

## WSPÓŁCZESNE CHINY

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### INDIVIDUAL IN A TRADITIONAL CHINESE FAMILY

In this paper I attempt to answer a question of what a family means to an individual according to the traditional Chinese way of thinking. From my point of view the question can be deconstructed into two more specific questions as follows. First: What scope of support can individuals gain from their families? Second: What obligations are the individuals required to fulfill in order to maintain their family identity? Starting with a general overview of the understanding of the individual and the family in Chinese culture I seek to answer the questions mentioned above by examining the roles of the family in the individual's life cycle. My aim is to demonstrate that according to the logic of traditional Chinese thinking, the identity of an individual is shaped by his or her relationships, of which the most influential are family relations. In keeping with the proper family order defined by Confucianism and practiced by the society, certain behaviors or characteristics of the individual are appreciated, such as filial piety (孝 *xiao*), obedience (顺 *shun*), responsibility for family members (当 *dang*), harmony (和 *he*), complaisance (让 *rang*), etc.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, certain features which are essential for individuals in the context of Western individualism are not within the scope of the discussion, *e.g.*, independence, autonomy.

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<sup>2</sup> Connotations of the traditional virtues will be explained later.

## Understanding the individual in Chinese culture

There are different approaches to define the individual in Chinese culture. For instance, one well known theory, proposed by the Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong, is the Differential Mode of Association (差序格局 *chaxu geju*). This theory was created to show the different social structures in the West and in China. According to Fei, in Western society individuals participate in different organizations which make up the society. He named this structure the Organizational Mode of Association (团体格局 *tuanti geju*). By contrast, in traditional Chinese society every individual is likened to a center surrounded by different social ties. Yan Yunxiang, Chinese anthropologist at University of California, argued that this mode not only explains the social structure in Chinese society, but also explains traits of personality of Chinese individuals. He further argues that in China there exists a superior side and an inferior side to each particular social tie. It is through these particular positions that Chinese individuals define themselves.<sup>3</sup> A metaphor of “internal relation” can be applied to describe the relational individual in Asian cultures. The term was used widely by Bertrand Russell, and applied by the Polish anthropologist Stanisław Zapaśnik in examining the cultural patterns in Central Asia. According to his research, in the West people connect to the outside social environment only externally, which means that they keep one’s independent self-identity in all relations in which they participate. However, in Asia the external relation is replaced by the internal relation. This means that an individual is determined by the relations in which he/she participates, and does not exist outside of them. One consequence of thinking in the category of internal relation is that in traditional Asian cultures it is impossible to think about an individual’s existence as independent from the whole, and *vice versa*. The entire society is perceived as a sum of its parts. Ontologically the whole precedes the existence of its parts, hence a part cannot have features independent from the nature of the whole. In such thinking the individual human being is perceived as a part of a whole, in which he/she participates.<sup>4</sup>

Sinologists Hall and Ames apply the term “focus-field self” to refer to Chinese individuals. As they write: “the focus of the self as a field of social relations constituting and constituted by the person is fundamental to our understanding of Chinese conceptions of selfhood.” They claim that “by definition, the focal self cannot be independent.” Indeed, Ames and the sinologist Rosemont, through their study of classical Confucian texts have adopted the term “Confucian role ethics” as an

<sup>3</sup> Yan Yunxiang, *Chaxu geju he Zhonghua wenhuade dengjiguan* [Chaxu geju and Chinese culture view on hierarchy], “Sociological Studies” 2006, no. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Stanisław Zapaśnik, *Walczący islam w Azji Centralnej: Problem Społecznej Genezy Zjawiska*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, Wrocław 2006, pp. 49–50.

alternative to autonomous individualism. According to them, the Confucian individual is a role-bearer. Guided by the Confucian family ethics, *e.g. xiao*, the individual, through performing every particular family role, constructs him or herself.<sup>5</sup> As Krzysztof Gawlikowski explains:

The individuals [in East Asia cultures] are neither autonomous nor distinct. Their existence is subject to the fluctuations which depend on circumstances. Variability but not stability is conceived as virtuous. The criteria of morality and the valuation of what is right, do not come from internal conscience, but each time are determined by social environment. Individuals in these concepts are not less important, but rather important in a different way. They are not autonomous, but unique, because of their unrepeatable status (so no one can be the same as others). The primary matter of humanness in that kind of culture is ritual, and strict observance of it has an intrinsic value. The ritual has a social nature, although when it is deeply rooted in one's personality, it can determine one's behavior even in seclusion.<sup>6</sup>

I do not intend to compare the differences between the above-mentioned theories, because this would be a separate subject. What I aim to demonstrate is the commonality that is shared by each of them. Unlike their Western counterparts guided by individualism, who think of themselves as ontological beings, independent from the group, the Chinese individuals in traditional thinking define themselves through their relations with others. Far from searching for independence, they dwell in a mutual dependency. Therefore, through fulfilling their social roles is how they obtain identity.

### **Understanding the family in traditional Chinese thinking**

Harmony of the cosmos was perceived as a foundation and a model of harmony in the family during most of Chinese history. According to Chinese beliefs, it is constituted by the relationship between *yin* and *yang*. Rules connected with this relation were systematized in Confucian philosophy by Dong Zhongshu (197-104 BCE) during the Han Dynasty. Dong emphasized the hierarchical order where *yang*

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<sup>5</sup> David L. Hall, Roger T. Ames, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture*, State University of New York Press, New York 1997, p. 43.

<sup>6</sup> Krzysztof Gawlikowski, *Jednostka i władza w cywilizacji wschodnioazjatyckiej*, in: *Korea: doświadczenia i perspektywy*, Krzysztof Gawlikowski, Elżbieta Potocka (eds.), Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń 2001, pp. 23–24.

is always superior, active and bright, while *yin* is always inferior, passive and dark. In consequence, *yang* is associated with the dominating role of a father and husband, while *yin* is associated with the submissive role of a son and a wife. Thus, according to these cosmological principles, Heaven rules over the Earth, the Sun dominates the Moon, and so in the family, a father rules over his son, and a husband rules over his wife. These two principles together with a third principle that the ruler has an authority over the ministers, are known as the Three fundamental bonds (三纲 *sangang*), the Confucian term for the most important human relationships and social virtues. Any violation of these principles is a violation of the law of nature. It should be avoided, as it can lead to disharmony within the universe. It is worth noting that the father-son and husband-wife relationships serve as patterns for other family relationships. Consequently, each pair of these relationships is based on a “superior-inferior” model type. That is the so-called Generation-Age-Sex order within the family.

It is generally accepted that the family is the most fundamental social institution in traditional Chinese culture. It is the foundational unit of the society in many different respects, *e.g.*, economic, administrative, that of social interactions. The imperial Chinese scope of kinship was defined by the legally recognized Five grades of mourning system (五服 *wufu*). Hence, theoretically, the person’s family members should at least include *jiuzu* (九族), which groups descendants from a common great-great grandfather down to his great-great grandchildren<sup>7</sup> towards whom he/she has family obligations. It is commonly recognized that for the Chinese people, the ideal family situation is one where all relatives live together and share a common property (共财同居 *gongcaitongju*). Such a community can be described by a Chinese term *jia* (家), which can be loosely translated into English as “the family”.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, the scale of the family is the number of its members who are actually living together, sharing common property, and recognize themselves as a family. As has been demonstrated, the scale of the family varies widely. It is generally recognized that the scale of the traditional Chinese family was limited by its property. During most of Chinese history, this limitation made four-generation or five-generation family an ideal rather than a fact. However, despite

<sup>7</sup> There are different interpretation of *jiuzu* in Chinese history. The “older interpretation” (古文说 *guwen shuo*) defines the nine grades of relations in the paternal line. That is the definition used in this paper. While the “contemporary” school interpretation (今文说 *jinwen shuo*) defines the nine grades of relations to be four generations from the paternal line, three from the maternal line, and two from the wife’s line. Yet another interpretation suggests that “nine” in Chinese culture is considered simply as “a large number”. More explanation of this topic, see Chü T’ung-tsu, *Law and society in traditional China*, Mouton&Co, Paris 1961, pp. 16–17.

<sup>8</sup> *Jia* refers to a family house or other place of residence, and is also the name of a group of kin with no regard to its scale. In some places, the term is also used as a verb which refers to setting up a home.

being of different scale, the small extended-family, lineage or highly organized lineage and clans were sharing the same structural principle.<sup>9</sup> We could observe the family being treated as a group also in the traditional Chinese law. First of all, the family enjoyed a high degree of legal autonomy under imperial China's juridical system. It was regarded as a fundamental unit of the overall legal and political system. On the one hand, the head of the family was regarded as the supreme authority of each unit and was responsible to the government. Troubles within the family would first be judged by the head of the family, and only when he was unable to settle it, the problem was brought to the judicial authority. The head of the family had the right to punish its members for a wide range of domestic offenses.<sup>10</sup> It is generally assumed that the people were encouraged to use the informal organs of control and conciliation to resolve social conflicts.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, since the authority of the family head was recognized by law, he was personally responsible for the obligations of his family towards the State, as well as for the actions of individuals belonging to the family.<sup>12</sup>

In criminal law, Qu Tongzu found that protecting the family system was reflected in many specific regulations. Several general principles can be found. First, committing a crime against family members was more severely punished than if committed against non-family members. Secondly, within a family the severity of punishment for committing a crime was determined according to the closeness of the relationship between the suspect and victim, which was defined by the Five grades of mourning system. This means that the closer their relationship was, the more severe their punishment, and *vice versa*. The first principle shows that the law regarded the family as a unit, not only by protecting its integrity from the outsider, but also by respecting and by encouraging the defined generation-age-sex hierarchy within. As shown in the case of punishment for filial impiety, juniors and seniors were not treated as equals under the law. The social superiority that seniors had over juniors was confirmed by law. Analogically, wife and husband were not equally treated either, with the latter enjoying superiority over the former.<sup>13</sup> The most convincing argument that the family was treated by law as a group would be

<sup>9</sup> Fei Hsiao-t'ung, trans. Gary G. Hamilton, Wang Zheng, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society, a Translation of Fei Xiaotong's Xiangtu Zhongguo*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1992, p. 84.

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed list of offenses which could be punished by the family head see Wang Liu Hui-chen, *The Traditional Chinese Clan Rules*, J.J. Augustin, New York 1959, pp. 6–7.

<sup>11</sup> David. C. Buxbaum, *Chinese Family Law in a Common Law Setting: A Note on the Institutional Environment and the Substantive Family Law of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia*, "The Journal of Asian Studies" 1966, vol. 25, no. 4, pp. 621–644.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 40.

<sup>13</sup> Chü T'ung-tsu, *Law and society in traditional China*, Mouton&Co, Paris 1961.

the “collective responsibility”. Collective punishment was the most brutal, but seldom exercised, implementation of laws. For instance, one of the most serious punishments was Nine familial exterminations (诛九族 *zhu jiuzu*) – the extermination of the offender together with all his kin up to the ninth degree of affinity. Historically, it has been used to denote collective capital punishment for a state offender.

Another proof that the family was recognized by the society as a group was the existence of the “family face”. Anthropology studies show that the concept of face as a cultural phenomenon does not exist solely in the Chinese culture,<sup>14</sup> however, its “face culture” is very common and well-developed. The Chinese sociologist Zhai Xuewei claims that filial piety is the fundamental motive and value of the “face psychology”. He argues this point from three aspects. First of all, Chinese people believe that each human being after death will meet with his/her deceased ancestors. This belief poses the following questions to every Chinese person: Will I have the face to see my ancestors? Secondly, as the family reside together and share common assets, the individual’s success is directly shared by his/her family members (沾光 *zhanguang*). Thirdly, the Chinese individual saw him or herself as a part of the unlimited family, his/her role to make the ancestors proud (光宗耀祖 *guangzong yaozu*).<sup>15</sup> Thus, “for one’s deceased and living ancestors/seniors, including those from their family, lineage, village, county or country etc., a Chinese must have a sense of mission to fight for the honor of all the related people, to let them have a big face”.<sup>16</sup> Or at least, one should avoid committing any serious mistakes to lose their ancestors’ face.

### Life cycle within the family: control and support

Birth, marriage and childbearing, education, professional career, and death are crucial issues and events in one’s life cycle. A simplified model of a descendant’s life cycle within a large-scale family is helpful for analyzing the support which an individual gains from his/her family and the obligations he/she has towards it. Hugh D.R. Baker devoted one chapter of his book *Chinese Family and Kinship* to discuss this topic, focusing mainly on the classical Confucian-style family in twentieth century Hong Kong. He started from the term “continuum of Descent”,

<sup>14</sup> The concept also exists in other cultures, e.g., Japan, Korean, Thailand, India, Russian, Italy, Poland, etc. Polish ethnologist Sławoj Szynkiewicz claims that in about 60 languages and their cultures there exists the concept of face as a synonym of human esteem.

<sup>15</sup> Zhai Xuewei, *Perspectives on Chinese “Face” Psychological Motives and Social Representations*, Beijing Daxue Chubanshe. Beijing 2011, pp. 109–126.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 126.

where he compared the descent line to a rope, which began in the remote past, and stretched on to the infinite future; male individuals were viewed as fibers of the rope. So long as at least one fiber remained, the rope existed: "the fibers at any one point are not just fibers, they are the representatives of the rope as a whole." It was made clear that under this family system the existence of the family is put first before the existence of individuals, and the meaning of the latter was to prolong the former.<sup>17</sup> Through its organization, the family manages to dominate most of the important stages of an individual's life cycle.

According to Baker the perpetuation or strengthening of the family line was the principal meaning of every male's life in a Confucian family. Furthermore, the birth of a male guaranteed his parents' status within the extended family, since having a son was one of the main duties of a filial son, and daughter-in-law. Baker also noted the extent to which parents were cautious about a boy's life that they dared not believe he was alive before he was thirty-days old, at which point they organized the Full Month Feast for him. Before reaching adulthood, the family also played tricks with his name in order to protect him from evil forces which were seeking to injure the male child. At the same time, they seemed disinterested in female children, or in animals. For heirless families, adoption of boys from within close kinship, was used to solve the problem.

Betrothal and marriage were for an individual the next most important life event. Baker argues that the family was responsible for the issue, rather than the individual himself, as romantic "love" did not hold a place in traditional culture. He cites as an example a story from the famous Chinese novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, in which the main hero discovers only during the unveiling after the wedding ceremony that he was cheated by his family, and was not marrying the girl he loved. Baker goes on to explain that romantic love, which would raise the intimacy of the relationship between a man and a woman, and might partially put the Generation-Age-Sex order in the family in disorder, was therefore excluded by family ideology from the range of possible options. An individual hardly had any relevance in the family's decision about his marriage. That is why the family did not need to wait for the son to grow up to the marriageable age to choose a spouse for him. Sometimes, a ghost marriage or other forms of marriage with the absence of the groom were arranged. Marriage of an individual was a very meaningful event for his family because of several reasons. First, the male descendant's marriage could enable the family to continue its family line; next, the family would have a daughter-in-law who was supposed to devote herself to helping with the running of the household; what is more, the marriage could bring the family a chance to forge a link with another wealthy, powerful family. This fact was also

<sup>17</sup> Hugh D.R. Baker, *Chinese Family and Kinship*, The Macmillan Press, London 1979, pp. 26–27.



confirmed by the wedding ritual in which worship of the ancestors of the groom's family played a significant part.

As the individual became older, he gradually gained power which corresponded to his age. His birthdays which had not been necessarily celebrated before, now became a celebrated event. If he became the family head, his birthdays would be celebrated by his descendants as a family ceremony. It was the son's responsibility to take care of his aged parents. Thus, when the family property was equally divided among the sons, one asset, usually in the form of the land, would be set aside in order to be used as life insurance for the aged parents.

The last major event in a male individual's existence was his death. He was briefly remembered as an individual but the mourning and the funeral would focus on the family and its continuity. The funeral was arranged as a display of the family wealth and strength. To organize a funeral was a major burden for the poor. Mourning was carried out strictly according to the rules of the previously described *wufu* system, regardless of the affection to the deceased. After death, the deceased became an ancestor, a symbol reinforcing the family unity worshiped by the descendants. Again, Baker made the point that the death of the individual was treated as a family issue rather than that of an individual.

One matter which the researcher did not mention in his book was the great effort that the family made in order to prepare its young males for the Imperial Examinations. The fundamental purpose of the examination system was selecting officials from a broad social base. It consisted of three degrees of examination, and had a democratic character since admission to the exams for the first of these three degrees was open to any man in the empire, save for a small group composed of jailers, executioners, actors, and a few others who had no social standing in Chinese society.<sup>18</sup> Successfully passing one level of examinations was the prerequisite to enter the next examinations. Finally, those who obtained the highest examination degree were eligible for official appointment. Being appointed as an official simultaneously meant becoming wealthy and achieving high social prestige. In fact, scholar officials formed the elite strata of the society in ancient China. As Paul F. Cressey from the University of Chicago writes: "there was but one socially distinguished profession, that of the scholar and China never developed an important hereditary noble class. Each generation had to stand on its own merits and prove its right to place and privilege."<sup>19</sup> Family, lineage, clan, the rich and the poor alike were engaged in training and sending their young male descendants to take the examinations; the rich and the elite aimed at maintaining their social statues, and

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<sup>18</sup> Paul F. Cressey. *The Influence of the Literary Examination System on the Development of Chinese Civilization*, "American Journal of Sociology" 1929, vol. 35, no. 2, p. 255.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 254.



the poor aimed at social upward mobility. The examinations were said to have represented the focal point of state interests, family strategies, and individual hopes and aspirations.<sup>20</sup> The State focused on organizing and codifying the examination competition. The actual educational process in classical Chinese, and the training for the examinations rested with the private domain of tutors, academies and lineage schools.<sup>21</sup> Arthur H. Smith (1845-1932), an American missionary and author of several widely read books presenting China to foreigners, in his *Village Life in China: A Study in Sociology*, explained in detail how school life looked like in Chinese villages at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> His observations confirm the claim made by Cressey that the goal of private education in ancient China was to pass the State examinations.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Smith gave a detailed introduction of the complicated and lengthy process of organizing and participation in the Imperial Examinations, in a chapter “Chinese higher education.” Sending a man to attend the examination was a family strategy and investment, especially when his family was not rich, as the fee which was spent on him, including the exam fee, accommodation and travel fee, were all very expensive. Furthermore, those men who devoted themselves to passing the examinations did not work as normal laborers would, as they had to concentrate on their studies. Thus, being conscious of how much the family had sacrificed for him and how great were the expectations it had of him, it was a great trial for a man who failed to pass the examinations.<sup>24</sup> Smith records an extreme example:

... in that test he was dropped one number, missing his degree by this narrow margin. His grief and rage were so excessive as to unbalance his mind, and for the greater part of his life he has been a heavy burden on his wife, doing absolutely nothing either for support or for his own.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Benjamin A. Elman, *Political, Social, and Cultural Reproduction via Civil Service Examinations in Late Imperial China*, “The Journal of Asian Studies” 1991, vol. 50, no. 1, p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> Arthur H. Smith, *Village Life in China: A Study in Sociology*, Fleming H. Revell, Edinburgh and London 1899, pp. 70–109.

<sup>23</sup> Paul F. Cressey, *The Influence of the Literary...*, p. 253.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 110–135.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 116–117.

### Female's status in the family

According to the Three fundamental bonds, a woman's inferiority to a man could be compared to *yin*'s subjection to *yang*. The subordinate position of a woman towards a man is more specifically presented in the "Three obediences" (三从 *sancong*), also known as the "Three dependencies" – a teaching for women, said to have been expressed for the first time in *Yili*, *Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial*, a Confucian classical text devoted to the social behavior and ceremonial ritual under the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE), as practiced and understood during the Spring and Autumn period (771–476 BCE). According to the *Yili* teaching, throughout their lives women are subject, first to the men of the family into which they are born, and next, through marriage to the men of their husband's family, and finally, during the widowhood, to their sons.

Compared to a man's life, a woman's life is of lesser importance in the Chinese system of kinship. Her birth is not such a great event for the family as that of a boy. There is no Full Month Feast for a girl child. After marriage, the woman loses her right to worship her own ancestors and must worship her husband's ancestors. This symbolizes her losing the membership in her original family and becoming a member of her husband's family. The only exception to this rule was when a husband married into his wife's family – this was a solution practiced in families which had no sons but only daughters. In such a case, the woman kept her original family membership. It should be noted that the acceptance of this practice varied between dynasties and regions.<sup>26</sup> To fulfill her role of a good daughter-in-law, a woman had to give birth to a male child and maintain a good relationship with her mother-in-law. Otherwise, she ran the risk of being divorced. There were seven situations, including the two described above, when the husband could legally demand a divorce. The other five of the "Seven outs" (七出 *qi chu*) were: wanton conduct, garrulousness, theft, jealousy and ill-will, and incurable disease. It is worth noting however, that according to historical research, very few divorces were effectuated using the seven conditions.<sup>27</sup> A wife was protected by the "Three not outs": observing the three years' mourning period for either of her parents-in-law, her husband's family becoming wealthy after she was married into it, and having no home to return to. A woman could gain respect through her children, she might also win authority with age. Especially when she became a widow in the senior generation, the authority of the family rested with her, at least ritually. However, it would not be difficult to imagine that, in practice, females in traditional Chinese families exercised different degrees of authority also through informal influence

<sup>26</sup> See Arthur H. Smith, *Village Life in China...*

<sup>27</sup> See Chü T'ung-tsu, *Law and Society...*

on their husbands, sons and fathers etc., or through informal female ties, as documented by some researchers.<sup>28</sup>

### Individual within the family: obligations

The previous few passages demonstrated close ties between an individual and the family by describing the control of the latter on the former, and the support that the former received from the latter. However, their closeness can also be observed from another perspective, that of an individual's obligations towards the family.

The greatest duty is filial piety, where maintaining the family through having at least one male descendant was the most fundamental obligation. Marriage served this aim. One had to marry in order to continue the family line. If the wife did not give birth to a son the husband could take one or more concubines. It was not unusual for his family, and even his wife, to persuade him to do so. Those who did not leave any male descendants were considered unsuccessful in life and had no face in the community. There are several terms in the Chinese language specially used to describe the situation of being without offspring, *i.e.*, *juehou* (绝后), *juezhong* (绝种), *duanle xianghuo* (断了香火). And, there are also terms which describe the reality or expectations of having many male descendants, for instance *rending xingwang* (人丁兴旺), *duo zi duo fu* (多子多福). The former means a flourishing population in a family, especially of male descendants, and was used as the Spring Festival couplets horizontal scroll.<sup>29</sup> The latter is an old saying meaning that the more children a family has, especially sons, the more happiness it has.

There were many consequences of these family obligations, such as gender inequality, female infanticide, the instrumentalization of marriage, etc. However, from my point of view, the most essential one is that which concerns the identity of an individual. In the case of a boy, upon his birth he would be treated as a continuation of the family, but not as an independent individual. All his life would be bound to his family, and his fate was inseparable from the family's fate. The identity of a girl was that of a future wife of another family. In other words, we could say that a Chinese individual existed only in the context of the family.

<sup>28</sup> See *e.g.*, Sara L. Friedman, *The Ties that Bind: Female Homosociality and the Production of Intimacy in Rural China* in: *Chinese Kinship: Contemporary anthropological perspectives*, Susanne Brandtstädter, Gonçalo D Santos (eds.), Routledge, London 2009, pp. 95–111.

<sup>29</sup> Spring couplets are used as traditional Chinese New Year's decorations expressing happiness and hope for the coming year. Typical Spring couplets are written in Chinese calligraphy on red papers. They consist of a pair of vertical couplets hanging on both sides of the wall beside the door and a horizontal or a vertical scroll, above them.

Another obligation was the responsibility towards other family members. The responsibility could be economic, social and legal. First of all, in traditional families their members share a common property. The financial success of one family member directly influences the living standards of other family members. Another common expectation was that richer members of the same clan would help the poorer family members. Social responsibility is a more complex issue. As noted previously, in social interactions the family was seen as a unit. The behavior of each of its members could impact the “family face”. There are Chinese terms which illustrate this well, i.e. *guangzong yaozu* (光宗耀祖 – make one’s ancestors illustrious), *guangyao menmei* (光耀门楣 – bring honor to the family name), *baihuai menmei* (败坏门楣 – disgrace the family), *shijiao* (世交 – friendship spanning two or more generations). Lastly, some of the ancient Chinese laws stressed an individual’s responsibility towards his or her family members. One example is that in ancient China juniors could ask to be punished as substitutes for the elders in their family. “And sometimes a criminal was pardoned or had his punishment reduced when his son, grandson, or younger brother asked to be punished in his stead.”<sup>30</sup> As jurist of ancient Chinese law, Qu Tongzu wrote: “This was not stated in the law, but the sovereign usually gave special consideration to such cases to encourage filial piety and brotherly love. Sometimes the request was granted and the junior was permitted to assume the punishment of his elder. Sometimes the elder was pardoned or had his punishment reduced.”<sup>31</sup>

The third significant obligation of an individual towards his or her family was to keep harmony in relations with other family members, in accordance with the hierarchy and Three fundamental bonds. An individual should follow them in order to perform his or her family roles well<sup>32</sup>. As previously mentioned, through performing such roles individuals could gain and maintain their identity. However, the ultimate aim of the principles mentioned above was to maintain harmony within the family. Harmony was highly valued in the Chinese hierarchy of values. Even today it is this a character that is seen as a decoration in the main halls of people’s homes. Another traditional Chinese saying *Jia he wanshi xing* (家和万事兴 – harmony in the family makes myriad successes) illustrates this point well.

Because harmony was highly valued, direct conflicts between family members were to be avoided. However, in reality, as Arthur H. Smith writes, every family contains in itself the seeds of disunity. If they do not in all cases produce their

<sup>30</sup> Chū T’ung-tsu, *Law and Society...*, p. 74.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 74.

<sup>32</sup> In the relationship between the father and son there should be affection; between husband and wife – attention to their separate functions; between the old and the young – proper order.

harvest, it is because they are mercifully blighted or counteracted in their development.<sup>33</sup> For instance, individuals within the traditional Chinese family are encouraged to be complaisant (让 *rang*). According to the Confucian philosopher Mencius, modesty and complaisance form the principle of propriety.<sup>34</sup> And the latter is the core of a proper social order according to Confucianism. “Kong Rong concedes the pear” (孔融让梨 – *KongRong rang li*) is a traditional story for children which illustrates the emphasis on complaisance in a traditional Chinese family:

Kong Rong (153-208), was a prominent writer and the 20th generation descendant of Confucius. It was recorded that when Kong Rong was four, each time when he and brothers ate pears, he took the smallest one to eat. Being asked for the reason, he answered that he was the youngest, therefore he should take the smallest. He was praised by all his family members.<sup>35</sup>

This story was included in: *Sanzijing*, or the Three Character Classic, a Chinese Classic text, probably written between the twelfth and thirteenth century by Wang Yingling (1223-1296), a preceptor of his private school, and served as a first formal educational text for children at home until the second part of the 19th century. In the book, the story was written as follows:

融四岁，能让梨。(Rong si sui, neng rang li)

When Rong was four, he was able to concede the pear.

It is worth noting that the *Sanzijing* serves as a good example of how Confucian moral education was valued and practiced in ancient China. The text was written in triplets of characters for easy memorization. With illiteracy common for most people at the time, the oral tradition of reciting the classic ensured its popularity and survival through the centuries.<sup>36</sup> With the short and simple text arranged in three-character verses, children learned many common characters, grammar structures, elements of Chinese history and the basis of Confucian morality, especially filial piety and respect for elders.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Arthur H. Smith, *Village Life in China...*, p. 324.

<sup>34</sup> *The feeling of modesty and complaisance is the principle of propriety* (辞让之心，礼之端也 – *ci rang zhi xin, li zhi duan ye*) *Mengzi*. Gongsunchou I. <https://ctext.org/mengzi/gong-sun-chou-i/ens> [accessed 27.02.2018]

<sup>35</sup> *Sanzijing* (三字经 – Three Character Classic), Shijie Tushu Chubanshe, Beijing 1995, p. 16. The original story was collected in the *Book of the Later Han*, written by Fan Ye (398-445), covering the history of the Han Dynasty from 6 to 189 BCE.

<sup>36</sup> See Arthur H. Smith, *Village Life in China...*, p. 82–84.

<sup>37</sup> Norman Kutcher, *Mourning in Late Imperial China: Filial Piety and the State*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, p. 27.

## Conclusion

In traditional Chinese society, a family provides an individual with an identity and material support through his or her life. The individual gains his or her identity through performing family role ethics in each particular relationship with other family members, according to the hierarchy. The family is perceived as a whole. Each of its members has an obligation to maintain and make the family more prosperous, by upholding filial piety, meeting his or her responsibility to other family members, and maintaining harmonious relations with them. In fact, “obligation” may not be a proper term to use here. For individuals who are raised in such a culture pattern, these family ethics are perceived as natural. They were encouraged to be highly filial, obedient, responsible to the family, and to be ready to sacrifice themselves for the family’s sake if necessary. On the other hand, being autonomous and independent are personality traits which do not have their natural place within the traditional Chinese family.

## Abstract

The article analyzes the relation between the individual and the family in traditional China in a historical and cultural context. It concludes that the family, besides being a source of material support, provides a sense of identity, which is obtained through the performance of family role ethics. The ethics consist in fulfilling one’s specific obligations, such as filial piety, obedience, responsibility for family members, etc. Through practicing them since childhood, individuals shape their personality in a way that enables them to participate in a hierarchical, patriarchal family structure and maintain harmonious relations with its members.

**Keywords:** individual, family, group, obligation, China