
The Family in China

The Family in China: Commentary on the “Book of Rites”,
of Confucius. Pp. 52-57

A Summary

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1. Introduction

Liji Xueji's work¹ explains the Chinese notion of civil order. It mentions that the highest principle of moral justice is ‘to return good for good and evil for evil’. To return good for evil is mistaken because that would only encourage the persistence of evil². However, according to the book, the best example of filial devotion consists in working for the benefit of the community and that this is demonstrated primarily by the love one has for his parents. Once this habit of love for the parents has matured it is later adorned with service to one's fatherland and finally crowned with the good reputation that comes with the habit of being a sincere and righteous behavior³. Parents naturally wish that their children fulfill their duties like good citizens and if possible, undertake tasks that benefit the rest of the community. Hence, the conduct of a son who is obedient to his parent's demonstrates filial devotion at the same time⁴.

The Book of Rites states that ***‘The marriage ceremony was created as a bond of love between two families with different family names, to ensure that cult to the***

¹ Li Ji; La Familia en China: planificación o proyecto. Comentario “Libro de los Ritos”, de Confucio. Pp. 52-57

² Ibid., Nylan, Michael (2001), p. 186-187

³ Ibid., Book of Filial Piety, Book I, 1

⁴ Ibid., Cheng Tien Hsi, (1947), p. 169

ancestors and the family lineage continued ...⁵ The book's reference to marriage could only be interpreted as the union between a man and a woman, whereby children give continuity of the family line. For the older generation, the institution of the family is not just a religious institution, but one that is necessary for the ordering of society. We discover here that just as the social order was oriented towards the family, man on the other hand always linked in the present life of marriage which proffered the future life, to the past life of the ancestors.

In the chapter titled "the family model" it is noted that '***The King and Sovereign gives orders to his prime minister to transmit these lessons on family practices to the millions of people who constitute the community***'. In this chapter one encounters a varied range of instructions, which today would constitute what we know as 'the family law'.

If marriage is at the center of all social ceremonies, the rites of combat and the cult to the ancestor follow in that order of importance. The rites and ceremonies in the imperial court are also held in great honor. All these foster the cohesion of the kingdom.

2. Critique: Chinese vs Western Society

In Paragraph 3-6 I will be summarizing the key aspects of family life and society in China according to the Confucius 'book of rites'. But before entering into the details it is good to lay a framework of the key differences between Western European Society and the Chinese. There are many areas well worth elaborating but the length of this work will only allow us to mention just a few. The key areas defining the differences between Chinese society and culture are; family, education, women's right, marriage contracts, individualism versus communitarianism and the effects of these differences.

⁵ Ibid., Libro of the Rites, Part Two. CAP. 41.1 trad. James Legge, p. 428

The Western European society is founded on Individualism while that of china is based on family centered “communitarianism”. Western society emphasizes personal freedom, personal rights, and privacy, while in China the key is family relationships. In china an individual is nothing without family relationships while in Western Society individual contribution to society is most important. This means that in China one can make unlimited demands on his/her family relationship while in Western society this would be seen as intrusive of the others privacy. Only in exceptional circumstances does one have recourse to family relations.

Whereas the cohesiveness of the Chinese society is based on the cohesiveness of the family system the western cohesiveness is based on loyalty to fatherland or community.

Woman in China is submissive to the husband and really has no rights. She is constantly at risk of infanticide. The western society managed to raise the status of women to the level of equal dignity with man and with the same rights in society as those of their contemporary. This has still to be put in place in China.

Western society has made use of intermediate institutions while China is only beginning to make use of them. They have always been seen as a threat to existing power structures hence avoided.

The morality of the Chinese is based on the concept of traditional Confucianism while that of Western European society is formed on Christian foundations. Hence, the key moral principle is Christian charity which is far removed from the Chinese concept of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

We will now proceed to analyze the key aspects of Chinese family centered society.

3. Marriage and family life

We will now consider some cultural aspects of Chinese marriage and family life;

- a) The man, most aptly, is the one who goes to receive the woman. When the fiancée enters the house of the fiancé customary reverence is given to her future father-in-law. She together with her fiancé render cult to the heavens and the ancestors. These rites form the religious aspect of the marriage ceremony. The couple then takes residence in the house of the husbands parents.
- b) The morning after the wedding ceremony, the daughter-in-law should appear before her father and mother-in-law to show her desire to serve and be obedient. She is made aware that she will be the one to continue the family line.
- c) The father is the head of the family and has absolute authority to decide on all family matters. These include who the children are to marry and the punishment to be meted for disobedience. He has the duty to be strict but benevolent at the same time, authoritarian but paternalistic at once. In this way the children will be able to fulfill the rolls expected of them. He has the right to decide on the question of divorce of for their children.
- d) The sons do not have legal rights over their own inheritance. Without this capacity to have, that is a right of the parents in law, it becomes untenable leaving away from the paternal home.
- e) If a son had concubines, and the parents had affection for one of them, the son must treat that concubine as the parents wish.
- f) The eldest brother shows respect towards his parents and behaves as the senior towards his younger brothers. The spouses of the children must serve their fathers-in-law like as if they were serving their own parents. They also must get up to start working as soon as the cock crows in the morning.' The children, for the benefit of its parents, as soon as sings the rooster in the morning, must wash the hands and rinse the mouth, be combed and get dressed'. They go to bed early and may rise at whatever time they wished. They have no fixed

schedule for the meals. When the boy is able to eat by himself, he is to be taught how to use the right hand...'⁶

- g)** The fundamental purpose of marriage is to bear children. The aim of the marriage is to produce life. The children meant prosperity.
- h)** It seems that when 'the Four Books' of Confucius speak of the relationship between husband and wife, they only talk of the distinctions that exist between both; never do they speak of the love among them. 'If there is no union between the sky and earth, thousands of things would not exist. By means of the great rite of the marriage, the generations of men are perpetuated for thousands of years'.
- i)** As far as the imperial family was concerned: the empress formerly divided the harem into six palaces. The first three were occupied by the three eldest concubines; another was for the next nine concubines of lower degree, another for the next 27 and finally the last for the next 81 concubines. All of them received instruction for their domestic work, status and the particular rules of family. The Emperor was to the queen, what the sun is to the moon, and the 'son of the heavens' and his queen are like the father and mother for the community.
- j)** These family practices were meant to favour a cohesive social life, ensure good education of the children and enhance harmony in the family. But also there are some examples of the opposite.

4. Work in the family

The activities outside the house such as agriculture and hunting or war were a man's task. The care of the house was the woman's task. Here she found her own space and tranquility. Confucius created this division of the work.

⁶ Ibid., The Li Chi or Book of Rites, Part I of Two, section 50, n. 6 and 32-37

Without exception, when marrying, the woman left her paternal home to live in her husband's home. This is a primary reason why parents preferred to have male children. The woman did not marry her husband, but rather the husband's family. In China the woman has literary no rights. The feminine ideal is founded on obedience to four virtues. Three of these are; that when the woman is still unmarried, she lives for her parents; when she is married, she lives for her husband; when widowed, she lives for her children. The Chinese woman lives like a good daughter, a good wife and a good mother.

Family life involves a series of subordinations:

- i. The woman must carry herself submissively to the husband,
- ii. The son must be filially devout towards his parents;
- iii. The younger brother must respect and obey the elder brother
- iv. All are to be subordinate to the emperor.

The greatest preoccupation of Chinese parents was knowledge of who their children were to marry before they died. The parents wouldn't know what social class their children would have until they saw with their own eyes what type of woman or man their sons and daughters marry. The whole future of the family depended on the wife. Thus, one of the key responsibilities of parents was to train their daughters very well so that they wouldn't be ashamed of them when they marry them to another family group.

Life is a 'game' and favors no one; everyone will end up dying. It does not help anyone to fight against nature; and therefore it is better to be her ally and age gracefully. The great symphony of life should end with peace and serenity.

Cao Gui maintained that the rules of the *book of Rites* were all designed with the intention of controlling people's behavior. Transgressions against these norms brought with them terrible suffering and punishments.

5. Government and society

The promulgation of laws in China began with the recognition of the relationship between husband and woman. Accordingly, where there is civil society the institution of the marriage forms the cradle. Upon the institution of the marriage society flourishes. For Confucius, just as in marriage the woman is loyal to her husband; this same code of honor commits a man to give loyalty to the emperor. In these two loyalties rests the stability and strength of the nation.

The society would therefore be founded on five relationships; father-son, husband-woman, younger brother-elder brother. The fourth is the relationship between the individual and the sovereign, which takes its model from the family relationships. The fifth is the relationship between friends, which takes its model from the relation between brothers in the family.

No man lives a solitary life. If we thought of an individual and did not consider him a son, or a brother, or father, or friend, then what is he? In China it has always been admitted that a man is more important than the State, but never was he ever more important than the family, because outside the family one does not have 'real' existence. Marriage is a family issue, not an individual subject.

Good men are like a barrier; the great families are like a barricade; the circle of the relatives is like a walled city. We shouldn't allow the fortifications of the city to be destroyed.

When the Zhou took power from the Shang Empire, the empire was very small in comparison to the immense territory they finally conquered. This empire was made up of an alliance of clans, each one having its own city or cities. There were no marriages with people outside their own clans. Although they formed numerous cities, all the inhabitants of the same city shared the same root and had the same family name. The head of each clan had great authority in matters of the internal administration of the

clan and they were only subordinate with respect to the emperor in questions outside the clan with regard to participation in military operations and occupation.

The Zhou prohibited marriage between people of a same clan. With this limitation they encouraged the acquisition of new territories, where they would be able to find men to marry their young women. In the new State of the Zhou dynasty, protagonists in war and in the cities gradually moved from the head of the clan to the head of the family. For this reason it was in the interest of the State to promote family authority. They applied the principle that divided we fall and united we win.

It is difficult to determine to what extent this principle imposed by the Zhou prevented marriage between people of the same family line and how this contributed to the social cohesion of the empire. It is possible that it was one of the reasons for their enormous expansion and cohesion in Chinese society. Through the centuries a great homogenization of the society took place which gives the Chinese race as we know it today its character.

6. Drawbacks to Family Law in China

The new couple continues living and working in the same parcel of land that the parents of the man had. This has often led to feminine infanticide because some parents resist raising a daughter they will lose in marriage.

The contract of marriage in China is between the woman and the family and of the husband: neither the husband nor the woman can repudiate the contract without the consent of the husband's family. The obligations of respect, obedience, submission that the woman has towards her parents shifts to her in-laws.

Traditionally, the marriage was neat, in the sense that it was decided by the parents. It therefore is based on an alliance between families and not by the mutual consent or attraction of the couple. The love and the affection among them is a consequence of the

marriage and not the cause. In not few cases, the husband gives more attention to his mother more than to his wife.

The mother of the husband assumes the great role in the education of the children. The mothers do not give birth to children but 'grandsons'. Male offspring are overprotected and this takes away personal freedom. Obedience is overvalued in contrast to freedom.

The man has 'rights' to abuse the marriage contract, but the woman does not have that right. The woman is totally taken for granted. Following the classic thought of a society constructed on virtues and loyalties, the political system proposes a model based on a mutual correspondence of loyalties between the man and the woman. The other possibility, that we certainly wouldn't propose, is to give to the woman the same rights to abuse the system that man has, that is, to would be to transfer the loyalty of the woman to the State, and not to the husband.

One of the difficulties of this social family system in the east is the lack of intermediate institutions. These institutions help citizens associate outside their family circle. However, the lack of intermediate institutions is not due to the familiar institution or the lack of vision or interest of the citizens to associate with others. The exclusion of intermediate institutions was a policy of State to reduce opposition from these social organizations. The family institution is perfectly compatible with other types of institutions. When man associates with others he makes a greater use of his freedom, decides more, takes options, chooses between different alternatives, etc. As a result through the different forms of associations established, much more value can be created than simply relying on family resources.

The presence of foreigners was not foreseen in the Chinese family system, because foreigners do not assume the nature of a family institution, organized to accept the local system. They came with other ideas of social organizations. The efforts to stop them were not sufficient and the strange thing was that to a certain extent, they were the cause of 'the fall of the empire'.