



Marriage and Family in China

Ideology and Practice

By Lisa Tran

Chinese family in Szechuen ca 1875. Image source: <http://www.heritage-history.com/.../china/zpage035.gif>.

While marriage and family have always formed the foundation of Chinese society, their meaning and practice have varied over time. Ever since the adoption of Confucianism as the official ideology during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), Confucian principles have fundamentally defined marriage and family. In the twentieth century, however, the wholesale assault on Confucianism and the concomitant embrace of Western ideas of monogamy and equality transformed—but did not completely destroy—the institutions of marriage and family inherited from the late Imperial era.

Historically, marriage and family in China have been shaped by three distinct ideologies: 1) Confucianism for much of its history until the early twentieth century, 2) the discourse associated with the May Fourth movement in the early twentieth century, and 3) Communism after 1949. What lay at the center of each ideology—respectively, the clan, the individual, and the state—defined the nature of marriage and the structure of the family for the period during which that ideology was dominant.

CONFUCIANISM IN LATE IMPERIAL CHINA

At the core of the Confucian discourse on family was the idea of filial piety, which demanded from junior family members absolute obedience to their elders. Widely distributed tracts on filial piety, aimed at inculcating Confucian moral values in the population, glorified extreme acts of self-sacrifice, such as a man planning to bury his own son in order to save food for his mother or a daughter-in-law who breastfed her ailing mother-in-law.¹ Even in death, parents were to be honored, as suggested by the popular practice of ancestor reverence. Filial piety was as much a legal as a moral obligation, as evidenced by late Imperial law's punishment of adult sons who were derelict in their duties to provide for their elderly parents.² In upholding the principle of filial piety, late Imperial law even went as far as to essentially exempt from punishment a father who murdered his defiant child.³

While filial piety dominated Confucian-based discussions of the family, the clan structured marriage and family patterns. In China, the extended family, rather than the nuclear family (as in most Western so-

cieties), functioned as the basic family unit. The Confucian ideal of five generations under the same roof envisioned the families of the sons of each succeeding generation all living in harmony in the same compound. In many respects, the family compound served as a physical manifestation of the three principles that most shaped family identity and marriage practices: 1) patrilineality, which traced ancestry exclusively through the male line, 2) patriarchy, which sanctioned a family hierarchy that privileged men over women and the aged over the young, and 3) patrilocality, which required that a wife relocate to her husband's residence upon marriage.

Given the short life expectancy and economic limitations of the vast majority of the population, the social reality often fell short of the Confucian ideal. With most people not living much beyond their thirtieth year, most households contained on average only two or three generations. Differences in economic circumstances also contributed to variations in marriage and family patterns, as will be discussed in more detail below. In general, the wealthy married earlier and had more children, while the poor married later—if at all—and had fewer children. The custom of household division, in which the family property was equally divided amongst all the sons, resulted in households that ranged from the stem family—which included the parents, their eldest son and his family, and their unmarried children—to the nuclear family. Strictly speaking, household division was to occur only after the parents' deaths, but domestic conflicts (often blamed on the daughters-in-law) often led to early household division. Despite the variations in marriage and family patterns in social practice, however, all households in China aspired to achieve, or at the very least to approximate, the Confucian ideal.

In late Imperial China, family was virtually synonymous with the patriline. Membership in the clan—which represented the broader kinship group to which one belonged—was through one's father. Hence, all members of a clan shared a common male ancestor, symbolized by their shared surname. According to law and custom, the most distant paternal relative was considered closer in kinship than the nearest maternal relative, as exemplified by the practice of patrilineal succession.⁴ The lack of a birth son required that an heir be appointed to succeed to

the patriline. In most cases, an heir would be selected from the sons of the deceased man's brothers, and when that was not possible, from among the man's more distant male relatives on his father's side, who had precedence over even the closest blood relatives on his wife's or his mother's side. The Confucian emphasis on the patriline privileged ancestry over blood. Indeed, merely having the same surname qualified a man to be another man's heir; although not related by blood, they shared a common surname was evidence that they shared a common male ancestor, no matter how far distant in the past.



Chinese mother and her two sons. Source: University of California Digital Library.
<http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb5k40047h/?docId=hb5k40047h&layout=printable-details>.

The moral—and beginning in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the legal—obligation to have an heir engendered a number of social customs designed to help a sonless couple save a dying patriline. Some, like adoption, seem familiar at first. In the Chinese context, however, the main purpose of adoption was to select an heir to succeed to the patriline; hence, the rules that governed patrilineal succession outlined above also informed the adoption process. While not all adoptions were made to secure an heir, those that were could be made posthumously. When a man died without having designated an heir, his widow, in consultation with a council made up of the clan elders, could adopt an heir on the deceased man's behalf.

In the practice of combined succession, a man simultaneously married two women. The sons sired with the first wife carried on his patriline, while the sons sired with the second wife represented the patriline of a sonless couple, usually the man's paternal uncle and his wife. In the eyes of society, both wives were of equal standing. Although the law technically forbade bigamy, it tolerated the custom of combined succession, a testament to the importance of continuing the patriline not only for families, but for the state as well.

A more common solution to the extinction of a patriline, and one that avoided suspicions of bigamy, was concubinage. A man who had been unable to beget sons with his wife could acquire concubines, considered to be minor wives but never recognized as legal wives.⁵ The moral justification for concubinage was to allow a married man without sons to fulfill his most important filial duty of carrying on the patriline by hopefully siring sons with a concubine. The concubine's children were considered by law and custom to belong not only to the man but also to his wife, referred to as the main or principal wife. In this respect, the concubine operated much like a surrogate mother—giving birth to children who would be raised by the main wife as her own. By custom, the children of a concubine referred to the main wife as “mother” and called their birth mother “elder sister.” Given the legal and social prerogatives a main wife enjoyed over a concubine's children, it is little wonder that a main wife often did not mind the entry of a concubine into the household, especially since law and custom also upheld the absolute authority of the main wife over her husband's concubines.

Concubinage, however, was more prevalent among the elite, for it required substantial financial resources to purchase and maintain concubines. A more affordable, albeit unorthodox, alternative for families with a daughter but no son was the uxorilocal marriage, in which the husband moved in with his wife's family. In this type of marriage, the children assumed the surname of the wife and carried on the family line of her, rather than his, parents. Here, a literal interpretation of the patriline was set aside in order to maintain the fiction of patrilineal continuity. Although the uxorilocal marriage

fell far short of the ideal, it reflected the desperation of sonless parents and impoverished men to achieve that ideal. For the parents, such an arrangement was often the only way they could save a dying patriline, even if that line was now to be traced through a daughter rather than a son. For the man, it enabled him to get married, a goal not so easily achieved in the face of the scarcity of eligible women. The practice of female infanticide as a survival strategy among the poor and the custom of concubinage among the wealthy combined to limit the pool of available women.⁶ For both sonless parents and poor men, the uxorilocal marriage offered a practical way to approximate the Confucian ideal, even if it was looked down upon by society.

Not surprisingly, the emphasis on the patriline strengthened patriarchal authority. In most cases, the household head was the most senior male member. His complete and exclusive control of all family assets empowered him to allocate family resources as he saw fit, and the indoctrination of Confucian values in each generation was intended to ensure willing compliance from the younger generation. In the Confucian moral discourse, children owed filial piety to their parents, and wives owed obedience to their husbands, as two of the Confucian Five Relationships commanded. Together with the patriarch's monopoly of family resources, the moral authority of Confucianism gave the patriarch virtually complete control over the lives of everyone in his household.

Custom and law combined to strengthen and defend the authority of the patriarch in a variety of ways. Parents arranged marriages to forge alliances with other families, rarely taking into account the wishes of their children. In fact, sometimes the prospective bride and groom would not meet until the day of the wedding. Those trapped in intolerable marriages had little recourse; this was especially true for women, since the provisions for divorce, with their defense of patrilineal and patriarchal principles, greatly favored men. The “seven-outs,” which allowed a man to divorce his wife for her apparently physical and moral failures, ranged from an inability to provide him with a son to behaving in an unfilial manner toward his parents.⁷

The last of the three principles that shaped marriage patterns and family structure was patrilocality, in which a newly wed wife moved to her husband's household. Since law and society considered as incest any marriage between those having the same surname, and since most

villages were made up of people sharing the same surname, for women, marriage also required her to move to her husband's village. Consequently, when a woman married, she not only left behind her natal family but also lost the support network she had grown up with in the village of her birth. A newly wed wife had to start anew, and the first step involved creating her uterine family, which consisted of herself and her children.⁸ Wives with sons, in particular, enjoyed a certain degree of influence, particularly after their sons married, for then they became mothers-in-law and were owed a greater degree of deference from junior family members than women in any other position in the family hierarchy.

While patrilineal, patriarchal, and patrilocal principles defined the nature and structure of marriage and family in late Imperial China, poverty also shaped marriage and family patterns. Driven by economic necessity, hard-pressed parents sometimes arranged a marriage for a daughter when she had not yet reached the age of maturity. The young girl would move to the household of her future parents-in-law who would assume the financial burden of her upbringing. Once the young girl and their son reached the age of maturity, the two would be wed. From a strictly economic perspective, this was a cost-effective strategy for impoverished parents. With one less mouth to feed, the pressure eased slightly for the young girl's parents, and with the money they received for what essentially amounted to the sale of their daughter, they could resolve some of their financial problems. For the parents of the prospective groom, such an arrangement was also financially appealing, if not socially respectable, for such marriages were viewed with disdain. Acquiring their future daughter-in-law as a child guaranteed them a free source of domestic labor. More so than did conventional marriages, these types of arrangements benefited the parents of the husband-to-be, especially the mother-in-law. From her perspective, training a child to be a dutiful and filial daughter-in-law was preferable to engaging in a battle of wills with an adult daughter-in-law. For the future bride and groom, however, being raised together as sister and brother often made the transition to wife and husband difficult.

As the marriage practices described above suggest, the Confucian discourse on family placed the interests of the clan—embodied by the patriarch—above all its members. For centuries, law and custom combined to strengthen patriarchal authority, defend patrilineal interests, and encourage patrilocal residence, all of which in turn reinforced the Confucian family model. In the twentieth century, however, that structure came under fierce attack.

THE MAY FOURTH DISCOURSE IN REPUBLICAN CHINA

The opening of the twentieth century ushered in a new era for China. In the political realm, the revolution of 1911 toppled the weak Qing dynasty and led to the creation of the Republic of China (1912–1949). In the cultural sphere, the May Fourth movement (1915–1925), also referred to as the New Culture movement, introduced intellectuals, students, and much of the literate public to the Western concepts of equality, liberty, individualism, and monogamy. In light of these new



Honor elders, cherish the young, in harmony and unity.

Image and caption source: From the collection of Prof. S.R. Landsberger, Sinological Institute, Leiden University, The Netherlands.

imported ideals, the Confucian principles that had in the past been touted as the backbone of the Chinese family were now portrayed as the source of China's backwardness and weakness. Public discussion on family reform almost universally rejected the Confucian model, embracing instead the "small family" ideal made up of a wife and husband and their children.⁹

The "small family" ideal emerged as an alternative to, if not a replacement for, the extended family. As the nuclear family model gained popularity, especially among the younger generation who had the most to gain from it, the idea of family centered more on maintaining conjugal harmony than ensuring patrilineal continuity. In the May Fourth discussion on family, the interests of the individual, rather than the clan, should prevail.¹⁰ Consequently, marriage should be a private matter between two individuals and not a family issue to be decided exclusively by parents. The principle of equality challenged the Confucian emphasis on hierarchy that had privileged age over youth, and men over women.

Similarly, the principle of monogamy made morally indefensible and legally suspect customs like combined succession and concubinage that had in the past been rationalized and protected in terms of fulfilling patrilineal obligations.

The social reality, however, did not always reflect May Fourth ideals, particularly in the countryside, where traditional patterns of marriage and family persisted. But the introduction of alternative models paved the way for the dramatic transformations that marked the rest of the twentieth century. To be sure, the incorporation of such new principles as equality and monogamy into the legal codes and marriage regulations of the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—the two political parties that controlled major parts of China during the first half of the twentieth century—reflected the influence of May Fourth ideas. Of the two parties, the CCP, which defeated the KMT and established the People's Republic of China in 1949, had the greatest impact on marriage and family.

COMMUNISM IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

Although the CCP was founded during the May Fourth movement, the domestic reforms implemented by the CCP since 1949 reflected a certain degree of ambivalence to the May Fourth legacy. On the one hand, during the height of Mao Zedong's power (1949–1976), the CCP politicized the private sphere through policies that redefined marriage and family to better serve state interests. On the other hand, the CCP's rhetorical commitment to the ideals of monogamy and equality, and its retreat from the private realm since the death of Mao in 1976, paved the way for the emergence in recent decades of marriage and family patterns that reflect the ideals and values of the May Fourth movement.

Under the leadership of Mao Zedong, the CCP implemented a series of policies that politicized marriage and family. With Communism replacing Confucianism as the prevailing ideology and the Party-state replacing the patriarch as the source of authority, marriage and family came to be linked to the imperatives of party policy rather than to patrilineal continuity.



Less births, better births, to develop China vigorously, 1987.
Image and caption source: From the collection of Prof. S.R. Landsberger,
Sinological Institute, Leiden University, The Netherlands.

Most scholars view with skepticism the CCP's claim that it "liberated" those groups oppressed under Confucianism; they interpret the CCP's domestic policies as strategic maneuvers to redirect the loyalty and obedience previously owed to senior members of the clan to the Party-state.¹¹ To be sure, the CCP did crack down on practices oppressive to youth and women. It defended an individual's right to choose a spouse free of parental coercion. It granted women extensive divorce rights. It ended concubinage and other forms of bigamy. But the nature of family reform and the extent to which the Party would intervene in domestic affairs depended on the Party's agenda.

Whatever the ulterior motives of the CCP, its policies had the long-term effect of shifting power in the family from the older to the younger generation and leveling the playing field between husbands and wives. During the CCP's aggressive drive towards collectivization in the 1950s, the financial contributions of young and female family members were formally recognized with the award of workpoints (although women received fewer workpoints than men). The CCP's ideological campaigns during the 1950s and 1960s, which privileged correct political thinking and good class standing, gave youth an advantage over their elders. The CCP's most radical programs—the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution—attacked the institution of the family itself. While the CCP failed to destroy the family unit, it did seriously undermine the authority of the senior generation over the younger generation and of men over women.¹²

Given the dominating presence of the Party-state in the family, its retreat from the private sphere beginning in the late 1970s left a power vacuum in the family. The CCP's assault on patriarchal authority had greatly diminished the arbitrary power of parents and husbands. The opening of China's economy to global market forces, which created

new opportunities for the entrepreneurial, and the resultant cultural liberalization, which lauded the values of individualism, would further tilt the balance of power in the family towards its younger and female members. The one-child policy has also reversed family roles. Where before, children were expected to silently obey and anticipate the needs of their elders, now, it is the parents and grandparents who compete to spoil these "little emperors and empresses."

To be sure, the Confucian values that shaped marriage and family for almost two millennia continue to influence contemporary China. The current gender imbalance in the youth population and the continued practice of female infanticide in the countryside attest to the persistence of Confucian thinking. Providing old-age support for elderly parents is still considered an important filial obligation. But the legal, political, and cultural assault on Confucianism over the course of the past century has muted its influence. For today's generation, the goal of marriage is to achieve conjugal happiness, not to fulfill patrilineal obligations or to meet state priorities; and the meaning of family centers on their children, not their parents. ■

NOTES

1. For some exemplary stories on filial piety, see *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From 1600 through the Twentieth Century*, comp. Wm. Theodore de Bary and Richard Lufrano, 2nd ed., *Introduction to Asian Civilizations Series*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 138–141.
2. Philip C. C. Huang, *Civil Justice in China: Representation and Practice in the Qing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 31.
3. Derk Bodde and Clarence Morris, *Law in Imperial China, Exemplified by 190 Ch'ing Dynasty Cases* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1973), 37.
4. For a detailed discussion of the practice of patrilineal discussion, see Kathryn Bernhard, *Women and Property in China, 960–1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).
5. The law only recognized the first wife the man married to be the legal wife; all subsequent wives, even if married in accordance with the Six Rites—the set of rituals that governed betrothal and marriage—were considered by law to be concubines.
6. Elizabeth J. Perry, *Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China, 1845–1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980).
7. For a comprehensive survey of marriage practices during the late Imperial period, see Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
8. For a discussion of the uterine family and women's strategies to gain influence in the patriarchal household, see Margery Wolf, *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972).
9. For a discussion of the "small family" model in the first half of the twentieth century, see Susan L. Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State, 1915–1953* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
10. A representative work from the early twentieth century that draws from the May Fourth discourse to critique the Confucian-based family order is Pa Chin [Ba Jin], *Family* (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1972; reprint, Boston: Cheng and Tsui Company, 1999).
11. For an exemplary representative of this argument, see Judith Stacey, *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
12. For a detailed discussion of the impact of CCP policy on marriage and family relations in the post-1949 period, see Yan Yunxiang, *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949–1999* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

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