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China: A New Family Portrait

By Henry K. Chang

Consul-General for the Republic of China at San Francisco.

IF THE many changes in China wrought by the forces which have been brought into play by the impact of Western civilization, none has had such a far-reaching effect on the present Chinese social structure as the passing of the family system. Admittedly, China is the last stronghold of the *old* family system, but even here it must give way to the disintegrating force of the world's industrial revolution.

Its origin practically lost in the mist of antiquity, the Chinese family system has been handed down through many centuries virtually intact. The reason for this is that Chinese civilization has been built on the basis of the family.

All ancient records of history give credit for the establishment of matrimonial rites to Fu Hsi, the legendary emperor who ruled China more than five thousand years ago. The use of family surnames came into existence at about the same time. It may therefore be said that patriarchal society in China as well as the Chinese family system came into being during this period.

Marriage, as a ceremony, has undergone a series of evolutions. The so-called "captive marriage" gave way to "marriage by barter" and that in turn was succeeded by "marriage in law," which was arranged and sanctioned by the parents of the contracting parties. In the evolution from marriage by barter to legal marriage, we notice a distinct advance in the position of women, for, in the latter form, the bridegroom was required to welcome the bride personally into his own home and, during the ceremony, he was required to pay homage to the parents and the ancestors of the bride.

Perhaps it is accurate to say that the word "family" as represented by the Chinese character 家 has a different connotation from the ordinary meaning of that word, "family." Until comparatively modern times, the custom has been that, so long as either of the parents was alive, the sons were not to live apart, even after marriage. A Chinese family very often included, besides man, wife, and children, the grand-

Ancient clans disappear and ancestors go out of style as this old civilization unlimbers to absorb social by-products of industrialization.

parents, parents, uncles, and brothers on the paternal side as well as their wives and descendants. It was after the death of the grandparents or parents that custom permitted the descendants to establish separate households. When this happened the eldest brother, by the custom of primogeniture, became the *pater familias*, which position carried with it certain prerogatives in the administration of the family household as a unit. In China one still finds families, each with as many as a hundred members, all of which live as collective units from generation to generation.

UNTIL the promulgation of the new code, the Chinese never felt the need of making wills for the reason that the property rights were so well defined by common usages that the question of distribution of property was relatively a simple matter. When a man died, his eldest son immediately took charge of the family property and he, after setting aside a certain amount for funeral and burial expenses and a proportionate sum for the maintenance of the widow, had the right to distribute the balance, which was usually divided equally among the sons. In some localities, the eldest son was given double shares, and a portion was retained as dowries for the unmarried daughters.

Because of the fact that filial piety was and is esteemed as one of the several basic human virtues, it is the real fundamental reason for the existence of ancestor worship, which is still a prevalent custom of the country. Until quite modern times almost every household, irrespective of class distinction, had a shrine on which were erected tablets representing the dead ancestors, before which sacrificial ceremonies were held at regular intervals every year. This ancestor worship is in no sense a superstition nor does it partake of a religious character. It is merely one of the four principal family rites which are solemn-

nized with ritualistic and elaborate ceremonies, namely, the ancestor worship, the celebration of a member upon attaining maturity, the wedding, and the funeral.

When a number of separate families have a common ancestor, bear the same surname, and live in the same locality, they very often form themselves into a clan. There are several hundred common Chinese surnames, and as a rule each surname is represented by one common clan organization. These

clans are usually located in places where their respective ancestors had their homes for many generations. It is quite common to find small villages entirely occupied or dominated by a single clan. When a clan has held sway for some time in a given locality, often the whole village will take its name from the clan.

Students of sociology have asserted that the Chinese people are the most democratic in the world. Perhaps this is so on account of the large degree of local self-government that has been granted to the

various clans in the administration of local affairs. The continued existence of the Chinese nation as a whole and the self-sustaining nature of the Chinese civilization may be ascribed in a large measure to the solid foundation of the Chinese social structure as supported by the family and clan organization.

WHEN a group of families lived under this clan system *old style*, they enjoyed a large measure of self-government. The executive head of the clan was usually elected from among the senior members of the constituent families. There were no written statutes or codes, but common usages which had acquired the sanction of law, were enforced. These usages in practically all cases conformed to the state laws.

Under such a communal organization, disputes and litigations were usually settled by appeal to a board of elders presided over by the head of the clan, and its award was considered final. Only in most exceptional cases was recourse ever had to the court. So firmly was this régime established that it was considered a loss of dignity for the losing side to appeal to the court for adjudication. So it came about that whenever differences arose, it was the paramount duty of a member of a clan to submit his case to the decision of his elders. That explains

Photographs by Courtesy of Chicago Art Institute.



A Chinese lady with four children and two attendants on a terrace of their home—typical of the traditional home life of the old empire. The original was painted on silk by Lêng Mei, Ch'ing dynasty, about 1710.

why under the imperial régime, the administration of justice was carried on with such very simple machinery, its functions having been mainly those that concerned more serious offences against the state and society.

Until modern jurisprudence was introduced into the Chinese legal system, no Chinese would deliberately get himself into litigation. Irrespective of whether he was on the right or wrong side, to be involved in a lawsuit was regarded as a disgrace. Indeed it might be said that even though a litigant might have had all the merits of the case on his side, yet to be a party to a suit was in itself something not entirely to his credit. It was a general view that to become involved with a wrongdoer constituted a "loss of face."

Each clan has a common establishment in the form of an ancestral temple. Such a temple consists usually of a large central hall in which ceremonies and communal gatherings are held. Communal meetings are held regularly at stated periods or are called on special occasions by the elders of the clan, either for the discussion of business of common interest or for the celebration of some special occasions. At such gatherings only the male adults are permitted to attend. In many respects, a communal gathering strongly resembles the old New England town meetings of North American colonial days.

THE chief functions of the clan government are the settlement of disputes between component families or between the members of the same clan; the collection of funds by assessment for the maintenance of public works and for common defense; the superintendence of the educational affairs of the clan; the maintenance of a common granary as a relief measure in case of bad crops; and, finally, the assumption of the right and duty to deal, in a representative capacity, with other clans in matters of common interest.

Until almost modern times, the clan government was very powerful, so much so that it assumed the right and power of trial and punishment in minor and civil cases that were submitted to it by its own members. This clan government, as it has developed out of the Chinese family system through the many



Cranes are celebrated in Chinese mythology as the aerial steeds of ancestral immortals. This painting by the artist, Shên Nam Ping (1736-96), is symbolic of the ancient virtues of "permanent health and longevity."

centuries, seems to have answered the purpose in the ruder age of rural simplicity, but with the gradual infiltration of modern ideas and modes of life, the social structure of the whole nation is gradually undergoing definite changes and the clan government has outlived its usefulness.

The centralization of the [Continued on page 44]



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chief industries in the cities and towns has been the main cause of the breaking-up of the family system. Emigrations to the less-congested parts of China and even to other countries, the improved means of transportation, and the organization of agencies in various parts of the country by large industries and banking firms have done their share in bringing about these changes.

It may with truth be said that, as far as the Chinese family life is concerned, there have been more definite changes in the last fifty years than in all the preceding ten centuries. Not a few people look back with something like regret to this gradual decline of the Chinese family life, yet most of them will admit that, without some modifications, the system is no longer able to meet modern requirements. It has shown its defects and certain attendant evils that are inherent to it.

THE senior members of a family and clan were burdened with so many responsibilities that it was hard for them to avoid becoming overbalanced in their sense of duty toward their own relatives. And just because it was the obligation of the senior members of a family to protect the minor members, it was not conducive to developing self-reliance. Furthermore, one of the vicious practices associated with this system is that when a member of a family makes a success in life, whether in business or in politics, it falls to his lot to find positions and jobs for a number of less well-to-do relatives and he thus indirectly becomes responsible for their personal conduct. It often happens that some of them will take advantage of the fact that they hold

their position by virtue of the backing of a successful relative. They are prone to become less attentive to work; consequently their backer is accused of nepotism.

Sectionalism is still very strong, particularly in the interior provinces, and has been one of the chief factors that militate against national consolidation. But with the spread of nationalism in China, local prejudices are fast giving way to the clamor for individual liberty and national unity. Moreover, with the codification of China's criminal laws, and the recent completion of the first three sections of China's civil code, family relationships, marriage and divorce, property rights of both sexes, the right of inheritance, etc., are all minutely defined, and are intended by the authorities to supersede the common law and usages which have hitherto prevailed.

It is only natural, therefore, that with the assumption by the government of many of the duties that were delegated to the families and clans, the functions of the government are becoming more onerous and complex. Child labor, public education, the establishment of public nurseries and children's homes, and factory supervision are but some of the new demands on the government.

Imperceptibly, China is bringing herself in line in the march of progress by modifying her institutions to meet present-day needs; and such changes are but the inevitable result of the world industrial revolution which has at last extended to China. While it is true that the social system is still in a liquid state, it does not require any prophetic vision to predict that in time the Chinese family system will become more adapted to the needs of modern industrial life.

When Millions Listen-In

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consequence to the happiness of a nation that a million isolated homes throughout the country should be made vibrant with an event of general interest to them than that a few urbanites be thrilled by an exotic program.

It is the audience, not the station, which counts. First of all, service must be national, which means that a broadcasting system be organized so that mat-

ters of moment to the nation, as well as educational, informative, and musical features, be made available not to the limited audience of a single station or any special group of that audience, but to the greatest possible audience in the entire country.

Moreover, it is essential that broadcasting must serve the interests of good government, education, and commerce,

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