

THE CHINESE FAMILY SYSTEM

THE CHINESE FAMILY SYSTEM

BY
SING GING SU, M. A., Ph. D.

INTERNATIONAL PRESS
NEW YORK CITY
1922

Copyright, 1922

by

SING GING SU

New York

Printed in the United States of America

by the INTERNATIONAL PRESS

New York

TO

MY FRIENDS

EDWIN C. JONES

AND

ROBERT T. JONES

CONTENTS

PART I

THE HISTORY OF THE CHINESE FAMILY SYSTEM

		INTRODUCTION	11
CHAPTER	I	THE CHINESE FAMILY SYSTEM IN THE MAKING	13
CHAPTER	II	THE ANCIENT CHINESE FAMILY SYSTEM .	26
CHAPTER	III	THE ANCIENT CHINESE FAMILY SYSTEM— <i>continued</i>	35

PART II

THE CHINESE FAMILY SYSTEM OF TODAY

CHAPTER	IV	THE GENERAL STRUCTURE OF THE CHINESE FAMILY OF TODAY	47
CHAPTER	V	CHINESE MARRIAGE	54
CHAPTER	VI	THE RELATION OF HUSBAND AND WIFE . DIVORCE	65
CHAPTER	VII	THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTS AND CHILDREN	75
		I. PARENTAL POWER	
		II. THE POSITION OF THE CHILD	
CHAPTER	VIII	ANCESTOR WORSHIP	84
CHAPTER	IX	THE "GREATER FAMILY"	88
CHAPTER	X	CONCLUSION: EVALUATION OF THE CHINESE FAMILY SYSTEM	92

BIBLIOGRAPHY	99
------------------------	----

INDEX	109
-----------------	-----

PART I.

The History of the Chinese
Family System

INTRODUCTION

China is changing. In a metamorphosis that bids fair to be universal, the family, that ancient and hitherto unalterable basis of Chinese society, is undergoing marked transformation. Part of the change is the more or less mechanical resultant of the combined action of a great number of impersonal and unperceived forces; a greater part is the result of conscious readjustments and rational social control.

For many hundreds of years the Chinese family system worked satisfactorily among millions of people. Now the machinery does not seem to run as smoothly as it did a century ago, and in recent years there has been considerable agitation in China for reform.

The transformation of a basic social institution is fraught with far-reaching and often dangerous consequences. Never before has there been greater need of a clear-sighted view of the Chinese family system. The object of this study is to describe with scientific accuracy, clearness, and simplicity the nature and functioning of the Chinese family system, past and present. It is not an exhaustive study. It aims to embody only enough of the more important facts to constitute a comprehensive view of the Chinese family system as a whole. Throughout the thesis, precedence is given to facts and processes rather than to theories and hypotheses. Equal emphasis is placed upon the bad and the good features of the Chinese family system, for both its successes and failures are of value, either as examples to be copied or as mistakes to be avoided. Above all else the author seeks to furnish reliable data which will help solve the problem of family reform in China and serve as a scientific background for practical policies of control.

The present is clearly discernible only in the light of the past. Any worth-while judgment of an existing social institution presupposes knowledge of its origin and evolution.

Pursuant to this view the first three chapters of this study deal with the salient features of the ancient Chinese family, its origin and development. The main body of the monograph is devoted to a scientific description of the Chinese family of today. The concluding chapter is an attempt to evaluate the Chinese family system upon the basis of the facts presented in the previous chapters. This evaluation is a matter of individual judgment. Its validity must be attested by the reliability of the data upon which it is based and the correctness of the inferences therefrom.

Materials presented in the following pages are drawn from a great variety of sources. The chief primary sources¹ are: (1) Chinese ancient history; (2) ancient poems and folk-songs; (3) ancient laws and customs described in the ancient classics of Chinese Literature; (4) Chinese laws and statutes of different dynasties; (5) the present civil and criminal codes of the Republic of China; (6) personal observations. Secondary sources¹ are the works of various authors on different phases of this subject and allied subjects.

¹ See bibliographical appendix to this monograph.

CHAPTER I

THE CHINESE FAMILY SYSTEM IN THE MAKING

"Before there were husbands and wives there must have been simply people living upon the earth; before there were fathers and sons there must have been husbands and wives; before there were brothers and sisters there must have been parents and children. These relations, between husband and wife, between parent and child, between child and child, are the principal family relations. From them one extends his relationship to other members of the family unto the ninth class¹ of his kindred"². In this brief description of its structural aspect, we find the underlying principle of the Chinese family system.

What was the origin of the husband-wife relationship in China?

The ancient Chinese, like the ancients of most other races, believed that the institution of marriage was first established by a legendary ruler.³ According to ancient Chinese historians and writers, the institution of marriage was established by Fu-shi, first of the three legendary Augusti,⁴ 2852-2738

¹These members are all the consanguineous relations from the great-great-grandparents to the great-great-grandchildren on the father's side. See *Shu King Choo Soo (Book of History, with a commentary and exposition)*, "Canon of Yaou."

²Yen Chih Pan's *Family Instructions*, in Chinese, vol. I, chapter on "Brotherhood."

³It was believed that Swetaketu first formulated the rules of marriage for ancient India; Kekrops for the ancient Greeks; Njavvis and Attjis for the ancient Laplanders; while the ancient Egyptians believed that they were indebted to Menes for the institution of marriage. See Westermarck, *History of Human Marriage*, p. 8.

⁴*Chu Shu Ke Neen T'ung Tseen (Annals of the Bamboo Books)*, pt. I, chap. I; *Yih She (History of China from the Earliest Times Down to the End of the Tsin Dynasty, 203 B.C.)*, vol. III, leaves 1-3 inclusive; *Peh Huo T'ung (A Collection of Essays on Various Social Institutions)*, vol. I, chap. I; *Loo She (The Great History [of China]*

B. C.⁵ They tell us that before, and to some extent during, the time of Fu-hsi there existed none of the three primary family relationships. The sexual life of human beings differed but slightly from that of animals. Children knew only their mothers; paternity was unrecognizable in the maze of promiscuity.⁴ According to Confucius' version of this period of antiquity, people "in winter lived in caves which they had excavated; in summer, in nests which they had framed. They knew not yet the transforming power of fire, but ate the fruits of plants and trees and the flesh of birds and beasts, drinking their blood and swallowing also their hair and feathers. They knew not yet the use of flax and silk, but clothed themselves with feathers and skins".⁶ It was in this primitive stage that Fu-hsi "examined the natural orders of heaven and earth and established the proper relation between husband and wife".⁷

Another authority asserts that it was Nu-Wa, the Augusta succeeding Fu-hsi, who used divination to determine whether a certain man and woman should be united as husband and wife, and that thereby the institution of marriage was established.⁸

from *Antiquity to 1766 B. C.*), pt. I; Hirth, *Ancient History of China*, p. 9; and Gowen, *Outline History of China*, p. 25.

⁵ Different dates are given by the following writers: Mayers (*The Chinese Reader's Manual*, p. 366), 2875-2738 B. C.; Giles (*A Chinese Biographical Dictionary*, p. 233), 2953-2838 B. C.; Arendt ("Synchronistische Regendentabellen, etc.," in *Mittheilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen*, Jahrgang, II, 1899, p. 216), 2852-2738 B. C. Professor Friederich Hirth in *The Ancient History of China* follows the last named work for his chronological data. See *The Ancient History of China*, p. 7. Chronological data in this monograph follow Professor Hirth's work.

⁶ *Li Ki* (or *Canon of Rites*), translation by James Legge, bk. vii, secs. 1, 8. Cf. also description of Fu-hsi: "Before his time the people were like unto beasts, clothing themselves in skins, and feeding themselves on raw flesh, knowing their mothers but not their fathers."—Mayers, *Chinese Reader's Manual*, p. 48.

⁷ See footnote 4.

⁸ *Fong Suh Tung* (*Inquirer Into Manners and Customs*), chapter I.

We find, in Chinese literature of many different periods, no other noteworthy accounts of the origin of marriage in China. Although the opinion long prevailed among Chinese scholars that an edict of Fu-hsi established the institution of marriage, and though this opinion is still held by a few modern Chinese writers on the subject, it is quite impossible for us to accept an anthropomorphic explanation as scientific. Important social institutions like human marriage are not established suddenly and arbitrarily by one person. They emerge and develop in an infinite process of gradual evolution. Westermarck has well said that "popular imagination prefers the clear and concrete; it does not recognize any abstract laws that rule the universe. Nothing exists without a cause, but this cause is sought in an agglomeration of external and internal forces; it is taken to be simple and palpable, a personal being, a god or a king. It is natural, then, that marriage, which plays such an important part in the life of the individual, as well as in that of the people, should be ascribed to a wise and powerful ruler or to direct divine intervention".⁹ Whatever its evolutionary antecedents, it is quite probable that marriage was an established and recognized social institution in China as early as the time of Fu-hsi, 2852-2738 B. C.

Many facts are available in Chinese literature and history for the study of the primitive Chinese family system and for a scientific description of its evolution through many ages to its present form. We are reasonably sure that from the time of Fu-hsi, to the days of Yaou and Shun, 2357-2206 B. C., there existed a metronymic family relationship. Children knew only their mothers.¹⁰ This can be established by historical and etymological facts. The ancient rulers, Shen-Nung, 2737-2705 B. C., third and last of the three Augusti after Nu-Wa, and Hwang-ti,¹¹ 2704-2595 B. C., first of the

⁹ *History of Human Marriage*, p. 9.

¹⁰ See footnote 4.

¹¹ The Chinese historian, Sze-Ma Tsien, known as the "Herodotus

Wu-ti, or five emperors after Shen-Nung, were both descendants of Shau-tien, but bear different surnames. The surname of Shen-Nung is Kiang,¹² while that of Hwang-ti is Ke.¹³ According to the concurrent explanation of various historians, Hwang-ti's surname was Ke because he was living with, and brought up by, his mother near the river called Ke where his mother's family dwelt.¹⁴ An even more striking fact is that there is a character in each of the surnames of these ancient rulers, meaning "female" or "woman." The same thing is true of the surname of Yaou, fourth of the "five emperors" of ancient China. Yaou's surname is Ye-chi, which is his mother's surname.¹⁵ Furthermore, the Chinese word for "surname" is composed of two characters, meaning, respectively, "woman" and "born," or "beget." Chinese etymologists, commenting on these facts, explain that the surname was originally the mother's name only.¹⁶

Another significant fact may be mentioned here. In the *Annals of the Bamboo Books*, containing the biographies of ancient rulers,—Hwang-ti, Che, Chuen-heuh, Kuh, Yaou, and Shun,—parentage was recorded not in the name of the father but in that of the mother, with the exception of the Emperor Kuh, in which case the name of neither parent was given. We find in the *Bamboo Books* such sentences as "His mother was named so and so" or "His mother was called so and so," and in not a single instance is the name of the father mentioned.¹⁷

From these historical and etymological facts we can con-

of China," commenced the history of China with Hwang-ti. His *Historical Records* were written 90 B. C. from materials collected by his father. A translation into French has recently been published by M. Chavannes. (See bibliographical appendix to this monograph.)

¹² Sze-Ma Tsien, *Historical Records*, vol. I, bk. I.

¹³ *History of Chinese Customs*, pt. I, chap. I, sec. 6.

¹⁴ *Chu Shu Ke Neen T'ung Tseen* (*Annals of the Bamboo Books*) These are said to be the oldest records of Chinese history. Cf. *Historical Records*, pt. I, bk. I.