China - Regulations Of Family Relationships, Tradition—persistence And Transition

High respect for family is a special feature of Chinese civilization. The family is deemed the basic unit of Chinese society. An individual's actions are mostly geared towards the requirements of the family. This fundamental system has remained for about three thousand years without major change (approximately since the Chou dynasty, 1027–256 B.C.E. to the early twentieth century). Although it has been considered relatively stable, the Chinese family system is not resistant to change. The end of the imperial era in 1911 and the following industrialization and modernization brought about an extensive and dramatic change to this enduring system. Even when, in 1949, civil war separated the Chinese regime into two independent governments (the People's Republic of China under the Chinese Communist Party and the Republic of China, Taiwan, under the nationalist Kuomintang), the changes in Chinese family continued to take place. Nevertheless, there is a striking continuity over time. Much of the tradition is still apparent in contemporary Chinese society, and especially so in Chinese communities outside the People's Republic of China (PRC).

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China - Regulations Of Family Relationships

Confucianism is the dominant philosophy and doctrine of proper ethics and conduct of the Chinese people. It is nearly synonymous with traditional Chinese civilization. Over the centuries, Confucians have developed an ideology and social system designed to realize their conception of the good society, a harmonious and hierarchical social order in which everyone knows and adheres to their proper stations (Stacey 1983). According to Confucianism, the family must first be put in order, and only then can the state be ruled. A well-ordered family is thus the microcosm and the basic unit of sociopolitical order. With the great importance of the family order emphasized by Confucius and his disciples, the relationships among family members are regulated by the pecking order that results from generation, age, and gender.

Generation, age, and gender (beifen-nianlingxingbie) *hierarchy*. Confucianism provides a protocol for proper family life. Therefore, the hierarchy of generation-age-gender defines an individual's status, role, privileges, duties, and liabilities within the family order accordingly. Family members know precisely where they

stand in the family by referring to this order: to whom each owes respect and obedience. Position in the family is more important than personal idiosyncrasies: people of the elder generation are superior to those of the younger; within each generation, the elder are normally superior to the younger; men are absolutely superior to women (Baker 1979). Everyone in the family owes obedience to the eldest male because he is superior in generation, age, and gender.

For Chinese, increasing age is accompanied by higher status. Even when it is impossible to increase the material comforts of the aged, there is no denying the respect and deference shown to them. Neither the wealthy nor the poor would abandon the elderly, nor does the thought arise (Levy 1971).

In traditional Chinese culture, the world is created by the interaction of *yin,* meaning tender, passive, inferior, and referring to female, and *yang,* meaning tough, active, superior, and referring to male. Therefore, women were appointed to a dependent status; they were secondary to men (Lang 1968). Surnames, being considered highly important, were passed on through the male lines. Only male children were counted as descent group members and had rights to the family's property. Females were not eligible to inherit the family estate, even their husbands', nor did they have primary position in any single crucial ceremonial role.

Female children were considered a bad economic and emotional investment, particularly in poor families. Their names were seldom proclaimed, for once they were married and became members of the husband's family, they were known by their husbands' surnames or their own surnames prefixed by their husbands'. Throughout their whole lives, Chinese women were expected to conform to *Three Obediences* (*san-tsong*): obedience to their fathers before marriage, to their husbands after marriage, and to their sons after their husbands die.

Although generation is definitely superior to age in hierarchy, it is not always the case that age is superior to gender. The heavy emphasis on male superiority in Chinese society may sometimes override the age consideration. For instance, a

younger brother can easily see that he owes obedience to his older brother, yet, he may feel that he is superior to his older sister-in-law because of his gender. As generation-age-gender works to coordinate individuals' rights and obligations in the family, the essence of the order in family is expressed through filial piety that is considered the foundation of all kinds of virtue.

Filial piety (xiao). Filial piety is the basis of order in Chinese family. The father-son relationship is the elementary and the most important one in the family and all other relationships in the family system are regarded as extensions of or supplementary to it. Filial piety refers to the kind of superior-inferior relationship inherent in the father-son relationship. As it often appears, filial piety means children, especially sons, must please, support, and subordinate to their parents (Hsu 1971).

The obligations of children toward their parents are far more emphasized than those of parents toward children. As it is stated in the *Xiao Jing* (Classic of Filial Piety written some three thousand years ago), "the first principle of filial piety is that you dare not injure your body, limbs, hair or skin, which you receive from your parents." This principle establishes how a filial child practices filial piety in its rigorous form. In addition to duty and obedience children owed to their parents, parents' names are taboo since using it is considered a serious offence toward one's parents. To avoid using the name of one's father, a filial child would deliberately mispronounce or miswrite the word, or even refuse an official title that is similar to the name of his father or grandfather in ancient time (Ch'u 1965).

Since the relationship between father and son is indisputably most important, the major duty of a man is, thus, to his parents and only second to the state. With the emphasis on filial piety, a son could even be absolved from responsibility for reporting the infractions of his father in the Imperial China, except in the case of treason. In the mean time, sexual love can also be pressed into the service of filial piety, which is incumbent upon any man to continue his male line. Mencius (a

great Chinese philosopher second only to Confucius) said that of the three unfilial acts, failure to produce an heir is the worst. It is so because the whole continuum of ancestors and unborn descendants die with him. Children who die young are considered to have committed an unfilial act by the mere fact of dying before their parents do. They are not qualified as potential ancestors (Freedman 1970).

It is believed in Chinese society that an individual exists by virtue of his ancestors. His descendants, then, exist only through him. To worship an individual's ancestors, thus, manifests the importance of the continuum of descent.

Ancestor worship (ji-zu). The cult of the ancestors is no mere supernatural cult. It lays stress on those moral aspects of the family that tend towards unity and good order. A young and incapable son is fed, clothed, and housed by his parents. As he grows up, he begins to take the same care of his parents. A parent's death merely alters the form of the duty. The transfer of goods from this world to the next is achieved primarily by burning symbolic paper models. Food, on the other hand, can be offered directly. As the annual Grave-sweeping (*qing-ming*) festival in early April arrives, it is the duty of the living descendants to weed and clean up the grave-sites of the ancestors. The ceremony not only serves to keep family solidarity alive; it also enhances the authority of the family head. In the case of a daughter, the reciprocity is performed to her husband's parents.

It is believed that the ancestor's real power begins when he dies. At that moment, he is transformed into a spirit of powers. The spirit ancestors depend on their descendants for food and a comfortable life after death, in the form of sacrifices. The descendants, meanwhile, need the supernatural support in return for the sacrifices and service (Creel 1937).

Kinship (qing-qi-guan-xi). Kinship is one of the most important principles of social organization in Chinese society. Almost all interactions among individuals are based on their relationships in the social network built by kinship. The term

"kin" (qing-qi) in Chinese is defined as those relatives for whom one wears mourning. Kin are divided into three groups: paternal relatives, maternal relatives, and the relatives of one's wife. The length of mourning depends on the closeness of relationship and varies from three years for one's father or mother to three months for distant cousins (Lang 1968). Because an orderly relationship of the individual and his kin is of great importance, the Chinese have a very elaborate kinship terminology system to properly address the person with whom they interact. All relatives have their specific titles: father's elder brother (*bo-fu*), second maternal aunt (*er-yi*), third younger paternal uncle's wife (*sanshen*), and so on.

Extensions of the conception of family include the *lineage* (*zong-zu*) and *clan* (*shih-zu*). Same surname, common origins, shared ancestors, and worship of a founding ancestor all are common conditions for the foundation of lineages and clans (Wu 1985). Law and customs insist on mutual help among members of the lineage and the clan. Moreover, the Chinese make a great deal of social organization along the surname line. Surnames, considered very important in the family domain, are always put before personal names.

In Chinese society, a family (*jia*) can be vast yet ambiguous, even extended beyond the scope of the lineage and the clan. Because the family has been proven effective as an organizational force, the adoption of its values and institutions has become attractive in non-kinship situations. "My own people" (*zi-jia-ren*) is thus used to include anyone whom you want to drag into your own circle, and it is used to indicate intimacy with that person. The scope of *zi-jia-ren* can be expanded or contracted according to the specific time and place. Compared with the outsider, *zi-jia-ren* always enjoys favoritism (Fei 1992). This explains why Chinese seek connections in higher places and do things for the sake of relationships. However, responsibility and obligations are also expected according to closeness.

China - Tradition—persistence And Transition

Several key features of the Chinese family system according to family life-cycle have existed in Chinese societies for thousands of years. Some of them are still valid in modern Chinese societies, whereas others are changing.

Family structure. The large, complex family has been viewed as the typical form of the Chinese family. In this type of family, parents commonly lived with more than one married son and their families, or two or more married brothers lived with or without their parents in the same unit. However, under the effects of the material conditions, demographic factors, and cultural ideals, the predominant pattern was co-residence of parents with only one married son and his family. That is, *three-generation-stem-family (san-dai-tong-tang)* was generally the traditional, typical, and prevalent form of family (Levy 1971).

However, the nuclear family has become the predominant household composition in both Taiwan and contemporary China, with the effects of industrialization, modernization. In addition, China is also affected by the socioeconomic policies of the Communist Party. The stem family is still common in rural China and in Taiwan. A special temporary form of stem family called *meal rotation (lwenhwo-tou*)is typical in Taiwan. In meal rotation, married sons take turns providing meals and residence for their parents according to a fixed rotation schedule (Hsieh, 1985). This long lasting family structure facilitates mutual care of the young and the old.

Mate selection. With the influence of Confucianism, romantic love between husband and wife was considered detrimental to the supremacy of filial piety between the parent-son relationships. Courtship, in ancient China, was for men to seek concubines or mistresses; it had no place in conventional marriage. Given the emphasis on family importance, one's future mate was decided by one's parents or grandparents, and not by the young couple themselves. Because marital relations were part of one's filial duty to parents, the choice was more important for parents taking a daughter-in-law to continue the family line and to help out with the household chores than for the son taking a wife (Baker 1979). The arranged marriage could ensure that criteria of strength, skill, and conscientiousness were used in the choice rather than criteria of beauty. Personal affection and free choice based on love were considered not only unnecessary but also harmful. The Chinese believed that real affection grew up in marriage, be it romantic or not. Should personal gratification not exist, the couple was still together to continue the family, not to like each other.

The Chinese also emphasized the importance for decent young people not mingle or fall in love until they were married. However, parents never fully succeeded in keeping boys and girls apart or in eliminating love from their life. Premarital sex was forbidden for both genders, but the rule was more strictly enforced for girls than for boys. Young men's sexual experimentation was more likely with prostitutes or household servant girls (Levy 1971).

Although most parents and the society itself still consider premarital sex unacceptable, boys and girls mingle freely in both Taiwan and China. Attractions between one another are prevalent. Despite the moral prohibition, more and more young people think premarital sex is acceptable especially when two people are in love. However, more young boys than girls believe so. Survey researchers have found that it is not unusual for young people to engage in premarital sex. For example, among college students in Taipei (the capital of Taiwan), 37.5% of male students and 26.7% of female students have had premarital sex (Yen, Lin and Chang 1998). Among university students in Beijing (the capital of China), on the other hand, 15% of males and 13% of females have admitted doing so (Li et al. 1999).

Along with freer association between the two genders and the pursuit of romantic love among the youth, the Civil Code of 1930 proposed by the Kuomintang and the Marriage Law of 1950 and 1980 by the Chinese Communist Party have weakened parental control in mate selection. Young people in Taiwan and China alike are more likely to choose their own mate with parents' approval, or under parental arrangement with the children's consent (Yi and Hsung 1994; Riley 1994). The thousand-year-old parent-run system has been transformed into a joint parent-child system. An increasingly child-run pattern is also quite common.

Marriage. Marrying outside the same surname group was demanded by law as well as the custom in ancient China. The husband-wife relationship was strictly held to be supplementary and subordinate to the parents-son relationship. Love was irrelevant. A filial son would devote everything to his parents at the expense of his marital and other relationships. If there were a quarrel between his wife and his parents, he would have no alternative but to side with his parents, even to the extent of divorcing his wife. Marriage was for the purpose of providing heirs for the family and continuing the father-son line, so the husband/wife tie was not one of affection but of duty. Should affection develop, display of it before other family member was disapproved of socially. No upright man showed signs of

intimacy in public, not even with his wife. It was regarded as licentious for female to display their personal charms (Hsu 1971).

Division of labor in the household was primarily based on gender. The men dominated the public sector and work in the fields or elsewhere outsidet the home. The women occupied the domestic sector, by managing the household and providing service for its members. Regarding decisionmaking in the household, the husband enjoyed absolute power.

Traditionally, Chinese girls married early—as soon as possible after puberty. Marriage brought about drastic changes in women's lives but not so in men's. Once a woman married, she had to leave her natal home and live with her husband's family. A frequent meeting with members from natal family was improper. The first duties for a woman were to her husband's parents, and secondly was she responsible to her husband. Unfortunately, tension and conflict between mothers- and daughtersin-law was frequent. The power, however, always lay with the mother-in-law due to her superiority of generation and age and the emphasis on filial piety.

Regardless of her hard work for her husband's family, a daughter-in-law was seldom counted as zi-jia-ren, nor could she enjoy favoritism, especially if she had no son. As an outsider, without a son to secure her status, a woman was doomed to powerlessness. The head of the family might demand that his son take a concubine, and the wife could only cooperate (Leslie and Korman 1989).

The Marriage Laws of 1950 and 1980 in China and the revisions of Civil Code in Taiwan have helped to raise the status of Chinese women. The average age at marriage has been rising for both men and women. Once married, women do not change their surnames. They also have full inheritance rights with men. Mandatory formal education and participating in paid labor market altogether increase wives' power to achieve a more egalitarian style of decision-making and domestic division of labor. This phenomenon is more predominant in cities than in rural areas, and is more common in China than in Taiwan.

Despite the significant progress, the persistence of tradition still restricts women to inferior status. Wives' full-time paid employment does not guarantee that their husbands will help with household chores. Many young couples begin their marriages by living with the husband's instead of the wife's parents. The mother-inlaw/daughter-in-law relationship remains difficult. Visiting the natal home still frequently causes conflict between these two women (Kung 1999).

Child socialization. The differential treatment of the child on the basis of gender began at birth. The birth of a son was greeted joyfully. Daughters, in contrast, were usually deemed liabilities. They experienced a much greater risk of being sold out to act as servants, concubines, or prostitutes. Infanticide often happened.

The Chinese were tender and affectionate toward small children. Discipline was held to a minimum (Levy 1971). Through story-telling, for example, young children learned to obey their parents and older siblings, and, more importantly, to devote themselves to be filial. At the age of three or four, some restrictions began, as did segregation by gender. Boys were under their fathers' direct supervision. Girls were inducted into women's tasks. Education for girls was considered unnecessary and even harmful.

A daughter was trained for marriage, to be a good wife, nurturing mother, and a diligent daughter-in-law. The best training for marriage was illustrated in the *Four Attributes*—proper virtue, speech, carriage, and work (Mann 1991). Should the daughter turn out to be a poor wife or an unfit daughter-in-law, criticism would be directed to her mother as the person responsible for her training in the domestic arts.

Foot-binding, started from early childhood, also confined women to home and made them safer, less mobile property. In 1902 the Ching empress and in 1912 the president of the Republic of China respectively issued edicts that outlawed footbinding. However, the practice did not end until the end of the Sino-Japanese War, Second (1945) (Gao 1995).

Because of the Family-Planning program in Taiwan and One-Child Policy in China, respectively, far fewer children are born in contemporary Chinese families. Daughters are cherished as are sons. Gender segregation no longer exists. Daughters can also enjoy equal rights, but sons are still preferred particularly in the rural areas. Female infanticide still happens occasionally and even has increased in China since the One-Child Policy era began in the 1970s and 1980s.

Extensive school attendance and nonfamily employment have set the youth free from absolute parental authority and much family responsibility. Teenage subcultures have emerged as well. Although the relationship between parents and children has become a more equal and relaxed one, Chinese parents still emphasize training and discipline in addition to care taking (Chao 1994).

Divorce and remarriage. Divorce in imperial China was very rare. Husbands could initiate a divorce on any one of the following seven grounds: (1) failing to have a son, (2) adultery, (3) disobedience to parents-in-law, (4) gossiping, (5) theft, (6) jealousy and ill-will, or (7) incurable disease. These are so called *Seven Outs* (*qi-chu*). Divorce also happened by mutual agreement, but actually required the consent of the heads of the families. Finally, divorce could be initiated by order of the authorities. In each case the welfare of the family was emphasized, not the interests of the couple (Lang 1968). Marriage was infrequently dissolved on the wife's initiative. The poor could not afford divorce and remarriage. The wealthy regarded it as shameful; the taking of concubines thus became a common alternative.

The Chinese considered it sad and tragic for women to be divorced and frowned upon them. They were not entitled to inherit any property, nor *Shoes for bound feet shown next to a coffee cup for size comparison. Foot-binding confined women to home and made them safer, less mobile property.* HSIANG-MING KUNG would other families consider them suitable marriage prospects. They could only go back to their families, but their repudiation brought shame on themselves and their families as well. Their alternatives were suicide, begging, prostitution or becoming nuns.

Revisions of the marriage laws in both Taiwan and China alike grant modern Chinese women equal rights on divorce, child custody, and remarriage. Most divorces nowadays result from mutual consent or from insistence by either party, although for women to be divorced due to failure to produce a son still happens occasioinally. The divorce rates in Chinese societies have been increasing (Thornton and Lin 1994). Although marriage laws have been changed, divorced women are still more discriminated against than are divorced men. For example, the court may appoint a guardian in the interest of the children; and court rulings generally favor the father.

Old age and widowhood. The elderly, as the closest living contacts with ancestors, traditionally received humble respect and esteem from younger family members and had first claim on the family's resources. This was the most secure and comfortable period for men and women alike. Filial piety ensured that the old father still preserved the privilege of venting his anger upon any member of the family, even though his authority in the fields might lessen as he aged. His wife, having produced a male heir, was partner to her husband rather than an outsider in maintaining the family. If not pleased, she had the authority to ask her son to divorce his wife. However, due to her gender, her power was never as complete as her husband's.

The life of widows in traditional China was no less miserable than that of divorced women. Although widowers could remarry without restraint, the pressure of public opinion ever since Sung dynasty (A.D. 960–1279) prevented widows from remarrying. The remarriage of widows was discouraged, and their husbands' families could actually block a remarriage. Nor could the widow take property with her into a remarriage. The only way a widow could retain a position of honor was to stay as the elderly mother in her late husband's home. This way, her family could procure an honorific arch after her death (Yao 1983). A widow's well-being was less valuable than the family's fame.

The decline in fertility and increase in life expectancy both contribute to the growth in the aging population for Taiwan and China. Modern industrial life has

weakened the superior status of the aged. The power of filial norms that call for children to live with their elderly parents has declined (Yeh 1997, Xiao 1999). Many aged persons are in danger of being left without financial support. The situation is even worse for aged women because they experience double jeopardy on age and gender grounds. Those elderly parents who still live with their adult son usually have to help with house keeping, child caring, and they sometimes suffer from the grimaces of the younger generation. Elderly abuse is no longer a rare phenomenon. Regardless of revisions of the inheritance laws that guarantee the inheritance rights of widows as well as the elimination of the value of widowhood chastity, remarriage for widows, especially those with grown children, continues to be considered disgraceful. In fact, widowed as well as divorced women in Taiwan experience the highest distress level compared with men and women across all marital statuses (Kung 1997).

See also: ANCESTOR WORSHIP; ASIAN-AMERICAN FAMILIES; BUDDHISM; CONFUCIANISM; ETHNIC VARIATION/ETHNICITY

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HSIANG-MING KUNG

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