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## Part 4

# FAMILY AND CLANSHIP



## THE FAMILY

*Ta Chen*

Source: Ta Chen, *Emigrant Communities in South China: A Study of Overseas Migration and Its Influence* (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations; reprint: New York: AMS Press, 1978), pp. 118–48.

Whether the larger actual and proportional expenditure on house room in the emigrant community, as compared with the non-emigrant, also reflects, among other things, a larger family, the information at our disposal does not permit us to judge. Although most of the emigrant households included in the more detailed budget study still have members overseas, it is also true that one of the first and most tradition-sanctioned expressions of social status in China is the size of the family. The respected man in the community not only makes provision for as large a male offspring as he can afford,<sup>1</sup> but also often keeps around him members of the family who, without the inducement of a comfortable home, would drift off to start a home of their own. Perhaps the two tendencies cancel each other, so that actually there is not much difference in the size of households as between the emigrant and the non-emigrant community.

Certainly the essentials of the family system have not been changed by many generations of contact with the world outside of China and its different attitudes toward this basic social nucleus of society. How that system, characterized as it is by joint management of its resources and rigid control of the individual member, operates in the emigrant community can best, perhaps, be described by means of concrete examples.

### Family structure

The first case is that of an upper-class family. The head of this household is a man, 61 years of age. Brought up in modest circumstances and hard pressed by poverty, he went to Bangkok at the age of seventeen to become apprenticed at a monthly wage of five Siamese dollars (*Baht*). Later, he started a business of his own which gradually expanded in several

directions. After forty years he was established successfully in grocery, dry goods, and rice businesses, and also in general export and import. Today he is a millionaire. When he is away, his wife manages the family affairs at home in China. Living with her are one of his concubines, her own children and the concubine's children. The husband lives in Bangkok with three concubines and the children of two of them. Thus the family may be said to have two branches in the life-time of its founder, one in South China and the other in Siam, an arrangement common enough to be widely recognized as the "dual family system". The combined family is made up of twenty-two persons, as shown in Table 1. The married daughters are not usually considered members of the family since they are not living in their father's house. The family owns three slave girls (*Mui Tsai*) who are not counted as members either, although, as distinct from servants, they are permanent members of the household.

The second example (see Table 2) is that of a middle-class family. Here also the head of the household is abroad for the time being, living in Singapore with a concubine. In the village at home the wife of the emigrant presides over the household. In 1934, this family was composed of eighteen persons, not including a married daughter, eight living in the village and ten living in Singapore.

The third example (see Table 3) is that of a lower-class family. Without counting two married daughters, it had ten members in 1934. The wife of the absent head of the family manages the household affairs in the village. The head is in Bangkok but has no family there. The son is a bookkeeper in Siam, temporarily out of work, and has left his young wife with his mother at home.

These three examples will give some inkling of the indefinite variety in the composition of typical families in the emigrant community. The immediate family circle thus made up does not, however, yet fully indicate the size of the household. By and large, the traditional joint family still prevails. Aside from husband, wife, concubines, and their children, the household usually also includes other kin—a younger brother of the husband and his family, or grandchildren, a father or mother of the husband no longer actively engaged in household management or, if the head of the household is old enough to be a grandfather, his daughters-in-law and grandchildren.

The home remittances of the emigrant, therefore, supply the needs of a household variously composed: perhaps only of wife and children, more often also of members of the larger family. When the head of the household has a son abroad with him, as in the third of our examples, the two will customarily not make separate contributions for the upkeep of their dependents, but the contribution will be a joint one, addressed to the acting head of the household in the home village who, in turn, will take care of the son's immediate dependents, his wife and children. Usually it is the wife of the head who looks after the affairs at home while he is away (not an

Table 1 Composition of household under "Dual Family System".

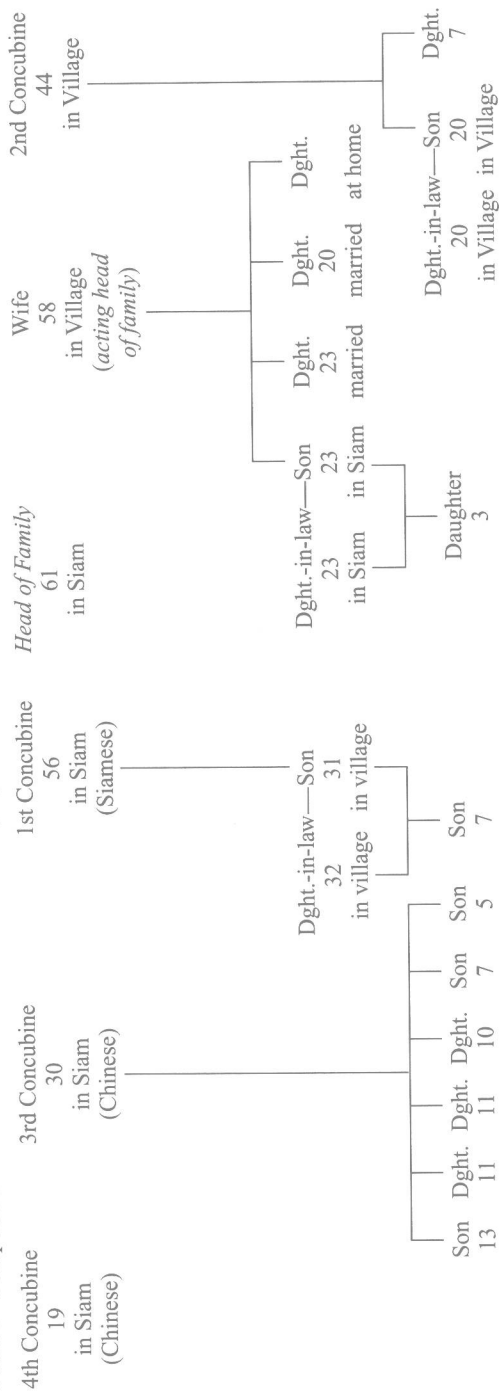


Table 2

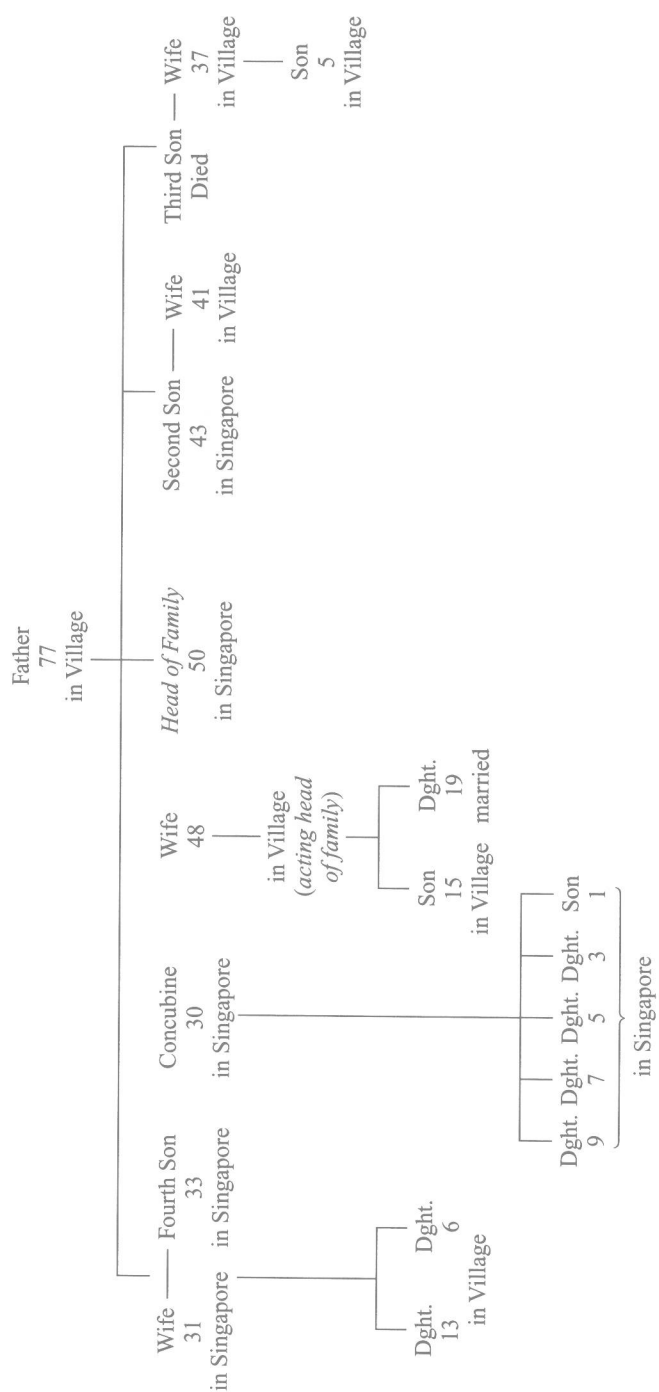
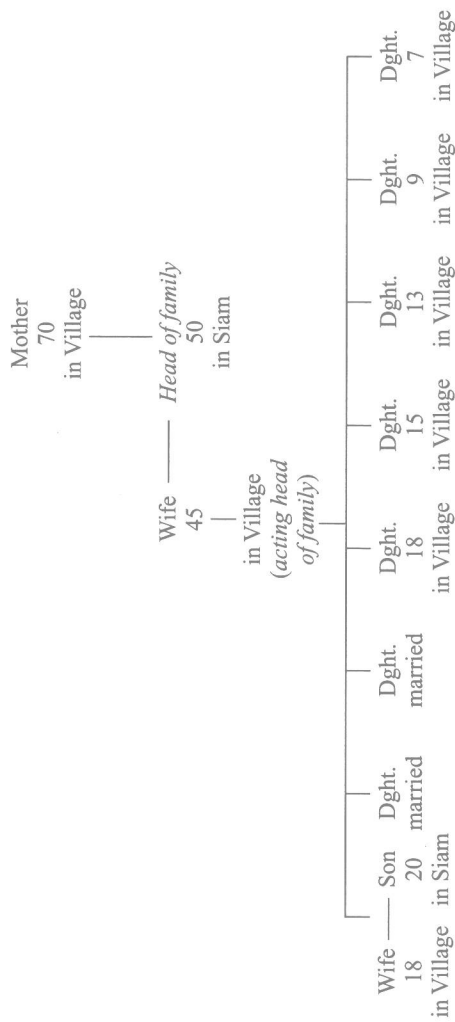


Table 3





aged father or mother); only occasionally, when the wife is not sufficiently experienced, may some other older woman act as head of the household and take charge of all the matters that affect the immediate family circle. This may at times include important questions having to do with business, education, marriage, religious observances, and other decisions that require considerable judgment. The head of the family in the Nan Yang if his circumstances permit cohabits with another woman, and this gives rise to the “dual family system” to be further discussed below.

### The chief functions of the family

#### *Perpetuation of the family tree*

The basic desire for family survival which has so often been described as the central source of motivation in Chinese private and social life has its living connections with the past and the future. The peasant in South China is not an individualist. He feels himself bound to his sires and to his progeny by a blood relationship that involves both duties and benefits. He usually holds to a firm belief in the power of his ancestors to bestow blessings on his home and to avert misfortune from it. While the scope of the present study does not permit a fuller analysis of this belief, of its causes, and of the social uses that spring from it, a few illustrative comments may be in place. In the opinion of an elderly woman:

We worship spirits because they give us protection in many ways. Without this protection, all sorts of evil things may befall the family's fortunes and the health of its children. . . . Because he had a good geomancer and gained the protection of his deceased forebears, so-and-so, who now lives in Singapore, has been able to accumulate a large fortune.

To the minds of the more educated emigrants the veneration of ancestors represents not so much a worship of ghosts or a religious service as it affords an occasion for the remembrance and commemoration of the departed. A man in Singapore, in a letter to his younger brother in Amoy, says:

In your last letter you mentioned that your family had gone to visit the tomb of our late father near Amoy. You may like to know that on the same day my wife and I prepared certain dishes to commemorate him here in our Singapore home. We feel that on that day we should recall father's love for us, remember what all through his life he has done for the family and for the community, and thus refresh our memory of his perfect personality.