

Family Structure in Mainland China: A Critique

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The article by Mr. Fang Shan, "Family Structure in Mainland China" cites statistics from China's Third (1982) and Fourth (1990) National Censuses, and points out that in China today there are households of single individuals and married couples, but the most common type of household consists of two or three generations. This means that the principle type of family structure in China is the nuclear



family. The next most numerous type, according to the author, is the stem or extended family. His research leads him to conclude that there is a trend towards fewer and fewer joint families. His article also points out the difference in family size in the city and countryside. While nuclear families predominate in the city, the village folks, operating within the Household Responsibility System, need a substantial labor force. The natural result of such a need is an increase in the number of stem families. The author also notes that the trend toward smaller families will eventually create a heavy burden in caring for the elderly. This situation will easily lead to conflicts, increase anxiety among the elderly and have a negative effect on their morale. Furthermore, the implementation of the One Child Policy and the manner in which the nuclear family cares for its only child will inevitably create a number of social problems.

Mr. Fang's article is based on sufficient statistical data, and introduces us to the essentials of family structure in China today. What is rather regrettable in the article is that Mr. Fang fails to explore China's present attitude toward traditional culture, and the current social, economic and socio-political factors that would shed light on the reason for the increase in the nuclear family on the mainland. Fact-finding alone can never provide us with a total picture of any situation. I will, therefore,

use some research material that I have available presently to supplement and explain Mr. Fang's data.

The article is certainly on target when it stresses that the One Child Policy creates social problems. According to investigative reports, 95% of single child families do not permit their son or daughter to go to another city to work, and 50% will not let the only child go elsewhere to study. These examples highlight the protective attitude parents harbor toward their only child. On the one hand, "only" children who grow up better fed and better educated are often unrestrained, stubborn and spoiled. On the other hand "only" children who are overpampered by parents and guardians also often tend to lack autonomy and the ability to stand on their own feet. A number of those who study the development of the only child doubt that children who grow up in the kind of environment prevalent in China today will be able to set up independent nuclear families after they marry.

Exploring Chinese family types is both a complex and interesting endeavor. A quick glance reveals that the nuclear family should be the predominant type since, according to the census statistics, family size is gradually shrinking. Let us take Shanghai as an example. The Fourth Census indicates that Shanghai has an average of 3.10 persons per households with 3.03 persons in the villages and 3.14 in the urban core. These numbers seem somewhat too low. What we discovered as a result of our survey taken in Shanghai in July 1993, is that the average household has 3.57 persons, which is practically the same as the figure of 3.62 for Beijing. Farm families, in fact, are also tending towards the nuclear family, as for example, Loulin Village, a close suburb of Shanghai, where 80.46% of the households are nuclear families, and the average household consists of 3.28 persons.

There is probably a link between the One Child Policy and the prevalence of the nuclear family which is viewed in a totally different way in China from that in the West. This perhaps can be explained by China's unique social, economic, cultural and environmental factors. In the West the husband and wife are the focal point of the family. Children are born, grow up, and leave after getting married to establish another independent nuclear family. The two families are not bound by strong, mutual, emotional ties. This is quite different from the traditional Chinese family outlook.

Historical Reasons for the Increase of Nuclear Families

The increase in nuclear families is not an imperative of social development; it arises from factors within a given society such as the economy and government policies. Countless young men and women live in the cities today. Unless, after marriage, they return to their homes and live with their parents, they must establish nuclear families. Why are there so many single men and women in China's cities? The reasons stem from certain events in the country's history. From 1938 to 1945, due to war and famine and the resultant collapse of the rural economy, poor peasants began to drift to the cities, swelling the urban population. Later, from 1950 to 1960, the government's policy encouraging the development of industry attracted large numbers of country people to the cities in search of jobs. Their hope was to make money and then either return to the village to live, or else find a spouse in the village and then move their whole family to the city. Since the government after 1949 began to place restrictions on population migration, and only permitted a small fraction of country people to register permanently as city dwellers, the hope-filled plan of the country people was seldom realized. In 1960, the government refused to allow anyone to migrate illegally to the cities. Thus the number of peasants flowing into the cities decreased. Urbanites of marriageable age were obliged to find a spouse in the city. The result was a large number of nuclear families.

In addition, infant mortality declined after 1949, and during the 50's and 60's the government encouraged families to have more children, leading to an increase in the population listed in the household registers. If, after marriage, the children born during this era lived with their parents, they formed linear or stem families. This tended to balance off the elevated number of nuclear families. During the '70's, China promoted the One Child Policy. This led to a decrease in the number of children, and the number of nuclear families also took a downward trend. In addition, due to the economic situation and the shortage of housing, the linear or stem family often took preference over the nuclear family. We can conclude that the increase or decrease in the number of nuclear or stem families are due mostly to social and economic factors.

The Ideal and the Reality of Family Size

Generally speaking, all young people today strive for autonomy and independence. Since the nuclear family can help them in the pursuit of their ideal, the number of nuclear families is increasing. Furthermore, given today's penchant for consumerism, an independent family can more easily and with fewer conflicts make decisions regarding the use of commodity goods. The freedom to make this kind of determination is very attractive to young couples. Yet, this ideal is often hard to realize due to several practical difficulties. One of these is the shortage of housing. With more nuclear families, the demand for small apartments has increased, leading to supply falling short of demand. Although a young couple may have enough money to be independent, the housing crunch compels them to move in with their parents temporarily. Free space may be available to the young couple but in this situation they cannot be independent. A second difficulty is the limited number of spaces available in nurseries and kindergartens. Since young couples usually do not command very high incomes, and the salary of a maid is considerable, ordinary people cannot hire someone to watch over their child. The only solution is to entrust the child to the grandparents, (during the daytime) or to send him or her to live with the grandparents. This reduces expenses. Predisposed by traditional Chinese thinking, parents are happy to have the grandparents care for their child, and to cover the expenses. This situation produces a multitude of stem families.

It is common in China today for parents to help their children financially. The traditional concept of "raise children to provide support for your old age" cannot be effected at all in a variety of situations due to China's policy of "low wages and high employment". This policy creates a huge gap between the wages of the young and the old. A number of studies have shown that 50% of people between the ages of 60 to 80 living in cities have or had a prominent position at work with a liberal salary or pension. Friedmann calls this phenomenon "intergenerational inequality." Studies reveal that 39% of young couples will accept financial help from their parents, e.g., accepting money to raise the grandchild. They may also live with their parents free of charge. This resolves their living problems and encourages their tendencies towards consumerism. In addition,

under the current One Child Policy, families are small, and it is easy for the whole family to live under the grandparents' roof, forming a stem family. Of course, if the parents are rather poor, short on pension and savings, it is very common for the son to help his parents. At the same time, the Marriage Law of 1980 stipulated that an only child must bear the burden of supporting his or her parents, or else face legal consequences.

The One Child Policy reduces the network of kinship. In order to solve this problem of relationships among people, the government gives special permission for only children to stay in their place of origin and work. This enables them to care for their elderly parents. Many work units permit parents when they retire to pass their jobs on to their children. Since many parents have housing quarters assigned to them along with their job, their children cannot receive quarters of their own and so need to live with their parents. Because of this, the children cannot establish nuclear families.

Based on the above reasons, i.e., China's own ancient culture and unique social and economic conditions, we can be certain that there will be very few Western type nuclear families in China. Although the nuclear family is an ideal living arrangement, one which, in fact, helps reduce friction, China's traditional value system is not consonant with the Western style concept of the nuclear family nor is the concept likely to be accepted in the future. Some commentators point out that China will perhaps have five different types of families: 1) nuclear family; 2) extended nuclear family; 3) linear or stem family; 4) traditional extended family or joint family and 5) bloodline family, etc. All these types will appear within the context of the contemporary environment. The nuclear family and consumerism are very closely related. This is especially apparent since the enactment of the 1979 policy on economic reform and opening to the outside world and the 1992 compromise to promote a market economy. These decisions have led to huge socio-economic changes. Opportunities for making money have increased, producing a kind of selfish individualism and a consumer mentality. All these changes will certainly have an impact on the various types of families in China. These developments need further research.
