Family Organization in China

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I. INTRODUCTION: CENTRAL POINTS

The Chinese family provides an excellent illustrative case for the study of several central issues of concern to anthropologists: the role of the family in traditional agrarian (i.e., peasant) societies; differential social change and its impact on the family; rural urban distinctions in traditional peasant societies; political factors affecting social change.

Role of the Family in Traditional Agrarian Societies.
Three interrelated characteristics of late imperial Chinese society all point to the family's significance, making the Chinese case an excellent illustrative example of the family's role in a traditional peasant society:

- the family indeed was the basic working unit of the Chinese economy, both rural and urban;
- there was in late traditional China a **deemphasis of the hereditary status relationships so common in other peasant societies (e.g.. India's caste system, medieval Europe's hereditary serfs and nobility), and rather a far more "fluid" social system with considerable upward and downward mobility, in terms not of individuals but of families;**
- there was in Chinese state ideology, including Confucianism, a concern and preoccupation with familial relationships and ethics far more pronounced than in most other known peasant societies. Indeed, it was commonly held by traditional Chinese thinkers that harmonious families, organized on the basis of "proper" relations were fundamental to the maintenance of the country's social and political order**. In other words, in China, the world's largest premodern state, attention was singularly focused on society's smallest unit.**

Differential Social Change: Impact on the Family.
The Chinese case also furnishes an important example of the impact of modem political, economic, and cultural factors on family organization. Differential social change is shown by the fact that the traditional Chinese family system of late imperial times largely continued unchanged among the peasantry during the latter portion of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, when the country otherwise was experiencing penetration by the Western powers and undergoing a series of rapid, violent, and remarkable social and economic transformations, culminating in the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949.

Rural-Urban Distinctions in Traditional Peasant Societies.
The case of the Chinese family can be used to challenge the common generalization that traditional peasant societies are characterized by severe rural-urban distinctions, for in China the emergence of such distinctions was precisely a symptom of the traditional system's breakdown. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century onset of Western attacks and penetration, there was a pat tern of family organization common to rural and urban society and to different socioeconomic strata. Later, with growing industrialization, especially in the port cities, and with the emergence of a wage-earning working class and

Western-oriented or radical elites, new family patterns also began to appear, so that there was the beginning of true contrasts, as between rural and urban or modern and traditional.

Political Factors Affecting Social Change in the Family.
Discussions of the family and social change rarely take into account political influences, and here again the Chinese case is useful for introducing the political dimension. Indeed, only after the coming to power of the Communist government were there forces set in motion of general significance to Chinese family patterns in city and countryside alike. Through collectivization, families throughout rural and urban China were transformed from self-managing economic units into groups deriving their income from outside work. Linked to this, and to government education and family planning programs, was the emergence of a pronounced trend toward simplification of family structure and reduction in family size. During the past decade, government policy has been to foster decollectivization, especially in the countryside, so that many economic functions have once again devolved to the family level.

The discussion below deals first with the traditional family, then turns to pre-Communist changes, and finally to developments in the People's Republic.

II. MAJOR TOPICS

TRADITIONAL FAMILY ORGANIZATION

In traditional China during late imperial times the family was the basic unit of economic organization. It obtained its livelihood through the coordinated efforts of its members, who usually would eat together and otherwise be supported by the common family fund. The vast majority of families were farmers, yet as economic and social groups they were organized along the same lines as families whose members might be engaged in any combination of agricultural, commercial, or handicraft activities, or even as those families with wealth, learning, and elite status.

***Peasant and Town Families*.**
The overwhelmingly rural economy had as its foundation the family farm: as tenants or as owner-cultivators, farm families both worked their plots and also were directly responsible for the management of their farm as an enterprise. In the cities and towns of China, non-agricultural production and distribution largely was based upon the family firm or shop. In both city and countryside alike, family management was combined with family labor to as great an extent as possible, so that the family can be seen as an integrated economic unit for the organization and carrying out of productive labor, and also for its management. Under such circumstances, most wealthier families with surplus land found it both easier and more profitable to rent plots to tenant families rather than directly supervise field workers. While their tenants would assume the burdens of such tasks as daily field management, or crop planning, the landlord families would profit from the rent at the same time that they would be able to devote family managerial efforts to a variety of additional entrepreneurial undertakings.

Family Property and Social Stratification.
The close connection between family organization and economic management was reflected in the traditional criteria for status evaluation. On top were those richer and more educated families whose members could avoid physical labor and instead devote their efforts exclusively to the management of their property; in the middle was the largest group, consisting of respected community members who were mainly farmers but also artisans and shopkeepers, who owned and managed land and other property, but had to do physical labor in deriving an income from their holdings; at the bottom of the social ladder were the poor propertyless with no managerial responsibilities, the hired field hands in the countryside or the paid manual laborers in the cities.

Gender Stratification.
The Chinese family was male-centered, most emphatically with respect to the distribution of authority, patterns of residence, patterns of inheritance, and a pronounced preference for male offspring. While women could find ways of expressing their opinions and influencing events, it was mainly the men who directed family affairs, especially these pertaining to farm management or other major economic activities, and the family's overall relationships with the outside world. The father's position of authority was assured from the moment he began to head an independent family unit, but his wife would obtain a degree of authority in her own right only after the passage of many years. Her position was weakest when she was still childless (sonless): it improved when she bore a son; it grew even stronger when a daughter-in-law came under her direction; and by the time she entered into advanced age her authority began to approximate that of her husband, especially in peasant families; if his was the earlier death, full power within the family might sometimes then be in her hands.

The Collective Family Economy.
The family was a group of kin related through marriage, birth, or adoption. The economic foundation of the family was its estate, owned jointly by male members and worked in common by the family as a whole. While the most significant property in the estate was land (owned outright or tenanted under a permanent or near-permanent arrangement), the family could also own residences, farm buildings, tools, livestock, etc. If the family was engaged in commerce, the shop and other assets likewise were family holdings. Associated with joint ownership of the estate was the common budget kept by family members. Persons working family fields or managing the family shop would contribute the earnings to a common fund managed by the family head, who was usually the father, on behalf of the family as a whole. Those working outside for wages were expected to do likewise if they earned a surplus above agreed-upon requirements for subsistence and personal expenses. The family was thus a cohesive unit economically as well as socially, but one strengthened to the extent that it owned property. Once again, there can be seen the tie between the internal economic forces making for family unity and the family's social standing in the community: the property relationships fostering familial solidarity also provided it with status in society at large.

Family Division and the Family Cycle.
In China, marriage as such did not lead to the creation of a new family; rather, it usually

meant that the bride moved into her husband's family unit (in a family in which there were no sons, a daughter might be joined by her husband). New families were created through partition of the family estate; with the division of family holdings there was the termination of many of the social and economic obligations and residential arrangements which previously had held the family together. Family partition brought into sharp focus the dominance of males within the family system. It was the men who shared in the division of the estate, and in most cases married brothers obtained equal portions. Each would use his share as the economic foundation for the new, smaller family he now headed, while it was common for an unmarried brother temporarily to continue to maintain a joint estate with one of his married siblings or with his father. There was, therefore, a cyclical process whereby family formation through division was followed by expansion and then division again.

***Variations in Family Size and Complexity*.**
Families large by contemporary Western standards and including more than one married couple most closely approximated the Confucian ideal of numerous male offspring for the perpetuation of the family line and the maintenance of family unity across several generations. Actually, the large family ideal was achieved only in a minority of cases, and in any event it was inevitable that most larger families would split into smaller units at one point or another. In a village, at any given time most families were small; some included both parents (or one surviving parent), one son, his wife, and their children; others were limited to parents and unmarried children and would thus be similar to many present-day Western families in size and composition.

***Demographic Factors*.**
Especially among the less well-to-do, family size was restricted not only because of divisive tendencies within the family organization but also because of high infant mortality rates. To carry on the ancestral line was a major tenet of Chinese kinship ideology, and male infant mortality was one of the factors leading many families to bring males in through adoption or through "calling in a son-in-law," a form of marriage looked down upon by society at large but often the only option available to a family without sons or to a man without property. One reason for the larger size of richer families was that they were more successful in raising their children to maturity; infant mortality was especially prevalent among the less well-to-do. Family size also could be increased through the practice of polygyny (i.e., a man's having two or more wives at the same time), and the presence of the additional women would greatly increase the likelihood of more children; although polygyny generally was acceptable in China, richer families were far better able to afford it.

***Economic Factors*.**
Yet another reason for bigger families among the wealthy was the tendency for brothers in such families to postpone division of family holdings; if through the effective coordination of family members the family improved its economic condition, the brothers would be less inclined to risk striking out on their own, while in families that were declining, the brothers might be encouraged to demand division relatively early. Thus the forces keeping a family together also illustrate the close connection between greater

adherence to large family ideals on the one hand, and achievement of higher social and economic status on the other. It is not surprising, therefore, that the large "joint" or "extended" family was especially common among China's elite.

***Ideological and Religious Factors*.**
The Chinese imperial state attempted to give strong ideological support to the maintenance of family unity. A family where there were "five generations living together" could receive a special placard from the local magistrate, and for a widow refusing to remarry there might finally be erected a large memorial arch testifying to her virtue. All such official endorsements of behavior reflected the Confucian and state concern with maintaining social harmony on the basis of the proper acting out of particular social relationships. The three most crucial of these relationships were ruler-minister, father-son. and husband-wife, representing the equation of political and familial values, and also the state's focus on social ties involving pronounced super- and subordination. Given less emphasis were two other relationships that classically had received attention along with those already noted, the ties between brothers and between friends, for by late imperial times these implied equality between the parties involved and were less attractive to a state firmly committed to patterns of domination.

The ideological foundation of the subordination of children to their parents was filiality, the idea that the younger generation was ethically bound to support, love, and be obedient to their seniors. Ancestor worship gave powerful support to filiality, for when expressed religiously it was shown to be uninterrupted by death.

Thus family division, especially while the parents were still alive, was considered to go against Confucian ethics, for it was widely understood that most parents would want their families to remain intact. Nevertheless, early family division was common, especially among the nonelite. However, even after division sons would continue to support their parents, and it is therefore important to distinguish family division as a structural factor from the unending obligations of the young toward the old.

NEW SOCIAL FORCES AND FAMILY CHANGE IN MODERN TIMES

In the late nineteenth century there began the development of a new intellectual elite that was the product of Western-style schooling either in China or abroad, a new business class, especially in the Western-dominated treaty ports, and in these same cities a new working class, defined as wage earners in the modem sector characterized by large-scale firms and factories. For all of these social groups, the family had reduced significance with respect to economic management and production. One way or another, they increasingly obtained their income through participation in much larger organizations or arrangements. These new economic circumstances weakened the forces that traditionally had encouraged brothers to remain together and wives to accept subordination. Furthermore, it was precisely these social groups that were most exposed and receptive to the new cultural and intellectual forces entering China from Japan and the West.

Among these groups, therefore, new family patterns began to emerge at the same time that the younger generation, especially, began to agitate for legal and cultural reforms that would sanction and encourage the changes in family life that in fact already were under way. For all of the new groups, among actual changes was the increasing trend toward smaller conjugal (husband and wife) family units, and a growing freedom of choice for men and women with respect to marriage. Among members of both the modern-sector bourgeoisie and the increasingly radical new intelligentsia, the reform of the family system focused on the ideals of marriage based upon free and romantic attachments, and the equality of women with respect to marriage, property, and inheritance. But many members of the bourgeoisie took family reform as a goal quite independent of economic and social change in other areas; for the radical intellectuals and especially the growing numbers of Communist party members, however, significant and nationwide family reform could only occur in the context of total revolution.

In fact, the changes in family organization that did occur prior to the Communist victory were indeed largely restricted to precisely those groups which had been agitating for them. Among the vast rural majority, and even in the non-modern sectors of urban China families continued to be organized along traditional lines. This is not surprising, given that the rural Chinese economy on the very eve of the Communist triumph was overwhelmingly still based on the same forms of technology, cultivation, and organization that had characterized it during imperial times.

THE FAMILY IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

In countryside and city alike the family has remained a basic social unit in China throughout the period of Communist rule. Since the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, the family's continuing viability is attested to by its providing the framework for reproduction residence (in its own household), food preparation, consumption and expenditure, and child rearing. However, Communist programs of education, collectivization, agricultural modernization, industrialization, and urbanization have led to important changes in family patterns.

In the countryside, Communist-initiated land reform in the early 1950s did not as such appreciably change the family-based organization of production. However, the subsequent long period of collectivization (1955-1980) did lead to important changes in family life; some reflected the direct impact of collectivization, while others resulted from government policies which, while not directly involved with collectivization, could be applied more readily due to the much tighter connection between state and society that collectivization facilitated.

The Impact of Collectivization on Family Organization.
Due to collectivization, which transformed rural China's population in towage earners, the farming family largely lost its status as a production enterprise; the old relationship between family size and family wealth no longer applied, for there was no longer the possibility that larger family holdings would encourage brothers to stay together under

their father's authority as one family. Brothers therefore tended to separate from their parents shortly after marriage, often being constrained (usually for a relatively short period) only by the cost and availability of new housing, although it is true that the parents frequently continued to live with one of their married sons (or, if they had none, with a daughter). Collectivization by no means created economic equality among families: rather; the source of inequality was no longer importantly linked to differential wealth in the form of land or other private holdings, but to the differing ratios of wage earners to consumers in different families: the per capita income of families with fewer workers and many children or other dependents to feed tended to be considerably lower than for those where the worker /dependent ratio was reversed.

Changing Family Pattern.
Several factors linked to collectivization led to changes in the pattern of family relationships. The father's authority—which in the past had been reinforced by his management of family property, farm work, and dealings with the outside world—was weakened (as was his wife's authority, especially her control over her daughters-in-law). Rather than depending on the holdings and output of the family farm and other properties, the family's well-being was now based far more on the earnings of individual family members working for their collective unit or in other ways outside the family context. This, plus the fact that working in a collective gave young people an opportunity for daily contact that they did not have in the past, led to a substantial increase in their freedom to marry someone of their own choosing. The old system—whereby parents negotiated the marriage of their son or daughter as an agreement between the two families, so that bride and groom frequently were strangers until their wedding day—was replaced by a variety of arrangements, all of which give young people greater freedom of choice. At one extreme, the marriage still was arranged by the parents, but the son and daughter had to be given the opportunity to meet and agree to the match, while at the other, the young couple became acquainted on their own and asked their parents to prepare the wedding; the latter arrangement presently appears to be increasing in popularity.

The trend towards growing freedom of choice in marriage was in fact given its first major encouragement through the promulgation of the 1950 code concerning family and marriage. In order to meet the novel requirement that a marriage license be obtained, young couples had to confirm their consent to the match. However, it was collectivization that only a few years later provided an enduring context which encouraged the very developments called for by the new code.

Thus during the period of collectivization the weakening of family bonds was linked to the transfer on a major scale of the individual's sources of security and livelihood from his family to his collective unit. However, most parents remained deeply involved in the marriages of their children, even if they had become acquainted on their own. Although now illegal, it was common for a man's parents to give his bride's family a large cash gift, viewed as compensation for their having lost her earning power in the collective (in the past, this gift usually would be matched or exceeded by the dowry the bride brought to her new family; with collectivization, dowry in much of the country had been reduced to a few token items, perhaps because the bride no longer obtained access via marriage to

family holdings of which her husband would have been part owner). Also, the bride usually moved into her husband's house where, for a period at least, she lived with her parents-in-law and, during her free time, helped her mother-in-law with housework. Likewise, the mother-in-law commonly helped raise her grandchildren, thus freeing the wife to contribute to family income through full-time work in the fields of the collective. Interestingly, the traditional practice of the bride moving into her husband's home or village was reinforced informally by local authorities during this period. Because some collectives were wealthier than others, with better land and a more favorable land/population ratio, freedom for either husband or wife to change residence upon marriage would result in an undesirable flow of persons from poorer to richer collectives, where individual earnings were higher. By enforcing the traditional pattern. a more balanced movement between collectives was obtained.

Decollectivization: The Reestablishment of the Family Economy.
In a truly dramatic policy shift, there was initiated in the late 1970s a process of decollectivization, with a result that by the early1980s agriculture in China became once again overwhelmingly an undertaking of individual families, which now rent land on a long-term basis (fifteen-year or even twenty-five-year contracts are common) from the collectives which previously had been the units of agricultural production. On the basis of recent fieldwork and other reports it is clear that this shift has had implications for family organization. Wealthier families are now reappearing in the countryside; some are larger than average and contain married brothers. In some case, therefore, brothers by postponing division, are in fact reestablishing the kinds of family relationships that traditionally were diagnostic of family unity, especially the solidarity of brothers and the overall authority of the father over family affairs. Such strong and enduring "joint" families are once again associated with successful management of the family as an enterprise. These entrepreneurial families are all the more interesting because they survive and flourish in the face of new forces encouraging earlier family division. If collectivization has been eliminated as a force weakening extended family ties, the desirability of conjugal independence nevertheless has been strengthened, for this is now seen as one element of lifestyle enhancement by young people at a time when China is beginning an uncertain entry into an era of mass communications and a new popular culture. Under these circumstances successful family managers must be concerned not only with family enterprises but also with the satisfaction of the demands of the younger generation, such that the conjugal units within the larger family now commonly have far more financial autonomy than they did in the past. For most families, however, the new economic and social circumstances encourage continuation of the pattern that took hold during the collective era, whereby sons separate from their parents shortly after marriage. In any event, since decollectivization the Chinese rural economy has rapidly expanded, and it may be that China's leadership has come to understand that the Chinese family is a remarkable asset that ought to be given freedom of economic expression.

Education and Birth Control.
Agricultural policy aside, the strong impact of government on family life is notable especially with regard to education and birth control. The widespread availability of at least a primary school education means that some of the socialization and educational

functions previously undertaken by the family (often out of necessity—many families simply were unable to provide their children with formal schooling) have now been assumed by the state, which is able to teach basic skills and also inculcate Communist political and social ideology. Since the establishment of Communist rule there has been a marked increase in the prevalence of literacy; this is especially true for girls, who traditionally were denied the educational opportunities available to boys. In recent years, however, there have been reports of decreasing enrollments and attendance at basic-level schools. This may reflect the growing economic importance of family labor (even the labor of children) since decollectivization, together with the fact that only a minority of students are able to gain admittance to senior high schools while even far fewer pass the examinations for college entrance. In other words, there may be a perception that education generally provides little in terms of future economic advantages.

Birth control is a major and generally successful effort of the Chinese government today; in addition to the widespread dissemination of information about birth control, and the means to achieve it, the government attempts to enforce legally stipulated late marriages (no earlier than age twenty-five for men, twenty three for women) and forcefully employs measures to limit the number of children per couple (one in the cities, or two in the countryside, if the first child is a daughter). All other things being equal, the successful continuation of government family policy will pose obvious limits on the development of extended families.

Continuity and Innovation in Urban Life**.**
It is important to stress both continuities and innovations in Chinese cities because many changes in family life linked to collectivization in the countryside had already been anticipated among workers in the modern urban areas prior to the Communist victory. As indicated above, workers in the modern occupational groups, like those in the rural collectives, were not members of families having farms or other enterprises; thus their families similarly were characterized by weaker parental authority and greater freedom of marriage (some city workers in fact were members of rural families with land or other commercial holdings; for them, traditional family organization might still have retained much of its strength). Thus with increasing urbanization and industrialization since the establishment of the People's Republic, the preexisting forces making for the greater independence of the husband-wife unit and the simplification of family organization have been given vastly greater expression, and this has been further reinforced by the strict implementation in the cities of the policy of one child per family.

However, even in the cities the process of family change must be viewed relative to China's own past; in comparison with many Western societies, the Chinese family still plays a more important role in the lives of its members. The elderly in China generally continue to live with one of their children, a situation encouraged by the survival of traditional views concerning children's responsibilities, and also because such views have been reinforced by modern Chinese law, which stipulates that as parents must care for their young children, so must their adult offspring care for them. Also, it is especially true in the cities that housing problems frequently encourage parents to remain together with at least one of their married children. Thus while the old arrangement of married brothers

opting to maintain common family membership is now especially rare in urban settings, three-generation families are still common. The contemporary Chinese family thus represents both the continuity of tradition and adjustment to new forces.

III. ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

1. In light of the economic organization of the traditional Chinese family, consider the proposition that property relationships will vary from one culture to another.

2. How did the cycle of family development influence family size and organization in China?

3. Does the Chinese case confirm or deny the common assumption that modernization leads to similarities in family form and organization throughout the world?

IV. SELECTED READINGS

Baker, Hugh D. R. *Chinese Family and Kinship*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1979 (student reading). A very good general introduction: available in paperback for class assignment.

Cohen, Myron L. *House United, House Divided: The Chinese Family in Taiwan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1976 (faculty background). A detailed and somewhat technical analysis of family organization and development in a Taiwan village where traditional elements still characterized family patterns.

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Watson, Rubie S., and Patricia Buckley Ebrey, eds. *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991(faculty background). Another fine set of articles reflecting contemporary scholarly concern.

Wolf, Margery. *The House of Lim: A Study of a Chinese Farm Family*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1968 (student reading). A well-written and fascinating account of life in a large and undivided Chinese family in Taiwan. In paperback and most suitable as a student assignment.

Wolf, Margery. *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985 (student reading). A discussion of the position of women in the family life and society of the People's Republic of China. Available in paperback and can be assigned to advanced undergraduates.

Yang, Martin. *A Chinese Village: Taitou, Shantung Province*. New York: Columbia University Press, New York, 1946 (student reading). Good chapters on still largely traditional rural family structure. Available in paperback.

Reprinted by permission from Cohen, Myron L., editor, *Asia: Case Studies in the Social Sciences* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1992; ISBN 156324-1560). Myron L. Cohen is Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University, New York, NY.