

Family Structure in Mainland China

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During the last forty years China has undergone enormous historic and complicated transformations in economics, politics and society. In the midst of these changes the key figures for human reproduction, the birth rate and the death rate, have also changed rapidly. These have had a profound influence on the evolution of China's family structure.

Generally speaking, family structures may be divided into:

1. Type, i.e., nuclear, stem, joint, etc.
2. Generation, i.e., the one, two and multi-generation families.
3. Size.

These three categories mutually support and limit one another. The family type, however, plays a major role in determining the generational structure and family size.

Types of Family Structures

According to the two well-known sociologists, Fei Xiaotong and Zeng Zaiqi, families may be divided into four types:

1. *The broken or incomplete family*, where one spouse has died or moved out, or one where both father and mother have passed on.

2. *The nuclear family* which consists of a husband and wife and their unmarried children.

3. *The extended, linear or stem family*, composed of a nuclear family plus one or more grandparents and/or other relatives or non-relatives.

4. *The joint family*, composed of more than one nuclear family. This type usually consists of a household with married children living with their parents, or two overlapping generations of nuclear families.

According to the data in the Third (1982) and Fourth (1990) National Censuses, the nuclear family is the most numerous but the number of stem families is also considerable. There is a gradual downward trend among joint families composed of married brothers living together. (cf., Table 1).

TABLE 1: PERCENTAGE OF FAMILY TYPE, 3rd & 4th CENSUS

FAMILY TYPE	3RD CENSUS	4TH CENSUS
Single Family (Living Alone)	7.94	5
Nuclear Family	69.48	72
Stem Family	17.16	17
Joint Family	5.41	4

The statistics cited above are not broken down on the basis of urban and rural settings. Most of China's population, however, lives in the villages. To understand China's overall transformation, it is imperative to examine the transformation of family structure in the countryside. In 1936, before the Communists came to power, Fei Xiaotong made his first research trip to Jiang Village, a typical Chinese village. Between 1936 and 1985 he made nine trips to Jiang Village for purposes of research. With records spanning nearly half a century, Fei Xiaotong was able to document extensively the changes in family structure in that village (cf., Table 2).

TABLE 2: UNREVISED BREAKDOWN OF FAMILY TYPES IN JIANG VILLAGE

TYPE	1936	1981
Incomplete Family	27.6	18.1
Nuclear Family	23.7	39.0
Extended Family	38.4	21.6
Joint Family	10.4	21.3

Table 2 shows that, although the nuclear family still occupies a prominent place, extended and joint families are much more common than in Table 1. This may be due to the establishment of the Mutual Responsibility System in the villages which has widened the scope for household production. The need for a family labor force causes grown children to live with their parents after marriage. Yet, if a village family has several sons, ordinarily only one son will live with his parents; the others leave home to establish their own households. This is clearly evident from Fei Xiaotong's revised breakdown by family type in Table 3, which separates families composed of two overlapping, two-generation nuclear families from the joint family, and places them into a third category, the stem family. Farm families choose the stem family, not the joint family, as their main family type.

TABLE 3: REVISED BREAKDOWN OF FAMILY TYPES IN JIANG VILLAGE

TYPE	1936	1950	1964	1981	1982	1984
Incomplete Broken	27.6	27.4	34.4	19.6	16.9	17.3
Nuclear	23.7	32.3	44.7	38.7	37.8	39.0
Stem	45.4	35.5	20.5	38.5	42.0	43.2
Joint	3.3	4.9	2.4	3.2	3.2	0.4

Table 3 shows that starting in 1984, the number of joint families decreased. The nuclear family, originally on an upward trend, slowly took a downward trend in the '80's, slipping from first to second place. The stem family, which had been on a continuous decline since the '30's, and which fell rapidly during the '50's, reached its low point in 1964, but rose quickly in the '80's. It now occupies first place among family types. It is a fact, however that with the natural increase in population, the number of nuclear families will also increase at a stable rate. Table 3 shows that nuclear families had clearly increased by 1964. This increase was related to the rapid rise in the population of the Mainland from the end of the '40's. It is reasonable to assume that the poor economic condition of the family at that time made for friction and contradiction among family mem-

bers. This, in turn, caused stem families to break apart. The village economy in the '60's was in a state of collapse, and it was during that time that the number of stem families decreased dramatically.

The Generational Structure of the Family

Many factors limit the number of generations in a family. Family outlook is one important factor. If a majority of people prefer to live in a small family, it follows that the number of multi-generational families will be small. In China's traditional moral outlook, filial piety was encouraged and "Five Generations Under One Roof" was the ideal family model. However, families in China, more often than not, consisted of three generations. This was due to another restraining factor--the life expectancy of family members. Before 1949, the average life expectancy in Mainland China was only about 35 years. This factor automatically restricted the number of generations in a family.

The number of generations in a family and the type of family mutually interact with each other. Different types of families have different generational structures. If, for example, the nuclear family is the main type, two generation families are the most numerous. Changes in the generational structure of the family reflect changes in family types.

In the Third National Census (1982), the one-in-ten sample contained a question which divided families into seven generational types; in the Fourth National Census (1990), the one-in-ten sample added a new category, "other," for people over 15 whether married or unmarried but who lived alone.

Table 4 classifies households, that have relatives or non-relatives living with them, as one, two, three or more generations households.

Table 5 provides the new arrangement showing more clearly the generational structure of Mainland families. The table reveals that the two-generation household is China's principle household.

A significant number of households also have three or more generations. This situation follows from the nuclear family being the leading family type.

TABLE 4: FAMILY TYPES ACCORDING TO THIRD & FOURTH CENSUS

YEAR	SINGLE	MARRIED COUPLE	2 GEN	3 GEN	5)	6)	7)
1982	7.94	4.78	64.7	11.16	1.03	2.75	1.63
1990	6.26	6.45	65.7	17.14	.80	2.28	1.30

5) = One generation living with relatives or non-relatives

6) = Two generations living with relatives or non-relatives

7) = Three generations living with relatives or non-relatives

TABLE 5: GENERATION STRUCTURE OF MAINLAND FAMILIES

YEAR	1 GENERATION	2 GENERATION	3 + GENERATIONS
1982	13.75	67.45	18.79
1990	12.71	67.98	18.30

Lack of available materials precludes our fully exploring conditions in the villages.

Table 6 presents the sampling done by Ma Xia and Ling Yi, in the suburbs of Beijing, in Fujian, Jiangsu, Shandong, Shaanxi, Sichuan, and elsewhere, and the research done by Xin Zi in three villages of Zongyang County, Hunan. The data in this Table clearly indicate a trend towards more families of three or more generations. In fact, such families now are the most common. This follows from the fact that in the villages the stem family is the most common.

TABLE 6: RURAL FAMILY GENERATION STRUCTURE

Generations	pre-1940	1949	1964	1980	1981
One	6.6	13.0	13.1	6.3	14
Two	63.7	68.8	52.5	34.3	35
3 or more	29.68	18.2	54.5	39.3	51

There is another point worthy of note in the generational structure of the Mainland family: two-generation households composed of children living with their paternal grandparents. These constitute 0.7% of all households. This is a result of the reform and opening of the economic system of the '80's, which drove large numbers of healthy young adults to the economically prospering regions in search of jobs, leaving children with their grandparents, thus forming the two-generation household that skips over the middle generation.

Family Size

Traditionally the Chinese favor large families. Constrained by economic conditions and a high death rate, the average family size throughout history, however, has been five persons, more or less. This situation continued into the present century, but came to an end when the Communists came into power in 1949. Figure 7 reveals that after the Communists set up their government--given some periods of undulation--families shrank in size.

TABLE 7: AVERAGE FAMILY SIZE

YEAR	NATIONAL	URBAN	RURAL
1953	4.33	4.66	4.26
1959	4.58	---	---
1962	4.33	---	---
1964	4.29	4.11	4.35
1974	4.78	---	---
1982	4.43	3.95	4.57
1990	4.00	3.30	4.80

There are two important factors influencing average family size: the willingness of families to divide or to merge, and the rate of population increase. The decrease in family size in the early '50's was due to the first factor. With the beginning of Land Reform in 1952, the family gradually lost control over

production. This situation compelled families of several generations under one roof, as well as married brothers living together, to set up separate dwellings. This increased the number of households and decreased the average number of people per household.

The rise in average household size in 1959 followed the early stage of the *Great Leap Forward*. Encouraged by the slogan: "More People Are A Good Thing," the population rate quickly skyrocketed. As a result of the natural catastrophes that followed, the population growth rate also fell sharply. The average household size fell. The Second National Census (1964) gave a figure of 4.29 persons. Families with a larger number of people encountered economic restraints. Thus, farm families split up in response to the hardships of those lean years.

Family size was up again in 1974, during the period of the Cultural Revolution, when the stress on family planning slackened. Shortly afterwards, the Communists made a great effort to promote birth control, and in 1979 implemented the "One Family, One Child" policy. As a result, the birth rate and the rate of natural increase fell abruptly. This was reflected in the shrinking average household size.

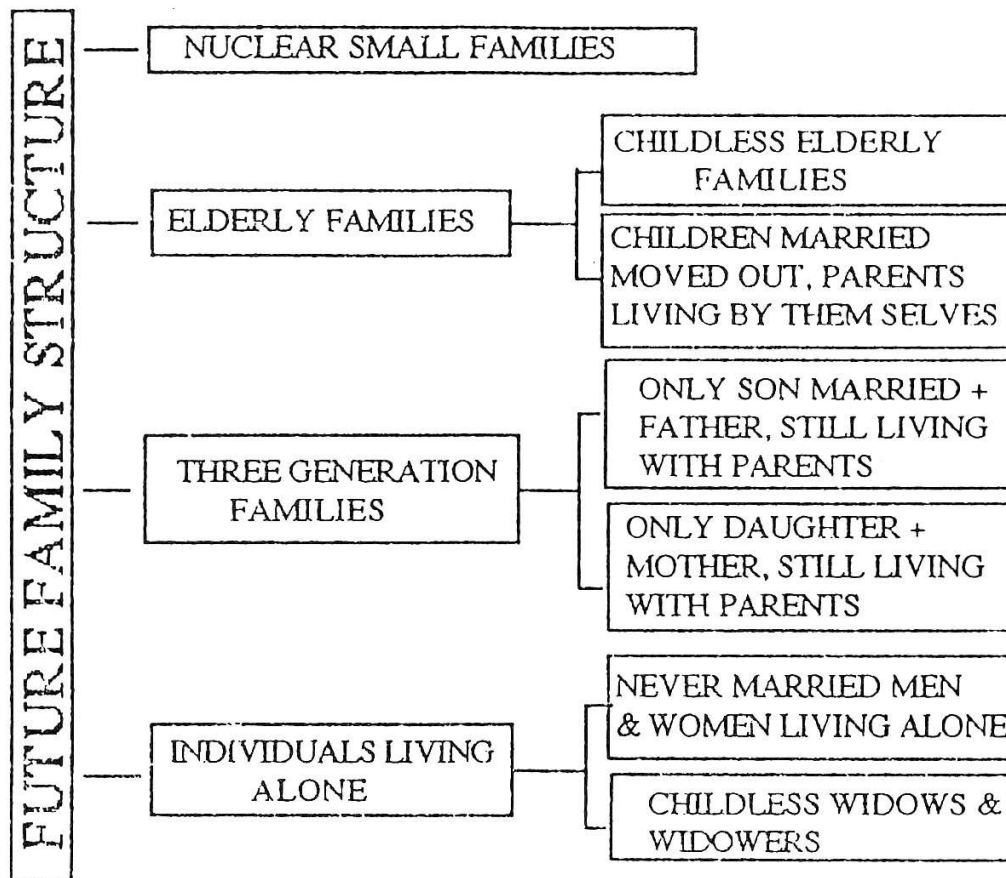
The trend in Mainland China as a whole since the '80's has been toward a smaller family size. In examining urban and rural statistics, we find that, in keeping with the national trend, the family size in the cities and towns has been shrinking, but the family size in the rural areas has been increasing. This cannot be due to a population increase since the rural population growth rate has tended to go down since the '70's. For example, in 1964, the rural natural growth rate was 2.81%, but by 1982 it had fallen to 1.479%. It would seem that only the splitting or merging of families provides a viable explanation for the increase. What has slowed down the speed with which families are dividing? Can the answer be found in the active promotion of the Family Mutual Responsibility System? The Mutual Responsibility System makes the family once again the basic unit of economic management. Under current conditions of production in the villages, extra labor power has an extremely positive impact on output. Also the increased scope and role for family management create a demand for a family labor force, which brings with it greater prosperity. Under these conditions a family does not want to divide. The result is an increase in

family size. This phenomenon is also directly related to family type in the village, where stem families are the principal type.

Conclusions

From the research in this essay, one can deduce the trends developing in Mainland families. In the '50's and 60's the high rate of births produced families with many children. When these children grew up and were ready to leave home, society developed economically, and attitudes shifted towards smaller families. The family structure was simplified. Nuclear families multiplied with an increase in the number of families with elderly members as well as in stem (linear) families of grandparents and grandchildren.

The population policy introduced in the 1970's, and which continues today, has caused a steady increase of "only" children. When these "only" children reach the age of marriage and childbearing during the '90's, and set up their households, they will live with one set of parents. The other set of parents will be left to live by themselves as an elderly couple. China's future family structure is outlined in Table 8.



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*... responsible fatherhood and motherhood
is an integral part
of the civilization of love....
And at the same time
the family is the centre and the heart
of the civilization of love.*
