

THE FAMILY IN CHINA

Contents

Classical China
20th Century

Classical China

The classical period In several key regions of the world – China, South Asia, the Middle East and Mediterranean – larger and more elaborate civilizations took shape in the centuries after roughly 800 BCE, in what is called the classical period of world history. The key theme of this long period – which would last until the fall of the great classical empires after the 2nd century CE – was the elaboration of characteristic social, cultural and political forms in these separate regional holdings. This was the era in which for example Confucianism was established in China, the caste system in India. Regional characteristics very much included some signature family values and institutions. These took shape within the context of agricultural society. They overlapped as a result in many ways – as in patriarchal authority structures. But they also differed, and some of these differences would persist well beyond the classical period itself, inviting ongoing comparative analysis.

China It was during the classical period that China unified its core geography and ultimately established its characteristic emphasis on relatively strong central government. The country included many different regions and ethnic groups, and these contributed to diverse family structures; a few ethnicities, for example, were strongly matrilineal in a country that overall emphasized patrilineality. Yet despite diversity, including pronounced social inequality, some generalizations about family forms have considerable validity.

Confucianism The Confucian value system, taking shape initially in a period of political instability but later promoted in support of the powerful Han dynasty, strongly emphasized the importance of the family as the essential building block of the social order and a training ground in appropriate political values. In addition to prioritizing families and the importance of procreation, Confucianism stressed hierarchy within the family, with husband and father atop the pyramid and careful gradations not only between males and females, but in terms of birth order. Children were to be trained in elaborate manners that would exemplify family hierarchy, with first-born sons, for example, given a special place to stand in relation to other siblings, in any family gathering.

The extended family China was unquestionably among the societies the placed heavy emphasis on kinship relations within the extended family, usually defined in terms of patrilineal relations. Household varied, between patterns based on coresidence of the eldest son (and his family) with the father, or coresidence of all the male progeny, with the household then divided after the father died (sometimes, with eldest son gaining the largest share). Manners stressed the importance of kin position, often more than individual names, with greetings identifying “uncle” or “third brother”; people outside the kin network, in contrast, were accorded far less attention unless they had some visible social rank or were to be treated as formal guests.

Gender Confucianism easily blended with the common agricultural emphasis on male authority. Daughters were far less esteemed than sons; one family guide urged that baby boys be placed as the side of the parents’ bed, but girls at the base, to demonstrate their inferior position from the outset. Husbands assumed decision-making power over wives. Marriages might be dissolved; a woman might decide to leave her husband and return to her parents, but this was a clear and shameful failure, to be avoided if at all possible. The position of single women was quite unclear, given the assumptions that all would marry. Yet there were complications to the gender hierarchy. In the first place, in an extended family, if a woman survived her husband and had close relations with her sons (particularly, the eldest son), she might wield considerable power, including authority over her daughters-in-law. Second, it has

been suggested that women devoted considerable attention to precisely this close relationship with sons; several stories suggested the obedience that sons continued to profess to elderly mothers despite the fact that, formally, they had the upper hand. Finally, while Confucianism emphasized hierarchy and female deference, it also urged respectful mutuality. A handbook written for women during the Han dynasty by Ban Zhao (an exceptionally well educated woman), that would be republished through the 19th century, urged the different duties and powers of husbands and wives, but insisted that wives who were diligent and deferential deserved good treatment and even an appropriate access to education.

Concubinage Many upper-class men, including government leaders, took one or more concubines in addition to their wives, presumably primarily to assure that they would be able to produce sons. This was not a practice most families could afford to indulge in. However, successful businessmen in addition to the more clearly privileged scholar gentry took up the practice. At various points, Chinese governments sought to regulate concubinage, mainly to protect the position of first wives. Internal family rivalries, and particularly disputes over the treatment of various children, were predictably common. As one statement suggested, “since the mothers have strong feelings, the sons become separate factions”.

Parents and children The authority of parents was strongly emphasized. A saying was, “Parents are never wrong”. Children were urged to ask their parents daily if they were warm or cool enough, depending on the season. In the upper classes (and in exceptional cases beyond this), providing education for sons was unusually important, particularly when the Han dynasty established the beginnings of the examination system for access to bureaucratic positions. The education of girls was unsystematic at best. Gender distinctions also showed strongly in infanticide, which was widely practiced as a means of family population control but also amid the preference for sons; girls were most commonly victim, and it is estimated that up to a quarter of all children born were exposed to death. Fathers expected to arrange marriages for daughters, sometimes in their mid-teens; at the imperial level, daughters might be sent as wives for nomadic leaders, as a diplomatic gesture, to the dismay of the girls themselves. With all this it is important to note moments of warmth, for example with fathers who took a particular shine to an individual daughter, like the man who noted “in the evening when I come home, she would welcome me with a big smile”. Or the poet who commented on the death of beloved daughter as he visited her grave: “How I wept over you, I could see your eyes and face. How could I ever forget your words and expressions.”

After the classical period Many of the key characteristics of Chinese family life persisted well beyond the classical period; some, like the preference for sons, are still operative today. Before the modern period, important changes often carried further values that had already been established. Thus a major shift that began with the Tang dynasty in the 7th century CE was the practice of foot binding, in which the bones in a young girl’s foot were broken so that she could only walk with a halting gait, regarded as a particular sign of grace and beauty. This was not a practice that working peasants could afford to indulge in, because they needed women’s work, but it spread beyond the upper classes particularly in the cities (some parents did it to girls in hopes of attracting attention for them from upper-class males), into the 19th century. Later Chinese governments also set up elaborate awards to commemorate women who defended their sexual virtue, even at cost of death, or widows who remained faithful to their dead husbands.

Study questions

1. How did Confucianism help shape family values and structures in China?
2. What were the main social class differences in family life?
3. How might gender relations in the family in practice prove more complicated than official hierarchies suggested?

Further reading

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20th Century East Asia

General National patterns of family life within East Asia have differed considerably over the past century. Most obviously, the communist revolution in China brought huge and distinctive changes between 1949 and the late 1970s, including some experiments, on rural collective farms, to replace aspects of family life with community facilities. Since then, however, some common trends can be noted across borders, including a rapidly declining birth rate, increasing emphasis on love-based marriage, and growing interest in family consumerism. At the same time, traditional values continue to play a role, often derived from Confucianism, leading to greater stability among families than is true in the West – at least in terms of legal status. East Asian divorce rates average at about 5% of all marriages, a distinctive figure worldwide; divorce still draws considerable social stigma. Overall, family patterns in East Asia may demonstrate the most dramatic combination of tradition and change of any world region during the past century, though the comparison should be debated.

Family size Overall, birth rates have declined fairly steadily in the region, though Chinese policy stands out. In Japan, the postwar government began to encourage birth control in the interests of population balance, accelerating the earlier trend and ultimately leading to one of the lowest birth rates in the world. Revolutionary China touted large families as a national resource for several decades, but then changed course in the 1970s. The famous decree limiting most families to a single child occurred in 1979, though it was later modified to allow a second child if the first born was female, an interesting testimony to the continued preference for male children. The government forcibly intervened in some cases, imposing abortions or sterilization. (The gender preference also showed in a pronounced overall gender imbalance, as some families consigned girls to orphanages or, as some speculate, practiced infanticide.) At the same time, infant deaths declined dramatically, thanks to better public health measures and greater prosperity. The Chinese communist regime quickly moved to improve conditions in this area, as the Soviet Union had done earlier.

Extended families Here too, change occurred in favor of the nuclear family, particularly amid rapid urbanization and housing constraints. In revolutionary China, the regime worked to reduce parental authority in marriage in favor of decisions by individual children. However, informally, extended families continued to count for a lot. Arranged marriage remained fairly common in Japan. In China, many families, seeking work in the cities, left children with older parents back in the village, visiting on annual holidays such as Chinese New Year. Kinship ties, and the special politeness due to relatives depending on their family rank, retained great importance, in contrast to the looser family manners and the greater acceptance of strangers in the West.

Education The growing importance of schooling played a vital role in family life – more, arguably, than in the West. China's revolutionary regime quickly expanded education at all levels, and the trend continued into the 20th century. Japan and South Korea, in the modernized Confucian tradition, emphasized school performance strongly. In all cases, challenging examinations, that determined among other things eligibility for university entrance but also the prestige level of the university available, drew great attention. Parents, particularly mothers, in East Asia carefully arranged extra tutoring (particularly prominent in South Korea), and at the same time tried to give children an opportunity to blow off steam in compensation. Expectations of household duties for children, in the cities, were very limited.

Discipline and emotion Until the 1970s the Chinese communist regime actively disapproved of Western emphasis on love and romance, which might distract from revolutionary devotion. And in general, public demonstrations of affection were not common in the region; severe, unisex costumes also prevailed. However, and in China particularly from the 1970s when foreign cultural influence increased, romantic expectations and dating clearly increased (frequently along with sexual activity). Parenting styles remained fairly strict, though again with periods of indulgence and organized entertainment. Some observers compared Asian "tiger moms" or *jiwa* parents to Western helicopter parents in their careful organization of children's lives, but the former were probably more focused on achievement and less on easing stress. Shaming

continued to be quite acceptable to bring children in line, both within the family and in school – another clear traditional remnant – and physical punishments were accepted also. (Many Chinese parents expected physical discipline in the schools.) Family and community loyalty, rather than individualism, predominated as a childrearing goal, though individualism gained some ground nevertheless. One study of a Chinese village in the later 20th century revealed a striking interest in pursuing individual goals rather than hewing to family traditions and solidarity. Growing consumerism among youth also pulled them away from families to some extent, as in their interest in separate entertainment, fast food dining and so on. Obviously, some complex balancing was involved in the individual-family relationship overall.

Gender Women unquestionably gained new freedoms in communist China, as in Japan from the American occupation onward. In China a steady reform pressure from the late 19th century finally did away with foot binding, a process completed by the communists. However, though this was particularly obvious in Japan and South Korea, gender relations in the family remained markedly unequal. Extraordinary working hours kept many men away from home for long stretches of the day, and at the same time separate male entertainment, including sexual affairs plus widespread consumption of pornography, persisted as well (at least in Japan and South Korea), without at least officially disrupting the marriage. (Overall, sexuality was a less fraught issue in East Asia than in the West.) Family-based entertainments were more limited, though in Japan the tradition of public baths with family members, including children, retained popularity. Work outside the home was common in China, but far more limited in Japan, where gender discrimination and long hours of work made it hard for women to combine occupations with family. (Lest all this seem dire, polls suggested that Japanese women were happier than their male counterparts; and Japanese girls seemed to enjoy greater freedom and self-confidence than their male counterparts.) By the 21st century women's labor force participation began rising, but in some cases only because the women involved were no longer marrying at all.

The elderly East Asian tradition urged respect and care for older members of the family. As one result, social security support for old age was lower than in the West, on the assumption that the family would provide. However by the 21st century, the low birth rate, the rapid improvement in adult life expectancy (among the highest in the world in Japan), plus crowded and expensive housing cut into traditional solidarity. Many old people lived and also died alone, raising new issues for family and society alike.

Study questions

1. What were the most striking signs of the persistence of tradition in East Asian family life?
2. In what ways did the Japanese family retain a patriarchal base?
3. How did the revolution alter family life in communist China?

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