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The Role of Family in Modern China: A Blended Compressed Transformation of the Private and Public Spheres

The study of family formation has been a central subject in the social sciences since the birth of sociology in the nineteenth century. The reason for this early academic interest in family studies lies in the fact that the family – through its connection to social actors such as the workplace, neighbourhood community or the state on the one hand, as well as to the individual on the other hand – can serve as an important reflection of the path of modernisation in a given society. According to its multicontextual social embeddedness, family studies have both addressed internal relations within the family such as marital and parent–child relations, and discussed its external relations to the political and economic spheres, as well as to the emerging civil communities in modern society. Linked to modernisation, family has frequently been used for cross-national studies in order to compare the different paths of social transformation from traditional to modern. Such studies often centre around the question whether the family in various societies is converging into a common Western(ish) family model on a global scale, or rather it is maintaining unique and local (occasionally even pre-modern) characteristic features during the process of modernisation.

Given its complex role in society, the present paper addresses the role of the family in modern China, with a special attention to its contribution to the reconstruction of the private (family) and ‘public’ (in other words non-private, such as the political, economic and civil society) spheres. The Maoist period (1949–1976) with its stress on workplace relations over family ties and the post-Mao era (especially from 1978) that restored the family as an important social unit not only provide a remarkable glimpse into the varying relationship between the family and society, as well as the family and individual, but also suggest a path of modernisation different from the apparently unilinear Western model. The case of China rather shows a certain type of compressed moderni-

sation where the reappearance of pre-modern elements mingle with modern and post-modern features. This blended characteristic feature of family conditions is further deepened by the stark contrast between rural and urban families, and this makes the generalisation of the family's social role in contemporary China even harder to achieve. Yet, it can be argued that the role of the family in today's China shows growing importance in the midst of a strongly marketising socio-economic environment.

Decline of the family in the era of collectivisation

China's post-war history is largely divided between the Maoist period, characterised by collectivisation, and what is called the 'post-Mao era', hallmarked by marketisation after the country adopted its reform and opening up (*gaige kai-fang* 改革开放) policy in 1978. The two historical periods greatly affected the role of the family in China's post-war social transformation, albeit in opposite ways. Whereas the Maoist period weakened the role of the family in society, the succeeding era rehabilitated the family as the basic social unit. This kind of shift between political orientations towards the family is not unique to countries that experienced socialist modernisation. During the first decade (1917–1926) of the Soviet Union (called Soviet Russia up to 1922), the institution of family was heavily weakened and transformed to the degree that it eventually lost its previous function in the society. This in turn resulted in an increased number of children outside of family control, who often formed gangs and engaged in criminal activities. Given this problem, the family as an important social unit was restored thereafter, especially from 1934¹ although – due to the lack of precise instructions in the classical socialist canon – it remained a dilemma as to what characteristics should be attributed to the family in a socialist society.

The first (so-called Maoist) period of post-war China underwent a process similar to that in the Soviet Union in regard to the family. The family was viewed as an institution of the past and considered to be an obstacle to the people's liberation from feudal social conditions. In the spirit of communalism, collective ties were stressed over family bonds, and from the late 1950s this was supposed to be achieved through the creation of workplace-related units. This was all despite the fact that the family had long been rehabilitated in the Soviet Union (the then model country for China) by this time. The people's commune in rural areas and the so-called *danwei* (work unit) system in urban settings not only guaranteed permanent employment, but also tied the workers to the designated

¹ Somlai 1990: 35, Horváth 2008: 62.

work unit. Their function however went beyond that of a simple workplace, and they rather operated as multifunctional social entities. These socioeconomic organisations provided schools, hospitals, post offices and other welfare services in both rural and urban China – though at a much lower level in the case of the former.² In doing so, they also aimed to strengthen the connection of the individual to the community, as well as to the state, at the expense of family ties. Under these circumstances both the people's commune and the *danwei* system significantly blurred the boundary between the private and public spheres. One of the most remarkable attempts to weaken family relations was the ban on private kitchens³ that was replaced by centralised canteens. This blurred boundary was even more obvious through the spatial (physical) differentiation of urban *danwei* compounds from the 'outside' world due to the walled barriers built around them. Within these walled compounds people worked and lived together, and since basic social needs were provided on the spot, people rarely needed to leave their residential space. The proximity of the workplace and residence both helped people achieve a certain degree of home–life balance and create a kind of local culture that in turn increased a sort of sense of belonging in spatial terms. On the other hand, the connection between the various compounds was less pronounced, and this led to an increased social separation between them.⁴

The intention to weaken family relations along with individual autonomy in early post-war China reached its peak time during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Ancestral halls and family records became the target of attack, and this – alongside with the previous restriction of several types of private properties – significantly hindered the process of family formation. However, this political dependence also had unintentional and positive effects on family relationships. Despite the then fierce criticism of the traditional family in general, certain pre-modern values, such as those emphasising the importance of mutual assistance and cooperation, as well as harmony and stability within the family, were not directly attacked. This suggests that the position of the state policy at the time regarding the socialist modernisation of the family was not entirely clear.⁵ However, there were at least two additional factors that had positive effects on family bonds. First, life expectancy at birth extended at a remarkable pace from about 45 to 64 years between 1960 and 1976 in the early post-war period⁶ due to the improved health care and food provision in general. This significantly increased the possibility of the formation of cross-generation

² Liu 2008: 67.

³ Dikötter 2010: 54, 60, 286, 311.

⁴ Chai 2014: 184–185.

⁵ Wu 2016: 175.

⁶ Macrotrends.

relations. Second, most adult men, as well as their sons were tied to their place of birth due to a restriction on migration, and this further enhanced the possibility of increased support between different generations within the same family.⁷

A similar paradox could be seen in regard to family values too. Whereas early post-war China intended to foster the connectedness between the individual and community, as well as the individual and the state, the increased possibility of cross-generational interactions opened the way to realise traditional family-centric core values. In contrast to the quasi-survival of cross-generation ties, marital relations went through a larger transformation. In accordance to communist ideas that viewed traditional marital patterns as a hindrance to women's liberation from feudal conditions, a new marriage law was introduced as one of the earliest reforms of socialist China. The Marriage Law of 1950 banned several earlier practices related to marriage such as child betrothal or the institution of concubinage, prohibited marriage by proxy and allowed women to file a divorce independently, at least in theory. In doing so, it emphasised four fundamental principles: free mate selection, equality between men and women, heterosexual monogamy and the protection of both women's, children's and the elderly people's legal rights.⁸ All this was done in the spirit of egalitarian ideology.

Despite the fact that China's early post-war family policies aimed to blur the boundaries between the private and public spheres, it can be argued that the former managed to retain a certain degree of autonomy. A remarkable example is the state's policy towards fertility. During the 1950s, no consistent policy regarding fertility had as yet emerged. At the time of the establishment of socialist China, the new state took a sort of pronatalist position for the first few years. This was replaced by a call for the necessity of certain family planning in 1953 that lasted until 1958 when a pronatalist position appeared again and lasted until 1962.⁹ In the early 1960s the state decided to promote birth control in urban settings,¹⁰ and after 1974 in rural areas too, though the degree of control at this time appears rather modest compared to the more general restriction that was introduced in the late 1970s.

As suggested by the aforementioned examples, the relationship between the family and state, as well as the family and individual in early socialist China varied according to the investigated aspects of the relations involved. These relations rather show a sort of blended picture containing a number of contra-

⁷ Davis – Harell 1993: 1.

⁸ Wang – Weisfeld 2018: 110.

⁹ Qu 1987: 36–38. It is worth noting that population theory studies were banned between 1957 and the early 1970s. Thereafter, however, population research restarted, and it became a vibrant academic field of research (Qu 1987: 37, 39, 1988).

¹⁰ Davis – Harell 1993: 14.

dictions. The inconsistent impacts on cross-generation relations, along with a radical state intervention into marital traditions and – compared to this – a relatively mild control over fertility all caution against an overgeneralisation of the role of the family in the Maoist period. It can be argued however that alongside the rather blended and paradoxical situation into which Chinese families were embedded at this time, the family as an institution was not completely destroyed. Instead, it managed to survive the period of collectivisation and communalisation, in spite of the fact that the family was not viewed officially as the basic social unit in early socialist China. The family survived the Maoist era, however, by the end of the period, the family pattern changed radically, and it was no longer identical with what it had been before.

The quasi-rehabilitation of the family in the era of marketisation

A new era started in 1978 with the promotion of reforms to revise the previous period of collectivisation, and, to open up a market economy. The shift to marketisation, which was in contrast to the former socialist planned economy, had serious social implications that also affected the role of the family. The most remarkable feature of marketisation can be seen in the weakening of state control, as well as state support, over various segments of the society, and this generated a second reconstitution of the private and public spheres in China's post-war history. The marketisation of the economy affected family ties conversely to the previous Maoist period. In association with a weakening state control over the private sphere, family ties were given greater significance, along with greater responsibility in terms of social sustainability.

China's social transformation after 1978 was best manifested through the decline of the people's commune in rural areas and the *danwei* system in urban settings that had previously functioned as a direct connection between the individual and the local (working) community, as well as the individual and the state in the era of communalism. On the other hand, this decline took a rather radical and abrupt form in rural China, where the system of the people's communes was turned into a structure of townships and towns in 1983.¹¹ In contrast, the *danwei* system in urban China went through a fairly gradual transformation. This gradual change is partially reflected in the decreasing urban population residing in *danwei* (work unit) communities. Whereas close to 95 per cent of the urban working population lived in *danwei* compounds in 1978, about 65 per cent still resided in such communities in the early 2000s.¹² This 30 per cent

¹¹ Christiansen – Zhang 1998: 6, Christensen – Levinson 2003: 223.

¹² Chai 2014: 184.

seems to be significant. However, a greater change to the *danwei* system was the shift to emphasising its professional (working) function over its previously determined social function. Among other things, public housing was replaced by a new housing system of private ownership, and this generated a mingling between former *danwei* members and new residents. The *danwei* communities also took various strategies in the highly marketising society. Certain *danwei* communities that were located in the city centre were relocated after having sold their compound site. In contrast, there were also *danwei* communities that managed to maintain their original locations by having successfully adapted to the challenges of the new era. In addition to these spatial restructurings, the former walls surrounding the compounds were removed and/or changed in a way that minimised the physical boundary between the compound and the outer world. All such changes resulted in a gradually individualised and diversified form of life within the compounds, and an obvious decrease in the sense of spatial belonging.¹³

The decline of social organisations established in the Maoist period as a result of the market economy after 1978 strengthened the role of the family in terms of social sustainability. The quasi-rehabilitation of the family as an important social group has also been emphasised in Chinese academic studies since the era of reform and opening up. Whereas social sciences had been made voiceless in the Maoist period, Chinese scholars started to emphasise the social role of the family from the 1980s, by naming the family the cell of society (*shehui de xibao* 社会的细胞). The growing significance of the family is also manifested in the increase of values related to family in the new era. The data of the World Values Survey (WVS) database suggest that there has been a significant change to the view that the family is important in life. Whereas the total number of respondents who chose “very important” and “rather important” has been well over 90 per cent since the late 1980s, there has been a remarkable increase in those selecting “very important”. The ratio of the respondents saying “very important” was just barely above 60 per cent for most of the 1990s and early 2000s, this however gradually raised to almost 90 per cent from the middle of the 2000s.¹⁴ This high percentage seems to be valid across all social strata in contemporary China, except for the upper class that shows about 65 per cent in the case of those choosing “very important”. The sample size for this social stratum, however, is very small and possibly does not accurately reflect the proportion of those opting for “very important”. In contrast, the regional distribution of those saying “very important” varies greatly. The lowest ratio was measured in Shanghai (73.2 per cent), whereas the highest proportion can

¹³ Chai 2014: 186.

¹⁴ Inglehart et al. 2020.

be seen in Guizhou province (96.1 per cent). There is also a striking difference between large cities such as Shanghai and Beijing (94.3 per cent).¹⁵ However, it remains uncertain whether these regional differences are caused by the survey sampling or reflect actual differences. If the latter, then the question needs to be asked what causes this divergence. Either way, it can be argued that the majority of people in contemporary China value family to a very high degree, regardless of which social strata they belong to.

Family relations and family autonomy

In association with the undergoing transformation of the private and public spheres, freedom in the formation of marital relations was (further) increased in the new era. The amendment of the marriage law in 1980 ruled that a decline of mutual affection between the spouses provided sufficient reason for filing divorce.¹⁶ This amendment, which indicate that marital relations are now at least partially based on conjugal affection, can be interpreted as a major step towards the recognition of the family as a private autonomous social group. Two decades later an even greater relaxation of the existing law took place in regard to marital relations. From 2003, couples no longer need permission from their employers for getting married or divorced. This also includes a provision that no health examination is required prior to marriage either.¹⁷ Though the first marriage law in socialist China emphasised free choice in regard to mate selection, this mainly referred to suppress traditionally arranged marriages, at least in theory. Nonetheless, couples who planned to get married were required to get permission from their employers, and thus they had not enjoyed complete autonomy before the amendment in 2003. The new era, although not immediately, changed this restriction resulting in marriage and also divorce becoming a private matter.

Alongside this increased autonomy regarding marital relations, a quasi-retraditionalisation took place in terms of wedding practice from the 1980s. In the era of collectivisation the use of lavish wedding expenses including bride price¹⁸ were denied from an ideological point of view in the spirit of puritanism, though it must be noted that the implementation of this denial was more successful in urban settings than in rural areas. In contrast, during the first decade of the market economy the use of lavish wedding practices increased. Notwithstanding,

¹⁵ Haerpfer et al. 2020.

¹⁶ Xia – Zhou 2003: 237.

¹⁷ Feng et al. 2016: 96.

¹⁸ Bride price refers to a sum of money or quantity of goods that is given from the groom's family to that of the bride.

there seemed to be differences in this quasi-retraditionalisation in both social and regional senses. The practice of high wedding expenses, such as lavish dowries, tended to be relevant when there was a need to promote the interest of the family through a daughter's marriage.¹⁹ Given the widening financial gap across the various social strata today, it can be assumed that this financial investment in weddings may be a practice even more relevant in contemporary China than before.

The recourse to lavish wedding expenses gives an interesting glimpse into the revitalisation, as well as the transformation of intergenerational relations in the era of marketisation. The intensifying intergenerational relations become conspicuous in other aspects too. For instance, there is a tendency for a more balanced locality of young married couples in terms of patrilocality and matrilocality. Whereas patrilocality seemed to be the norm in the past, this is obviously weakening in contemporary China. Young couples today usually reside in the proximity of either the husband's parents or the wife's parents, although, this bilateral characteristic feature of locality, accompanied by mutual support, appears to be more true for urban families than rural families.²⁰ The proximity of location to the parents' residence, however, is an important feature that suggests an intensive intergenerational interaction. In fact a quasi-return to intensive interaction between the parents and their adult (married) child(ren) can be seen in urban families regardless of their social strata in the era of marketisation. This strengthened vertical family tie in urban settings is noticeable in both a financial and emotional sense. With the decline of the *danwei* system's social function, family members became more reliant on each other than in the era of collectivisation. This appears to be more true for rural families from the early 1980s on, due to the abrupt break with the people's commune system, whereas urban families were also exposed to a similar challenge in the long run. For instance, the increased cost of childcare and medical expenses, as well as the soaring urban housing costs are all making financial co-investment between parents and adult (married) child(ren) for each other's needs indispensable.²¹ Similarly, though mate selection is basically based on the free choice of the individual, parents in urban families often attempt to search for a marriage partner for their adult child. In doing so they aim to match not just the interests of the two persons for marriage, but also that of the two families, as was the practice before the era of collectivisation.²² It must be noted that the strengthening of vertical family relations often takes place at the expense of the horizontal spousal relationship. This

¹⁹ Davis – Harell 1993: 10–11.

²⁰ Xu – Xue 2016: 42–43.

²¹ Davis 2019.

²² Tian – Davis 2019: 337–338.

quasi-return to previous practices is at the same time being accompanied by the aforementioned shift from patrilateral to bilateral intergenerational relations. As an outcome of the long-lasting one-child policy, the relationship between parents and their adult daughter today bears the same importance as the relationship between parents and their adult son in urban China.²³

Birth policy as a countermove to family autonomy

Despite the obvious decrease of state concern over the private sphere in general, a specific aspect of family formation was kept under a remarkable state of control in the era of reform and opening up. The introduction of a strict universal one-child policy in the late 1970s, as a further extension of the previous birth control policy, has had a profound effect on family dynamics and is without precedence in history. There is an ongoing debate about whether the ideas for this strict fertility control originated on the side of scholars, represented by Song Jian 宋健, an aerospace engineer and demographer, or from within China's inner political circle. Song Jian himself allegedly was introduced this idea in 1979 when visiting Europe and after reading two books related to population growth and survival. He considered that the ideal population for China would be between 650 and 700 million for the next 100 years, and he argued that this could only be achieved through a universal one-child policy.²⁴ On the other hand, there are claims stating that the political decision for a universal one-child policy had already been made before Song Jian's idea became known in the political sphere.²⁵ Either way, the one-child policy required a direct intervention of the state in the private sphere. This policy was more rigidly implemented in large cities than in rural areas where a second child was permitted from the 1980s on, provided that the first-born child was a daughter. Thereafter this policy mainly remained unchanged until the end of the 2000s when – due to the gradual distortion of China's demographic structure – a series of amendments were made in regard to the one-child policy. First, in 2009 the policy was amended so that a second child was allowed for couples where both the husband and the wife were an only child. In 2014 the restriction was further relaxed so that a second child was permitted if at least one of the couples was an only child. In 2016 the universal one-child policy was finally replaced by a general two-child policy. As the last part of this series of legal relaxation, a three-child policy was introduced in May 2021 whereby a couple is now allowed to have three children.

²³ Davis 2019.

²⁴ Greenhalgh 2005: 266.

²⁵ Wang et al. 2012: 119–120, 127. Note no. 6.

The implementation of the one-child policy raised concerns in regard to its effectiveness as early as the late 1970s. Notwithstanding the need for a full investigation to answer this question, in general, it can be argued that the classical path of social transformation from traditional to modern suggests a natural decline in the birthrate to two children per a couple. This occurred in association with the rise of economic prosperity and without any particular birth control imposed from above. Perhaps a more pertinent question for China now is whether the recently introduced three-child policy can meet the expectations for solving China's demographic problems in the future. Whereas the two-child policy showed some immediate positive effect with a rise in the birthrate in 2016, the birthrate subsequently declined again over the following years. Whether the previous legal norm of allowing only one child has in general become a quasi-cultural norm for young couples today will be an interesting line of enquiry for future investigators.

The formation of new family types

The transformation of the private and public spheres during the era of the reform and opening up has had a deep impact on the formation of family types in contemporary China. According to Chinese national census data (1982–2010), whereas the proportion of single-person households was stable at around 8 per cent in the 1980s and 1990s, there was a sudden increase of such households to 13.7 per cent (2010) during the 2000s. In contrast, the ratio of the nuclear family here broadly defined to include both childless couples, couples with child(ren) as well as single-parent households, decreased from 67 per cent (1982) to 59 per cent (2010). Within this demographic, the proportion of couples with child(ren) decreased from 48.2 per cent (1982) to 33.1 per cent (2010), while the ratio of childless couples increased from 4.8 per cent (1982) to 18.5 per cent (2010).²⁶

The trends above throw light upon changes in the Chinese family which seem to be following a path similar to the pluralisation of the family perceived in Western countries today. However, we should exercise some caution here as this data may not be an accurate reflection of the real situation. First of all, there seems to be a discrepancy between the census data and actual living conditions in the case of single-person households. If a family has more than one dwelling, one of the family members tends to be registered in the new dwelling as that person's permanent residence, at least on paper.²⁷ Furthermore, similar limitations of the census data may be a better explanation for the apparent gen-

²⁶ See Wang 2014 for more details.

²⁷ Xu – Xue 2016: 16, 23, 31, 48.

eral decrease in the percentage of the nuclear family. The increase of domestic migration, which often involves the migration of the whole family in the era of marketisation, results in the size of nuclear family being undercalculated in the statistical data due to the registration of different family members in different dwellings. At the same time, the percentage of extended families, especially that of the stem families,²⁸ seems to be remarkably stable at slightly over 20 per cent. This suggests that the path of modernisation for the family has not caused the decline of the extended family type. In contrast, the number of couples without child(ren) increased significantly, only, in this case there seems to be a huge gap between this statistical reality and the values attached to the ideal number of children. According to value surveys, a high proportion of young people believe that the ideal number is two children.²⁹ On the other hand, how well such value surveys capture the objective opinions of respondents is in a question. There is a possibility that the respondents may simply be reflecting a number based upon social expectations of the ideal norm in contemporary China.

Despite the fact that the family in China managed to retain a certain degree of stability, there is a remarkable form of pluralisation in regard to the family type today. New family types have emerged in response to the current transitional period in the era of marketisation. One notable family type refers to the so-called intergenerational nuclear family (or generation-skipping family) where both parents move to a big city for work, leaving their child(ren) with the grandparents at home. Another new family type, called the unconventional nuclear family in Chinese academic studies, refers to a family form where the mother raises the child(ren) with the help of her kinship connections while the husband works in a remote place. In contrast, elderly people in what is called 'alternate supporting families' are assisted by their married children in rotation. All these family types are present in rural areas, whereas in the cities there is an inclination to the formation of 'temporary stem families', where the grandparents stay together with the family of their married child in order to help them with bringing up their children. However, these new family types do not seem to be converging into some stable family form in the future. They rather appear to be merely temporary adaptations to the challenges caused by the marketisation of economy, and thus they show a certain transitional characteristic feature. This transitionality however is being accompanied by an intensive family dynamics in search for sustainability.³⁰

²⁸ This refers to a specific family household where a couple lives together with their married child, as well as with that child's spouse and child(ren) in the family home.

²⁹ Xu – Xue 2016: 33.

³⁰ Xu – Xue 2016: 36–37.

The emergence of modern familism

China's unique path of modernisation, which shows both similarities and differences with Western countries, gives little room for theoretical generalisation. China's post-war decades have not been able to slow down the ongoing social transformation to the degree where it becomes possible to identify a firm social structure, including family structure. Instead, the speed of social change is so fast that any attempt for generalisation seems to fail to grasp its transitionality. Yet, as early as the 1990s a couple of features were identified as firm characteristics of post-war China's social transformation in regard to the family.³¹ One such characteristic refers to the aforementioned quasi-return to certain pre-modern family practices and values. Another one pertains to the tendency of Chinese families to adjust their decision making strategies according to the accessible local socioeconomic conditions, generally during times when no universalising family policy is being implemented. A third characteristic has been the rapid decline of pre-modern kin groups and the decline in the number of children, both of which show similarities to Western countries. However, these can be attributed to particular patterns of social transformation which took place not at a grassroots level, but as a result of a homogenising policy imposed from above upon Chinese families in the era of collectivisation. It can be argued that all these features continued to characterise family change even after the 1980s in China. Nevertheless, while all these seem to be true for post-war China's family conditions, these do not necessarily reveal uniquely Chinese characteristic features, and a certain degree of similarity can be expected between China and other countries that also experienced a shift from a planned economy to a market economy.

From the perspective of classical modernisation theories, China does not show the linear path of modernisation that can be identified in Western countries. Instead, it suggests a blended picture of having both pre-modern, modern and post-modern characteristic features simultaneously. For instance, the increasing intergenerational relationship accompanied by strong filial piety shows a quasi-return to pre-modern conditions, whereas the stressed freedom of mate selection is rather a modern characteristic of Chinese families. In contrast, China's current total fertility rate (varying between 1.5 and 1.6 in the past two decades), which is well below the reproduction level, shows a post-modern characteristic feature of the family, albeit as a result of a direct state intervention into the private sphere. All this points to a sort of compressed characteristic feature of China's modernity, where the respective stages of pre-modern,

³¹ Davis – Harell 1993: 20–21.

modern and post-modern social conditions were not able to succeed one another in their ‘proper’ order, as seen in Western countries in general. This blended and compressed characteristic feature can also be seen in the ambiguous transformation of the private and public spheres. This is all due to the fact that the length of time of modernisation in China has been too short and heavily burdened with various types of challenges. However, it can be argued that contemporary China offers new perspectives to the social sciences which can provide a better understanding of the different paths of modernisation, characterised by a sort of new modern familism, and in which family keeps playing an essential role for social responsibility and sustainability.

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