Social Training

Parents were supposed to train their children to fulfill their proper role in Chinese society. For each generation, for each age, for each sex there was an accepted form of behavior which had to be learned. From the age of four to 16 children were taught their future duties. The boys of gentry families were sent to schools or to private tutors. The boys of peasant families were taught field work at an early age. All boys were taught the ancestral rituals. Both peasant and gentry girls had to learn many household duties. Peasant girls, in addition, learned to help in the fields.

Marriage

Marriage was very important in China because only through marriage could the family line be continued. Arranging marriages was the responsibility of the parents. The bride and groom had little to say about the choice of their mate or the marriage arrangements. In fact, they rarely saw each other before the wedding. There was no question of love in arranging marriage in China. Of great importance in choosing a mate was the social and financial position of the family. This was carefully checked before the marriage contract was signed.

A middle man always negotiated the marriage. He or she did the talking and bargaining and carried the messages back and forth. One of the most important questions to be settled was the size of the dowry to be paid by the family of the bridegroom to the family of the bride. The girl’s family used part of the dowry money to buy the bridal outfit. If there were unmarried sons in the family, part of the money was used to obtain wives for them.

On the day of the wedding, the bride was taken to the home of her bridegroom. Here the bride faced a completely new environment. In most cases she had not seen any of the family members before, including her husband. The most difficult adjustment was to her mother-in-law. The mother-in-law was responsible for training and disciplining her daughter-in-law. The husband and wife were not supposed to show affection in public. The young bride spent most of her time in the company of her mother-in-law. The son could not interfere with his mother’s treatment of his wife, because both he and his wife were subordinate to his mother.

Old Age

Old age and childhood were thought of as the happiest times in life. The Chinese looked forward to old age and growing old was pleasant. Age was respected. It was a time of leisure and little responsibility. Children had to do everything to provide for the comfort and happiness of their parents. They were required to support their parents in their old age and to carry out the ceremonial rites after their death.

Women also achieved respect and importance as they grew older. As the years passed, the timid bride became a mother-in-law and head of her own household. Once she had sons and daughters-in-law of her own, all owed her respect, obedience, and support.

The Family in China Today

After the Communists came to power in 1949, they set out to transform Chinese society. This affected family life as well. In China today, people are taught to think in terms of loyalty to the state first and the family second. While families are still held responsible for
teaching the young their roles in society, there are now other places where the young person can learn this. Nurseries, schools, clubs, factory committees, and party groups serve the function that the family did in the past. Young people in China today are no longer dominated by their elders as they were in the past. In fact, young people are placed in many positions of authority. The role of women is also totally different from what it used to be. However, in places with large Chinese populations such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia, many Chinese people still retain the old customs and traditional family patterns.

The Clan

A clan is a group of people who can trace their ancestry back to a common ancestor. Descent is traced on the father’s side. Some clans have thousands of members. Included in the clan are all those people having the same surname who can trace their descent to the common ancestor who first settled in the area.

Since the Chinese people place such value on the family, their dead ancestors are important to them as well. The Chinese kept genealogies—charts and written histories tracing the clan’s descent from the common ancestor and showing the relationship among the members.

Every clan usually had a center where the ancestral hall was built and where most of the ancestral graves were located. Once or twice a year the clan met to honor their common ancestors. The memorial service was to show their respect and reverence. The Chinese believed their ancestors continued to live as spirits. These spirits had the power to help their descendants if they were given the proper rites. If they were neglected, the descendants would suffer misfortune. One reason that the Chinese considered it so important to have sons was that they would have descendants to carry out the proper rites to their spirits after their death.

Clan leaders met periodically to discuss clan matters. Special funds were set aside to take care of orphans, widows, and the sick. In times of crises, such as floods, famine, or war, the clan helped its members. Funds were also used to help educate the promising children of the poorer members. Civil and criminal cases affecting clan members were judged by the clan instead of the government. For serious offenses the punishment was expulsion from the clan.

The Role of Women

Women in Traditional China

An old Chinese proverb states “A wife married is like a pony bought; I’ll ride her and whip her as I like.” This proverb shows how low a woman’s position in China was. There are a number of examples in Chinese history of women becoming empresses and ruling with great power, but women were never considered to be equal to men. The ancient Chinese custom of footbinding was supposed to keep a woman’s feet small and beautiful. At the same time it made it very difficult for a woman to walk, thereby keeping her at home and dependent on her husband. (Footbinding was not practiced among the poor because women had to work in the fields alongside their husbands.) When there was famine, girls were often sold by their parents who regarded them as just another mouth to feed. These
girls were usually used as slaves by the families who bought them. Also during times of famine, people would sometimes kill their newborn baby girls. Children as young as six were often betrothed (promised in marriage). If the girl’s parents experienced bad times, she would be sent to work in the house of her future husband. Young brides were very frequently mistreated by their mothers-in-law. Chinese literature is full of stories of women throwing themselves down wells or hanging themselves. When a woman’s husband died, it was considered unacceptable for her to remarry.

Women in China Today

All this has been changed. Women are now regarded as equal to men and they work and fight side by side with men. In 1950, the Communists passed a new marriage law. This law made husbands and wives equal in the marriage relationship, outlawed dowries and forced marriages, forbade mistreatment of children and infanticide, permitted divorce for women, and gave women property rights. The Communist government also outlawed footbinding. All over China women’s study groups were set up to discuss the new law and inform women of their rights.

Women in the Work Force

Women today feel proud of the useful role they have in building China. The government encourages women to do productive work outside the home. Women receive equal pay for equal work. Today they drive heavy trucks and bulldozers and fly planes in the air force. Half of the doctors in China are women. Chinese women, as well as men, consider their work to be a very important part of their lives. Often women and men leave their families for weeks or months if their jobs require them to go to the countryside, the army, or another part of the country.

Marriage and Divorce

Young people today choose their own marriage partners. The government discourages early marriages. This makes it possible for a woman to get the education she needs. If a woman works for several years before she is married, she will be more independent of her husband. Divorce is discouraged. The court first tries to help the couple work out its problems. Only after many failures to work things out does the court agree to grant a divorce.

“One child per family”

In the past, Chinese women had many babies. Today couples are told that they should have only one child. At study groups, local clinics, and their places of work, people can learn about family planning. Birth control is encouraged and abortions are readily available.

Child Care

After giving birth, a woman worker gets 50 to 60 days off with full pay. If a woman has to stay away from her job longer, she is paid for the days she is out. To make it possible for the woman to return to work as quickly as possible, children can be left in special child care centers. Between the ages of six weeks and 18 months a child is looked after in a “feeding station” in the same place where the woman works. The mother is given time during the day to feed and hold her baby. From 18 months to 3½ years, children are left in nurseries. (If there is a grandmother at home, children are left with her.) At the age of 3½ the child enters kindergarten and stays there until old enough to start school. Sometimes, children are left in the centers overnight if their parents work the night shift or have meetings in the evening.

Women in China have not reached complete equality yet. The great majority of leaders in the government, the Communist Party, the army, and industry are still men. But more and more leadership positions are being taken over by women.
A natural gas worker at a Takang oilfield. Chinese women play an important role in industrial development.
Language and Writing System

Language

Chinese belongs to the Sinitic or Sino—Tibetan language family (Tibetan, Burmese, Siamese, Chinese). Most Chinese speak Kuo-yo (meaning national language), also known as Mandarin Chinese. This language and its dialects are spoken in the northern and western parts of China. Throughout the southern part of China many other dialects are in common use. Educated people in the south usually learn the national language, in addition to the dialects of their area.

All words in Kuo-yu, as well as in all Chinese dialects, are made up of single syllables. For this reason the language is called monosyllabic. For example, *chop suey* means “mixed small pieces”; *chow mein* means “fried noodles”; *kow tow* means “bow the head”; *typhoon* means “big wind”; *tung hao* means “very good”; *tasi chien* means “see you again.” The city Shanghai is a combination of *shang*, meaning “above” and *hai*, meaning “sea.” The name Mao Zedong like most Chinese names is made up of three parts. The family name, which comes first, is Mao. (Mao was a place in ancient China.) Zedong, the given name, consists of two parts meaning “cast marsh,” the same as the first and middle names in America.

The Chinese language uses many homonyms, or words that are pronounced alike but have different meanings, like *to*, *too*, and *two* in English. Communication between speakers would be difficult without a way of making clear differences in the meaning of words pronounced the same way. Context, or the position of the word in a sentence and its use, is one way of making meanings clear. But still another method is the use of tone.

The national language generally uses four tones. In learning a new word in Chinese, it is necessary to know both its sound and its tone. A word pronounced with a rising tone may mean something different from another word with the same sound, but said in a falling tone. The tones give you the feeling that Chinese is sung, and not merely spoken.

Contact with the West has added many words to the Chinese language. The Chinese express their ideas by putting two or three syllables (words) together like *ting hao* (very good). Today, with new and strange terms having to do with science, technology and ideas, the Chinese have borrowed and pronounced foreign words as much like the originals as possible. Sometimes new combinations have been made like *fei chi* (“flying machine”—airplane); *huo che* (“fire wagon”—train); *yuan zu tuan* (“primary unit egg”—atom bomb).

The Chinese Writing System

The Chinese began developing their writing system more than 3,500 years ago. Chinese writing began with the drawing of rough, but recognizable pictures of things. Even today it is possible to guess the meaning of some of the ancient Chinese pictographs. The Chinese have developed a means of expressing ideas in writing by combining pictographs to suggest it.

日 月 明 女 子 好

JIH (sun) + YUEH (moon) = MING (bright)  
NU (woman) + TZU (child) = HAO (good)
Other characters in Chinese writing are composed of a “meaning” symbol and a “sound” symbol. The meaning symbol gives a clue to the meaning, and the sound symbol suggests the pronunciation. Most of the characters in present-day Chinese writing are of this kind.

Chinese writing includes more than 50,000 characters. A great many of these are rarely used, but a knowledge of 1,000 to 1,500 characters is necessary for even elementary reading and writing. This need to memorize so many written characters resulted in widespread illiteracy among the Chinese people.

The writing system has served to unify the Chinese. The same written characters were used throughout China, even though the dialects and therefore, the pronunciation may have been different.

Some words written in Chinese:

Numbers (HI):

一二三四五

六七八九十

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

子女笔食行朋友光人

boy girl pen eat walk friend (PONG-U) light man

Pinyin: The New Chinese Spelling

Early in 1979, a new way of spelling Chinese words was adopted by many newspapers, magazines, and books. At the request of the Chinese government, writers began using Pinyin, which is a new way of “spelling the sounds” of Mandarin Chinese by means of the Latin alphabet. Pinyin was adopted by China in 1958, but English-speaking countries continued to use the older system of writing Chinese words, known as the Wade-Giles system.

It is very difficult to reproduce many Chinese sounds using our alphabet. In the 19th century, Thomas F. Wade, a British scholar, tried to do so. He devised a way of writing Chinese words and names using the Latin alphabet. This system was later modified by H.A. Giles and became known as Wade-Giles. For almost a century, writers everywhere used Wade-Giles as the standard way of writing Chinese words. The Chinese government changed to Pinyin in 1958 because it is supposed to be more accurate in reproducing Chinese sounds.

This change is sometimes very confusing to readers. Books and articles written before 1979 use the traditional spelling. Those written after 1979 use Pinyin. Some use both. A person accustomed to the traditional spelling often does not recognize the same word written in Pinyin, and vice versa.

In many cases, the Pinyin and Wade-Giles spellings are identical. The city of Harbin is spelled the same way in both. In other cases, Pinyin has no resemblance to the traditional spelling. Peking becomes Beijing in Pinyin and the city of Canton changes to Guangzhou. Pinyin makes frequent use of x and q and gives them sounds that can be confusing to English-speaking people. The hyphen used between two personal names disappears in Pinyin because personal names are run together. Thus Mao Tse-tung becomes Mao Zedong.