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3

FAMILY LEADERSHIP SHIFT IN CHINA. PRELIMINARY PERSPECTIVES FOR A CONFUCIAN AND CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

Rachel Xiaohong Zhu, China

Introduction

This paper discusses the Chinese traditional family leadership and its transformation during the process of modernisation. Since Confucianism shaped and influenced Chinese society and cultural values, so main Confucian ideas on family leadership would be discussed in this first part. In particular, this part concentrates on the Confucian tradition on three relationships, i.e. the relationship between father and son, husband and wife, and younger and older brother.

Then, the second part will discuss the prodigious changes that have taken place in Chinese society in the last century, with an analysis of the three stages or elements which brought about these changes. In the third and fourth part of this paper, I discuss the main factors of the new family leadership and its main challenges in the face of Christian values.

1. Traditional Confucian Family Ethics

Family, the social structure based on wedlock and consanguinity, is the basic element of society. Confucian tradition always considered family as the core of social life. There is an old Chinese saying, which says that the family is the foundation of the state, and a state's harmony and prosperity depend on the stability of families. There are several historical reasons behind this tradition. Its founder, the great sage Confucius (551-479 BC), imitated the ancient tradition of the Zhou dynasty (1134-250 BC), which emphasised the importance of a virtuous rule through 'benevolence' *(Ren)* and a proper conduct according to the so called 'rites' *(Li)*. A patriarchal clan system and an echelon of aristocracy, on which the 'son heaven' is at the top and common people at the bottom, emerged during the Zhou dynasty. It also brought about the system of agnatic primogeniture, in which the succession goes from the first wife of the emperor to the eldest son (son of heaven, the royal and regional feudal authority).

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In this system, the emperor was regarded as the father of the big family of the state, while feudatories as the parents of the smaller families of the counties. In this system, the government of the ruler is similar to the management of a family. It was believed that only when the family has been well managed, the state would be well governed. *Ren* represents mankind's cardinal virtue in the system of Confucian morality[1] for both the ruler and ordinary people. The essence of the virtue of *Ren* is for a person to love his/her parents, then extend the love to siblings, neighbours and then to everyone else. In other words, the love of parents is the beginning and premise of the loyalty to the ruler or emperor.

Family orientation is one of the main characters of Confucian ethics. Confucianism emphasises five cardinal relations, known as *Wu-Lun*, where power differences and responsibilities are prescribed: emperor and minister, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, and friend. From these five relationships, Dong Zhong-shu (179-104 BC) develops the formal Confucian teaching on the *three Gangs*,[2] namely, 'the emperor guides the minister, the father guides the son, the husband guides the wife'. It is obvious that these *Three Gangs* are hierarchical in nature, in each of them the first one holds pre-eminence over the latter. In a system based on the *Three Gangs* and *Five Changs*, family ethics and family leadership are the foundations of social ethics and leadership. Mencius said: 'Treat the aged in your family as they should be treated, and extend this treatment to the aged of other people's families. Treat the young in your family as they should be treated, and extend this treatment to the young of other people's families.'[3] The development of one's proper relationship with one's parents and the others around her/him is fundamental in life. Society is possible and stable when all the different relationships which imply different norms of interaction are appropriately maintained.

From a Confucian's perspective, a Chinese family should possess those three basic relationships of father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brothers, as mentioned above. These three relationships are the origin of the generations and the nations. Now, let us discuss the traditional family leadership according to these three relationships.

a) The Relationship Between Father and Son[4]

The family instruction on domestic discipline existed for a long time in China. It stresses that every family should have a clear sovereignty, namely, parenthood. Compared with the other two relationships in the family, the relationship 'parents-offspring' is the most important one in the Confucian teaching. It is so fundamental that it

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becomes the model of all other relationships, such as that between emperor and minister. Parents carry the responsibility of cultivating their children, not only by raising them well and finding them good partners to marry, but also by teaching them to know *Ren* and *Yi*. According to *The Family Instructions of Master Yan*, the famous book by the Confucian scholar Yan Zhitui (born 531 AD), in order to be both strict and kind to their children, parents must behave very well and should not show their affections and sternness in an improper way. On one hand, parents should not be on too intimate terms with their kids, otherwise the children could be encouraged to neglect their parents; on the other hand, parent should take the needs of their children seriously and not treat them carelessly, otherwise the children will not know the filial piety and inherit their parents' benevolence. The parents' sternness will make the child more reverent and filial. Correspondingly, in terms of the development of the character of the human being, the most fundamental practice is that of filial piety *(Xiao)*.

Confucius believed that if people cultivated this innate tendency well, all other natural forms of human goodness would be positively affected. The children should show their filial piety, treat their parents with reverence, obedience and care, and not diverge from their teachings. 'When parents are alive, serve them with propriety; when they die, bury them with propriety, and then worship them with propriety.'[5]

Parents have absolute leadership over children. Confucius said: 'When your father is alive, observe his will. When your father is dead observe his former actions. If, for three years you do not change from the ways of your father, you can be called a "real son"'.[6] In other words, children should not have any independent actions under parents supervision, so that a bystander can judge them from the observation of their will; moreover, when parents pass away, neither the way in which their parents lived nor the people whom their parents appointed could be replaced by children.

b) The Relationship Between Wife and Husband

There are a lot of muchtold tales of harmonious couples in ancient China, for instance, the *Book of Odes (Shijing)* portrays a couple's mutual respect, so that they live their life together as beautifully as the instruments play on a common chord. *The Family Instructions of Master Yan* also confirm that the wife should not only submit to her husband, but also the husband must respect his wife and treat her righteously *(Yi)*. However, generally speaking, most of the marriages in ancient times were only approved and arranged by the couple's parents, so there are few couples who have true love for each other as

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starting point. Especially after the Song Dynasty, since the Neo-Confucian master Chenghao (1032-1085) proposed that for a widow starving to death is the smallest issue, while losing the chastity is the biggest issue, the concept of maidenly chastity and chaste widowhood had played a central part in the life of Chinese women, but friendship between couples has hardly been guaranteed.

In the traditional Confucian culture, the husband is dominating, and the wife is submissive. Dong Zhongshu is the first Confucian thinker who justifies this relationship in this way: 'In all things there must be correlates… Here is nothing that does not have a correlate, and in each correlation there is the *Yin* and *Yang*. Thus the relationship between sovereign and subject, father and son, and husband and wife, are all derived from the principles of the *Yin* and *Yang*.'[7] The husband's dominant position and wife's compliant status are justified according to the natural order. This tradition not only advocates that 'the male is venerable and the female debased' *(Nan zhun nv bei)*, but also encourages women to become 'worthy wives and good mothers' *(Xian qi liang mu)* with many admonitions and instructions.

Besides the five constant virtues, the woman as a wife, in a family, has to follow the threefold obedience and the four virtues *(San Cong Si De)*, as her primary principles to protect the family honour. The four virtues refer to female virtue, female speech, female appearance and female accomplishment, which demand from the woman fidelity, propriety in speech, physical charm and proficiency with the needle and cooking. The threefold obedience refers to obedience to her father before marriage, her husband during marriage and her son during widowhood.[8]

c) Relationship Between Elder and Younger Brothers

The third important element of family leadership exists in the relationship between elder and younger brothers. The principle of 'the elder brother must be friendly and the younger must be compliant' has a long history. It is the duty of the younger brother to show his respect and submission to the elder brother, the elder showing his friendship to the younger. It applies also to all the relationships between younger-elder siblings, although the male siblings would have the higher status than his sisters, no matter whether they are older or younger. Hierarchy also exists between elder and younger sisters.

The eldest son in a family inherits not only most of the estate of the parents, but also the patriarchal power, when the father resigns from the position of patriarch. According to the principle of priority, the elder brother must assume responsibility for raising the younger siblings, even when the mother lives. It is necessary to point out that the father-son relationship is the most fundamental dimension in the

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traditional family. The Chinese have been deeply influenced by the feudal ideology, based on sayings such as 'there are three ways not to be filial, and the greatest is having no descendents'.[9] In addition, Confucian teaching included: 'The more descendents, the more blessings'. The father-son dimension is superior, while the relationship husband-wife is subordinate. The result is that most couples work hard all their lives for their descendents, but fail to appease each other. However, the Confucian teaching on family leadership has been, in practice, modified during the process of modernisation.

2. Transformation and Modernisation in Family Leadership

In the ancient geoponic society, the society hardly changed, and so the family structure. However, rapid transformations took place in the past century. The three great historical events in China – the New Culture Movement (from 1915, climax with the May 4th movement in 1919), the establishment of the new system of socialism in 1949 and the commencement of the Reformation and Open Door Policy in 1979 – almost destroyed the traditional Confucian family leadership and family pattern. The lower status of the female partner and the patriarchal style were gradually abandoned as women were encouraged to demand equality. The 'clan-families' gradually disappeared and the nuclear family became the most popular pattern.

The new Culture Movement, which created the paradigm of anti-traditionalism and slogans such as 'down with Confucianism' changed very profoundly the concept of family. This movement introduced new ideas of science and democracy from the West and strongly criticised the Confucian ethical code, including the *Three Gangs, Five Constant Virtues* and family ethics. During the Movement, the Confucian 'rites' and teaching were dismissed as the tool for the rulers and patriarchs to oppress the inferiors. In the first issue of the leading periodical *New Youth*, the leader of this movement, Chen Duxiu, stated that Confucian ethics is only a way to enslave people and deprive them of their personalities. 'The reason why we can see no one of unattached individuals, but the minister, son and wife, is the *Three Gangs*'.[10] The famous writer Lu Xun generalised the conclusion that feudal Confucian ethics is 'a cannibal' *(Chi Ren)*.

This movement enlightened the common people to reflect intellectually on the Chinese family leadership and ethics, and indirectly influenced their family life. Fifty years later, with the 'Destroy Four Olds' (old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits) program of the Cultural Revolution – which started in 1966 – and the Anti-Lin Piao Campaign (a competing political figure) and Anti-Confucius

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Campaign (Pi Lin Pi Kong) in 1971, the Confucian familial ethics was intellectually and officially discarded.

Collectivism overthrew the foundations of the patriarchal system and cultivated equality between family members. The legal system regulated the family, as the constitution of the socialist system directly impacted the Chinese traditional family in many ways, for example in the case of parents-children relationship. In the old fashion, parents arranged their children's marriage and government seldom intervened in this family activity. In the new system, the government for bids arranged marriages and any other actions which interfere with the autonomy of matrimony.[11] The same China Marriage Law regulates the minimum age for the young people to be married, for instance, Article 6 provide that only men over 22 and women over 20 years have the right to marry, which guarantees the young people's capacity of autonomy of choice for their marriage partner. Parents were deprived of the power to arrange their children's marriage. The new system also remodels the family type and size. As the private ownership was gone with the old society, parents as patriarchs lost their economic power as a tool to command their children, most of the children would leave their parents and live separately when they got married and were, able to have their own house, although the government did not directly regulate how to dispose family property and live apart. Most Chinese clan-families disintegrated into nuclear families already with the small societies by the end of the 1960s, and the nuclear families increased, while the family size decreased very swiftly in both urban and rural areas.[12] The average urban family is today 3.1 persons and rural family 3.6 persons according to the 5th census of 2000, which is much lower than the 3.96 persons of the 4th census in 1990.

The beginning of the Reformation and Open Door Policy, by the end of the 1970s, ended the old ideology focused on class struggle and political movement which neglected the individual needs and personality. With the wider opening and the influence of Western values, the Chinese have now higher expectations on affection or sentiment in marriage and family. Moreover, the rapid developing productivity after the Reformation altered also the functions of the Chinese family. There was no essential improvement for the agricultural productivity from 1940 to 1970.[13] Owing to the low economic situation of the old days, the family first of all acted as a unit of production or economic complex, where the greater labour force would increase the income of the family. However, those functions of reproduction and procreation, which were considered to be very demanding, have been weakened after the Reformation, while the demands for care, affection and companionship became more demanding. At the same time, the centrifugal forces of economic, institutional and ideological changes, which tend to weaken emotional ties among family members, are often more

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powerful than the centripetal psychological forces which establish emotional bonds among family members. Hence an increasing divorce rate and affairs outside marriage challenge today's traditional familial relationships.

3. The New Familial Leadership

What are the consequences of modernisation and globalisation on family leadership? And how do these traditional cultural features shape this change? On the one hand, the nuclear family, which consists of two generations (wife/mother, husband/father and their child), became primarily a unit of residence and consumption. On the other hand, the different nuclear families in the same lineal relationships are still very close to each other and often live in the same district. Let us now select three profiles of the main relationships in the nuclear family: the couple to their child, the couple to their parents and the relation between husband and wife. We want to analyse how the family leadership in the loose extended family is organised and to see the vestiges of the Confucian mentality.

a) Young Couples and Their Child

Since many changes have been taking place in the Chinese society, the nuclear family, divorced family, one-parent family and even dink family are much more accepted these days. However, most Chinese families are still under great pressure of procreation and cultivation of children, and they take seriously the Confucian code of 'giving birth but not to instruct is the parent's fault'. Since the one-child policy was implemented, from the end of the 1970s to the year 2000, over 55,780,000 families have had one single child, who is described as a 'little emperor'. It might not be exaggerated to say that the so-called 'little emperor' is today the main factor to influence a family in making decisions, and it is the focus of six adults' lives (four grandparents and two parents). It is said that the primary reason of conflict between a young couple is how to raise the kid.[14]

b) More Equal Interdependent Eldership

Traditional Confucianism required that when the parents are alive, children should not travel far away, and when parents die, children should remain in mourning for three years. Now, in China, in rural areas, the rate of aged people is 7,35 % and 6,30 % in urban areas, according to the 5th census in 2000. More and more elder people choose to spend the last part of their life in a nursing home,

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something that was impossible before. On the one hand, due to the reform of the system of the registered permanent residence and to the phenomenon of urbanisation, many people leave their old parents and go to work elsewhere; they marry and settle down in big cities, so that these two generations become much more independent. On the other hand, filial piety is so rooted in many Chinese people that young couples are supposed to support both husband and wife's parents financially if the parents do not have a pension, while the grandparents would help to look after their grandchild. This interdependent relationship makes these two generations more equal than before.

c) The Choice of the Spouse and Marriage

Nowadays young people are exposed to all kind of mass media and international social exchanges and have more channels and chances to meet partners than the old generations had, so the young people are increasingly choosing their spouses rather than submitting to arranged marriages. Most of the young people follow the principle of 'making decisions on his/her own and getting consent from parents' to choose their spouses. During the 1950s to 1970s, the best candidate for the spouse would be a member of the communist party or a military, a cadre or a model worker from a good family by political standards. Now, since the younger generation cares much more about the economic and educational background of the partner, the standard for the choice of the candidate is much more varied. On the other hand, a self-determined marriage seems easier to be dissolved, and the divorce rate in 2003 was 0,21 %, which was much higher than the 0,07 % in 1980.

The traditional teaching on the threefold obedience and the four virtues, as the submission to one's husband for the entire life, has been challenged by the increase of educated and working mothers in China. The last generation of Chinese urban women illiteracy rate was 55,3 %, now it is only 2,1 %; the rural women illiteracy rate was 88,6 %, now it is 36,6 %. Nowadays, urban female employees are 38 % of the total, and rural female employees are over 47 % of the total employees. Compared to the traditional marriage lifestyle, the wife/mother figure has gained economic power, while the father has been losing his absolute control of the family. In the process of modernisation and globalisation, acculturation and enculturation have also affected the younger generation's marriage. A lot of young couples accept the western idea of marital agreement, premarital property notarisation, separate postnuptial financing, in order to keep equality and freedom even within the marriage. The establishment and development of the pension system generally lessen the economic dependence on their child, while the progress of high-tech alleviates

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the housework in a family, and the political and legal system confirms the equal status of women and men both in the family and the society. This is a novelty: the sexual equality, mutual respect and mutual assistance between husband and wife have never been deeply embodied in a society which was mainly predominantly Confucian.

Conclusion: an Approach to the Perspectives of Christian Family Ethics

As discussed above, after the political, cultural and economic revolution and transformation of the 20th century, the features of the Chinese family have been totally different from those of the past. The traditional teachings of the Confucian ethics on family leadership are weakened or were even institutionally destroyed, opening a way to the present day moral vacuum. How to revive and to reform the traditional family ethics while reflecting on the prevailing contemporary phenomena has become a very important subject for many Chinese. Finding harmony without becoming uniform is the principle for the Chinese to approach different cultures. In a globalised world, where running a family is still a great responsibility, the dialogue between Confucian and Christian thought might contribute a lot for the reflection on family ethics.

According to Chinese official statistics, the Christian Protestants are today over 16,000,000 and the Christian Catholics are about 6-8,000,000. This is less than 1,5 % of the total population, but however, the population of the Christian Protestants increases about 500,000 annually. Since Christianity had been introduced in China, more than 1300 years ago and in five different periods, the dialogue between Christian teaching and traditional non-Christian Chinese culture is a challengeable topic also for the Chinese intellectual circle. It has been said that the feeling of finiteness is the same for the individual in both Chinese and Western society. One obvious difference in the origin of this feeling is that Chinese finiteness derives from the hierarchy, while in the Christian society it comes from God.[15] The way of Confucian salvation consists in an indwelling of the moral teaching in the individual and in his moral practice within society, the Five Constant Virtues being the aim of the behaviour of the individual. On the other hand, the salvation that comes from Jesus Christ is transcendent. It is a way through Faith. This makes the love of Christ and the love *(Ren)* in the Confucian sense quite different. Although both Christianity and Confucianism consider 'love' as the core of their teaching, love in the Confucian tradition *(Ren)* is still graded or strict hierarchal, while the love preached, lived and communicated by Christ is unconditional. In the Confucian way, *Ren* is to

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love people, and the strongest love is the love between father and son, then husband and wife and then to the others of the Five Relationships. Love is limited and should be regulated by the rite or rituals and by the wisdom which must be cultivated by the master or patriarch. For Christian Faith, we cannot love until grace comes into us. God's grace transforms family life and leads to new patterns of love including mercy and self-sacrifice. This is a wide and challenging topic, which would make this paper too long. It is enough to say, as a conclusion, that after all the changes and transformations undergone by the Chinese family, the meeting with the grace of Christ can open a new chapter, to be written not so much on paper but on the real life of the Chinese people.

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NOTES

1 Later Mencius (371-289) proposes the four constant virtues, namely, *Ren* (humanheartedness, humanness or benevolence), *Yi* (righteousness), *Li* (propriety, rituals or rites), *Zhi* (wisdom). Dong Zhong-shu adds *Xin* (Good faith, fidelity) as the fifth *Chang* (five constant virtues).

2 The literal meaning of *Gang* is: a major cord in a net, to which all the other strings are attached. *Three Gang* means three guides (Fung:197).

3 Mencius, Ia,7, quoted from Fung:72.

4 To use solely the expression 'father-son' sounds limiting, since I believe that it would also apply to the female family members. It should be mother/father and daughter/son (or parentoffspring). Although the mother would have a lower status than the father, there is still a hierarchy between mother and daughter, mother and underage son.

5 Analects, 2:5.

6 Analects, 1:11.

7 Quoted from Fung: 196-197.

8 Zhang Mingqi, *The Four Books for Women. Ancient Chinese texts for the education of women* on http://nacrp.cic.sfu.ca/nacrp/articles/fourbookwoman.html

9 Mencius: 4A/26.

10 *The Duxiu' s Reader*, Hefei People Press, 1987, p. 34.

11 Article 3 in the Chinese Marriage Law.

12 Even though the numbers of nuclear families are increasing, they still live very close with their kin, psychologically and geographically.