

Documentation

The Chinese Family Facing the Twenty-First Century

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This year, 1994, has been chosen by the United Nations as the International Year of the Family. To mark this occasion, the Hong Kong-based *Dagong Daily* published in mid-January a series of three articles on the main features of the Chinese family, past, present and future (DDK, Jan. 13, p.6; 16, p.5; 18, p. 8). Even though this presentation often smacks of the official line and gives the impression of relying more on general trends than on scientific data, it outlines the main problems which will probably plague the evolution of Chinese society.

The author, Tian Sen, the chairman of the Research Centre on Contemporary Society, first recalled the traditional features of the family: three generations under the same roof, centred on father/son relations and based on the need to have a son to continue the ancestral line. He then characterized the present situation as still influenced by the continuation of "feudal" attitudes such as patriarchal behaviour, interference in marriages of children and the rule "by the voice of one man alone." Quoting a survey of fourteen provinces, he recalled that the majority of marriages were arranged and warned against the preponderance of male births. He also stressed the influence that "money worship" now has in family relationships.

On this question, a recent report (*Wenhui Daily*, Hong Kong, Jan. 20, p. A6) mentioned the development in cities of all kinds of "contracts" between spouses, before and after marriage. They are of different kinds but aim mostly at protecting individual property in view of possible divorce. In some cases, they concern elderly couples who make contracts with their children to avoid trouble at the time of inheritance and to ensure that the

remaining parent will not be neglected and will continue to be looked after. Other contracts specify that, once ordinary household expenses are met, each spouse can spend his or her money as he or she wishes. Such contracts are said to be viewed differently in society. They are opposed by those who hold "traditional" concepts of the family and protest that in a family "once money is more important than feelings" ethics will fall and "human character degenerate." Others, on the contrary, hold that such contracts are the consequence of a commercial society, reflect a new legal awareness and are in conformity with the rules of a market economy!

Looking towards the future and the twenty-first century, Tian Sen outlined fifteen trends that should characterize the Chinese family.

1. A development of the quality of the family is first hoped for. Sincerity, love and common objectives should predominate with the progressive diminution of the economic factors that still influence marriages.

2. The development of one-child families will lead to the disappearance of uncles and aunts and to a model of four (grandparents), two (parents) and one (child). There is a danger that "if this problem is not handled well, it could lead to spoiled, lonely and wilful children and mean a deterioration of the Chinese nation."

3. The universalization of the nuclear family will contribute to a weakening of relations between relatives and a development of social relations. Since both husbands and wives will be occupied with their professional activities, it will be even more necessary for them to adjust to each other.

4. A clash is foreseen between the "material" and "spiritual" civilization due to the "money worship" trend that has entered families.

5. Social evolution and the extension of life expectancy will lead to an increased number of divorces.

6. Love affairs outside marriage will develop. More young people already live together before marriage but it is felt that divorce will be chosen by couples as a way of solving clashes rather than extra-marital affairs.

7. Divorces will lead to more remarriages thus creating a complex family situation.

8. More couples will choose to have no children. Already

between 1978 and 1993, the number of such couples reached one million.

9. Mainly because of an increase in personal income, the status of women will rise.

10. The care of the elderly will become an objective problem, given the increase in numbers. There are hopes that the 4.2.1 model, of three generations living together or near to one another, will prevail.

11. Since the only child has no companions in his family, he will look for them outside and this could have a negative influence on the structure of the family.

12. The development of a market economy and increased mobility will enable the members of the family to come into contact with many other things and enlarge their world vision. As a result, it will enhance the whole quality of the family.

13. Marriages will be postponed in cities. In 1992, the average age at marriage for urban women was 22.5, as against 21.8 in 1987, and the average first birth occurred 2.18 years after marriage.

14. The choice of spouses will no longer be confined to the local area but will expand to the whole country. More marriages with foreigners are also forecast.

15. A plurality of family models will therefore coexist in the next century.

It is obvious that most of the problems raised are those of developed countries. Modern Chinese society cannot avoid them. However, it will certainly take a long time before the countryside can reach that level. The many reports of the sale and abduction of women and children show that old habits die hard. Tian Sen, in his concluding point, was prudent enough to leave the door open. Tradition and modernity will continue to be at odds.
