclusion of the book, Yang Mu sums up the relationships between REs and SMTs as the following:<sup>52</sup> (1) RE factory managers are appointed by the *xiang* or *zhen* government; (2) the establishment and expansion of REs depend heavily on the state-run enterprises for their marketing, technical, and informational help; (3) RE financial resources depend on the guarantees the local governments offer the banks; (4) local governments have the right to waive or reduce RE taxes; (5) local governments have the administrative power to consolidate REs; and (6) local governments have the administrative power to provide political protection for the REs. It is such detailed information at this level and across different economic systems that will form a solid cornerstone for us to theorize about the "maintaining factors" and to compare them seriously along functional lines. Ma Rong's collection is a good start toward a revised functional theory in Chinese rural development.

Finally, an obvious problem in *Zhongguo chengxiang xietiao fazhan yanjiu* and in Fei's work is that different locations are used for comparative purposes. In table 2, we see that the major cases set up for comparison are a prefectural city, a county-administered city, and an established town, respectively. This comparative practice is of concern in two respects. First, there is the lack of a theoretical clue, such as something like Skinner's nesting principle of location functions, that can help readers identify the relations among these three levels of administrative units. Second, this highlights the importance of synthesizing a new eco-administrative hierarchy from the current economic system of city, SMT, and village and the local administrative system of province, prefectural city, county-administered city, and *xiang*. That is, to put our discussion in a nutshell, the specification of the *politico-economic* functions which maintain the RE-SMT nexus as a community and which connect different location levels (i.e., institution, community, and system) in a Chinese-box way, is among the top priorities in a revised functional framework which can benefit the study of Chinese rural development. Only when such a framework is available can regional systems in China be compared in a meaningfully functional way.

## Conclusion

In his long career of studying Chinese rural development, Fei Xiaotong

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 4 59-62.

ingeniously carried out functional analysis in the first stage (prior to 1952) of his research. But since 1978, for political as well as practical reasons of "enriching the people," he has concretized his research agenda and put his functional orientation in a secondary position. The overall results from his research career are, on the one hand, an incomplete functional framework (see table 1) in which the coordination principle, or the pattern, of an economic system has not been thought through. On the other hand, he has unwittingly imposed a local administrative system upon the economic system whose functional relationships with the other are left unspecified. Finally, different patterns of rural economic development have been set up and rushed into comparison, with the result that not much theoretical sophistication can be gained from both Fei's and his disciples' studies.

Given that Fei's functional analysis focuses on the connectivity among institutions, communities, and systems and thus has the potential to study Chinese rural life in a holistically meaningful way, we have struggled with these problems in Fei's research in an attempt to devise an alternative, revisory mode of thought. In addressing the problem of the unelaborated principle of coordination, we have suggested that one can seek inspiration from G. William Skinner's nesting principle of marketing hierarchy, which is based on the same set of commercial functions, with various degrees of complexity shared by locations of different levels. Thus, a community's commercial functions necessarily "nest" those of an institution, for the former display a much higher degree of sophistication.

But Skinner's idea can serve as an inspiration only up to the point where we face the problem of coordination between an economic and an administrative system. It turns out that the operation of China's rural economy since 1982 has been unable to avoid impingement from the new prefectural city-over-county system. Without coordination, the new administrative system can, for example, simply force the consolidation of REs or their host SMTs by decree and hurt the rural economic system's development. That is, what emerged in the 1980s was a new politico-economic system whose political functions have not been theorized by either Fei or Skinner. In a sense, we are here pushed back, by the empirical fact, to a ground zero where we have to think through the *politico-economic* functions before we can imagine any principle of coordination, nesting or otherwise.

Finally, our discussion so far suggests that the comparison of the rural development at the level of "patterns," or in our term, systems (see table 2), is far-fetched and unlikely to yield any theoretical insight. What really should be done is a kind of "soft" comparison focusing on the RE-SMT nexus in dif-

ferent systems. In this comparison, we are interested not in how the RE causes an SMT to emerge (we have argued that functional analysis is not good at sorting out the causes of origin), but in how the nexus itself is maintained or even reinforced through which kind of politico-economic functions. Of course, this interest also includes what politico-economic dysfunctions contribute to the disintegration of such a nexus. The result of this comparison is likely both to solve our problem of theorizing on politico-economic functions and contribute to our understanding of the operation of different politico-economic systems in rural China.