The Chinese Family

The Importance of the Family in China

The Chinese people have always considered the family to be the most important part of society. The individual thought of himself as a member of a family, and others saw him in the same way. If the individual was successful, the prestige of the family was increased. If the individual was a failure, that brought shame on the whole family. The family was held responsible for the acts of its individual members. Confucianism emphasized the importance of the family. It was in the family that the individual learned his role in Chinese society. Of the five basic social relationships necessary to the right functioning of Chinese society, three were family relationships—the relationships between father and son, elder brother and younger brother, and husband and wife.

Family Size

In traditional China three types of families existed: the small, the middle-way, and the large family. The small family usually consisted of the parents and their unmarried children. The middle-way family was made up of the parents, their unmarried children, and one married son with his wife and children. The large family included the parents, the unmarried children, and the married sons with their wives and children. Sometimes, other close relatives, such as grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and nephews, might live in this family. The head of the family was usually the father, but sometimes it might be the elder brother. He supervised the common property and watched over the moral life of its members.

From ancient times until very recently, the large family was the ideal family. However, only certain wealthy families were able to achieve this goal. The majority of the Chinese people lived in small and middle-way families. There are several reasons why most Chinese were not able to achieve the ideal of a large family. Malnutrition, disease, and famine were very common in China. Many children died at a young age and many mothers died in childbirth. The small amount of land that the poor people possessed was not enough to support a large family. In present-day China the small family, consisting of the parents and their children, is typical.

Family Relationships

Until recently, the parents had almost complete authority over their children. Chinese fathers were regarded by their sons with a great deal of fear. Since untrained and undisciplined sons gave the community a bad impression of the father, Chinese fathers were very strict in training their sons. Relationships between fathers and daughters were usually warmer and closer. The relationship between the mother and her children was generally one of love and affection. She was often the one who protected the children, especially the sons, from the anger of their father. When the grandfather headed the family, he often protected his grandchildren from the father and mother. Children would run to their grandparents to escape from their father's punishment. Often, children received more love from their grandparents, uncles, and aunts than from their own fathers.
it necessary to add to their incomes by handicrafts. At night and during the slack season the whole family would weave, embroider, work with silk, or make baskets and other goods. They sold these products in the nearby towns. Most often the additional money was used to buy the necessities of life, not luxuries.

The peasants rarely left their villages. On occasion, the peasants did go into town, but this was only to buy the few things they could not produce at home or to sell the surplus crops or handicrafts they had made. The peasants had no time or money for the entertainment or luxuries of the towns. Only rarely did they enjoy any form of entertainment. Sometimes, storytellers who roamed from village to village arrived and spent a few days reciting various kinds of tales. On special occasions, theatrical companies came to the villages. The peasants tried to make their festivals, especially New Year, as happy as they could. Weddings were another time for celebrating.

The peasants generally lived in small families. They were often a nuclear family consisting of parents and children. Some peasant families consisted of two generations—the parents residing with their oldest married son. Their tiny pieces of land could not support many people. To preserve this small piece of land, they often permitted only one son to inherit the property. (The gentry usually allowed all the sons to inherit the property equally.) The peasants offered sacrifices to their ancestors when they could, at least once or twice a year. In choosing a wife, the peasant placed the greatest importance on obtaining a strong helpmate. What was looked for in a wife was a strong back, sturdy legs, and firm hands, not a pretty face.

Chinese peasants were independent individuals. They relied on their own labor and physical strength. They solved their problems by themselves and with the help of their sons. When problems arose that they could not handle alone, the peasant turned for help to the gentry or the village elders, but not to the government.

The peasants regarded the government with deep suspicion. They associated it with evil things, such as taking their scarce food for taxes, taking their strength for public works, taking their sons for the army, and often also taking their land away. In general, the peasants felt that the less they had to do with the government the better.

Life for the Chinese peasants was difficult. They worked from sunrise to sunset, yet most of their life was lived in poverty. Malnutrition and disease were common. During periods of drought, famine, or floods, the peasants suffered more than any other group. Yet despite their hardships and suffering, the peasants were conservative by nature. They were content to live out their lives in their accustomed way, rather than try to change the political system. Throughout Chinese history, when life became unbearable for them, the peasants rose up and helped overthrow the government. But they were mainly interested in throwing out the unjust rulers, not in changing the political system. Once the rulers had been changed and the injustices remedied, the peasants returned to their traditional way of life.

It was the hope of those in the peasant class to become members of the gentry class. One way in which peasants could move into the gentry was through education and government service. Bright peasant boys were often helped by relatives to get an education. If they passed the examination and became government officials, they became members of the gentry class. Peasants who became wealthy educated their sons and set them up in government careers. In this way, the sons joined the ranks of the gentry. Sometimes a gentry family might lose its wealth and descend into the peasant class. Thus a certain degree of mobility between classes existed in China.
The gentry lived in large, extended families that sometimes included four or five generations. The head of the family ruled over the family, had complete authority in all matters, and was not questioned about anything he did. There was a specific code of behavior that the members of the family followed in their relationships with each other. A great deal of time and care was spent training the younger members of the family in the proper behavior.

Large families gave the gentry power. Marriage was a way of increasing the power of gentry families. Marriages were arranged to establish alliances among important families. All the family property and wealth were preserved as a unit. The individual members strove to maintain the power and important position of the whole family. However, since there were so many people living together, there was often jealousy and arguments among the family members. While the head of the family was alive, he was able to keep the entire family together as one unit. After his death the property was often divided, and the large family was broken up into smaller, independent groups.

To become a government official in China it was necessary to pass a difficult civil service examination which required years of study. Since the gentry were the people who had the money and leisure to devote to education, they became the scholar-officials who administered the government of China. Since most Chinese peasants lived in great poverty, they were unable to spend years studying Confucian philosophy. As a result, very few of them ever became part of the ruling group.

As government officials, the gentry were able to protect their own interests. By filling all the government posts with their own people, they were able to check the power of the emperor.

The gentry carried out many important political functions. Their services were needed by both the government and the peasants. The gentry assisted the central government in dealing with local matters. They helped the government collect taxes, construct public works, and preserve the peace. When the peasants felt that their taxes were too high or that the government required too many soldiers from their district, they turned to the gentry for help in getting the government to moderate its demands. In cases of land quarrels and feuds, the gentry acted as arbiters. In this way, the gentry carried on an informal government in the countryside. This kept the central government from interfering too much in local matters.

The gentry maintained their important position well into the 20th century. In modern times, they became lawyers, doctors, engineers, and professors. Many found employment in industry, commerce, and banking. However, when the Communists came to power in 1949, one of their first steps was to break up the power of the gentry and take away their wealth.

The majority of Chinese people were peasants. They made up between 80–90 percent of the population of China. The life of the peasants was very different from the life of the gentry.

One basic difference was that the peasants earned a living doing physical work. Their income came mainly from cultivating the land. Some peasants were the owners of their small piece of land. Others were tenants who cultivated the land for landowners. And some were farm laborers who received a salary for farming the land. But in all cases, the peasants worked very hard to produce enough food to feed their families. The peasants also found
behavior is contrary to human nature and harmful. People can be truly happy only when
they are able to express themselves freely.

Since the Dao exists in everything, Daoists feel that they possess all things. They do not
fear or desire anything. Because of their union with the Dao, everything is part of them and
they are part of everything. Daoists have no fear of death. To them, death is merely a change
of form and has no significance. Being at one with the Dao puts one in complete control of
all the things of the universe. Daoists, therefore, feel that they are masters of the world.

In later years, Daoism came to be associated with spirits which the Chinese would turn
to in times of need. Daoists were called upon to select lucky days for weddings and funerals,
to choose sites for housing, and to do other things of this nature.

Daoism had a great influence on the Chinese people and their culture. This can be seen
in Chinese literature and painting. Because of its ideas about nature and the universe,
Daoism has fascinated scholars for more than 2,000 years.

Social Classes in Traditional
China: The Gentry and the
Peasants

The Gentry

The gentry and the peasants were the two main classes of traditional Chinese society.
The gentry were at the top of Chinese society. They were the landowners who possessed
vast landed estates and the officials who administered the government of China. The gen-
try were a leisure class who looked down on any kind of physical work. Because of their
wealth and comfort they had time to engage in social activities and political affairs. They
devoted a great deal of time to cultural activities such as poetry, painting, writing, and the
art of calligraphy or brush-writing.

Economic Life

The gentry received most of their income from the land that they owned and rented out
to tenants from whom they collected rent. The gentry did not cultivate or live on their land.
Instead, they lived mainly in the towns, which were the political and cultural centers. With
the money from the rents they collected they were able to buy luxuries such as paintings,
musical instruments, jewelry, clothing of fine silk, and different art objects. The towns provided
them with amusements and entertainment such as teahouses, restaurants, and theaters.

Gentry families often added to their incomes by opening shops, usually pawn shops and
rice shops. Since the Chinese people frequently lived through periods of economic crisis
and needed ready cash, the pawnshops served as banks and lending agencies. The gentry
kept the interest rates high. The rice shops also brought the gentry high profits. They
would buy the rice immediately after the harvest when it was cheap and store it until it was
in short supply. Then they sold it at a high price or made loans at high interest rates.

Those gentry families who stayed in the countryside and lived solely off their land soon
became quite poor. In each generation, the family property was divided among all the
sons, and after a few generations, instead of one large landowning family there were many
small landowners.
states, conquered the others and unified China. This required harsh methods and absolute control by a single leader. The first Qin emperor, Shi Huangdi, used the idea of legalism to achieve this control and to unite China. Legalist ideas formed the basis of the Qin dynasty, which ruled China from 221–206 B.C.

The Legalist philosophers believed that government and laws had to be based on the realities of human behavior. They believed that people by nature were selfish and not good. Therefore, to maintain order in society, people had to have a strong ruler who governed by harsh laws and threats of punishment. The Legalists believed in strong government control and absolute obedience to authority on the part of the people. They rejected the Confucian ideas that a ruler could influence people by his virtuous conduct and good example. They believed that only harsh laws, punishments, and rewards would insure order, not good examples.

The Qin emperors feared that the other philosophies might undermine their power. Therefore, they outlawed Confucianism and all philosophies other than Legalism. The emperor ordered that the books of other philosophics be burned and their scholars buried alive.

The harsh rule of the Qin dynasty led to its overthrow in 206 B.C. The Legalist philosophy was discredited. The new dynasty, the Han, returned to Confucianism and made it the official philosophy of China. However, some of the ideas of the Legalists became rooted in China and have influenced the action of Chinese governments ever since.

Daoism

The philosophy of Daoism (Taoism) takes its name from the Chinese word Dao (Tao) meaning “The Way.” The three principal teachers of this philosophy were Lao Tzu, Tang Chu, and Chuang Tzu. According to tradition, Lao Tzu (meaning “Old Master”) was the founder of Daoism, but modern scholars have questioned his existence.

The philosophy of Daoism stated that people should live naturally. People are happiest when they live according to their own nature. However, society does not permit people to live naturally. Society forces human beings to live according to rules which are not natural. This results in suffering and problems. To escape from this unhappiness, people must free themselves from all the rules that are forced upon them by society. They must find the Dao, or “Way” of the universe.

It is very difficult to say what Dao is. The early Daoists never defined it because they believed that language could not give its exact meaning. “Those who know the Dao do not speak of it; those who speak of it do not know it.” The Dao is the unseen power beneath all the life and movement in nature. The Dao is present everywhere in all things. It has no beginning or end. The Dao is the force that gives life and a particular nature to all things. It is the nature of a fish that it cannot live out of water. It is the nature of man that he must breathe air. It is because of Dao that this is so. To act contrary to the Dao or nature, for example, to deprive a fish of water or a man of air, can only be harmful.

The Daoists spoke of a golden age in the past when people lived naturally. They wore the clothes they had woven and ate the food they had grown. All the creatures of sky and earth lived together in peace and harmony. People were not restrained by rules or codes of behavior. They lived and acted spontaneously. But as civilization advanced, this situation changed. People stopped acting naturally. The Daoists believed that society corrupted people and separated them from their true nature. To live in society and obey its rules of
Confucius placed great importance on the family. Family life was seen as a training ground for life in society. It is at home in the family that the child learns to deal with problems that he or she will face later in the world. The family is responsible for educating the child to be a good member of society. Confucius emphasized the importance of education, the aim of which is to turn people into good family members, responsible members of society, and good subjects of the emperor.

The state (government) was regarded as an extension of the family in many ways. The emperor and his officials were referred to as the parents of the people. Subjects owed the same loyalty to their rulers that they owed to the senior members of their family.

However, the emperor had duties to fulfill as well. Confucius believed that for society to be well ordered and for people to live in peace and prosper, it was necessary to have a good government and a virtuous ruler. It was the duty of the emperor and his officials to set a good example for the people. The good example of the ruler would transform the people and make them better. Confucius believed that only the wisest and most humane men should rule. He further believed that if the emperor was not morally perfect, heaven would cause the world to suffer.

The emperor also had to maintain the proper relationship between himself and heaven. Heaven was regarded as the governing authority of the universe and the final judge of right and wrong. The Chinese believed that a dynasty ruled as long as it held the “Mandate of Heaven,” that is, the right to rule. The people felt they had the right to say whether or not the ruler had the Mandate. When the Emperor did not see to it that there was water for irrigation, that canal barges could transport rice, that rivers did not flood, and that roads were safe for traveling, the people suffered. When the people suffered, they were sure that Heaven had taken away its protection of the Emperor, so they rebelled. When the rebellion was successful, the Mandate of Heaven was given to the leader of the rebellion. He became the emperor of a new dynasty.

For 2,000 years Confucianism was the official philosophy of China. The only way a person could achieve an important position in the government or in society was by having a good knowledge of Confucianism. To become a government official it was necessary to pass a difficult civil service examination based on the ideas of Confucius. Since it was Confucianism that kept the leaders in power, they were opposed to any changes.

The Confucianists believed that they were the only civilized community in the world and they looked down on the beliefs and cultures of other people. This attitude made the Chinese unwilling to change their way of life when they were first exposed to Western culture. This unwillingness to adopt Western ideas and techniques in the late 19th and early 20th centuries proved to be disastrous for the Chinese.

Confucius himself was not very interested in the ideas of a God, an after life, heaven, and other ideas that we associate with religion. However, when Confucianism became the official philosophy of China, religious functions were incorporated into it. Confucius, together with his ancestors and famous followers, became objects of worship. Confucian temples were built all over China and sacrifices and rituals were performed.

Legalism

Legalism is a philosophy that became important during the period of civil war in China (the period of warring states from 475–221 B.C.). Legalist philosophers served as advisers to the leaders of the warring states. In 221 B.C., Qin (Ch’in), the most powerful of the warring
The earliest printed text in the world, dated May 11, 869 a.d., this is a part of the Diamond Sutra, a prayer to Buddha.

Bronze ritual vessel from the Chou Dynasty, 11-10th century B.C.
Life and Society in Traditional China

Chinese Philosophy: Confucianism, Legalism, and Daoism

The philosophies of Confucianism, Legalism, and Daoism originated between the 5th and 3rd centuries B.C. during a period of civil war and great unrest. It was also a time in which the old ideas and values seemed to have lost their importance, and new ones had not yet taken their place. The people of China had two basic needs: to end the bloody wars between the states and to set up a new social order. Confucianism and Daoism are considered philosophies and not religions because they were not concerned with God or life after death. They were mainly concerned with ways of improving society and achieving a better life on earth.

From the 5th century to the 2nd century B.C., these two philosophies as well as a number of others competed with each other. About 100 B.C., Confucianism was adopted by the government as the official philosophy. For the next 2,000 years, that is, until the 20th century, Chinese life and society were based on the ideas of Confucianism.

Confucianism

Confucius, the Latinized form of the name of Kung Fu-tzu, was born in 551 B.C. and died in 479 B.C. The philosophy that is known as Confucianism comes mainly from the speeches and writings of Confucius. Disciples (followers) of Confucius, such as Mencius, made important contributions to Confucianism as well. The ideas of Confucianism are found in nine works: the "Four Books" and the "Five Classics."

Confucianism is an ethical system rather than a religion. (Ethics deals with human behavior and conduct.) Confucius was mainly concerned with how human beings behaved toward each other and paid little attention to such matters as sin, salvation, and the soul. He developed a system of government, society, and justice which we call Confucianism.

Confucius believed that people, because of their nature, desire to live in the company of other people, that is, in society. It is only in society that people reach their fullest development. Therefore, it is important for people to know how to behave in society, that is, in their relations with other people.

According to Confucius, each person had a specific place in society and certain duties to fulfill. Confucius hoped that if people knew what was expected of them they would behave correctly. Therefore, he set up five principal relationships in which most people are involved. These relationships were (1) ruler and subject; (2) father and son; (3) elder brother and younger brother; (4) husband and wife; and (5) friend and friend. All, except the last, involve the authority of one person over another.

Power and the right to rule belong to superiors over subordinates; that is, to older people over younger people, to men over women. Each person has to give obedience and respect to "superiors"; the subject to his ruler, the wife to her husband, the son to his parents, and the younger brother to the older brother. The "superior," however, owes loving responsibility to the inferior.