

INTRODUCTION: THE CHINESE FAMILY MODEL
IN THE WORLD OF ART

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A rationale for this group of scholars having come together to discuss the role of the family in the world of Chinese art is not hard to come by. If one asks, why might art historians be so interested in family, aside from the fact that it relates us to other people who are not art historians, several generic answers readily emerge. We are interested in art production and in art content, and family can be a factor in both of those. We are interested in all those things one can see by looking at the many dimensions of families: how people construct and construe a view of themselves as individuals and as part of society, how they understand human nature and the makeup of the human mind, how they view issues of morality, of gendered behavior and the sexual body, of socialization and education, of victimization and violence, of changing times.

The importance of the family as a conceptual and rhetorical model for Chinese cultural constructs runs little risk of being overstated but considerable risk of being misconstrued. Yet the various intersections of the world of Chinese art with the theme of family have generated only isolated cases of serious academic examination. Obviously, the family has been a subject of deep contemplation for China anthropologists, social historians, psychologists, and literary historians. But in the realm of the visual arts, research scholars still have to justify their assumptions thoroughly and establish their methodological foundations each time the topic of the relationship of family to artistic representation or production is pursued, which is not too often.

There is no single locus for the formal authorization of the family's overriding importance in Chinese cultural history. The centrality of the family is attached to a spiritual system of ancestral rituals that dates back to a time in the Shang and early Zhou dynasties when they referred only to

THE FAMILY MODEL

the ruling family or to leading aristocratic families, and perhaps in only one region of what later became “China.” How do we trace the evolution of this system from social and geographic exclusivity to near-universality, from one associated with great privilege, private and intrafamilial, to one whose distribution throughout the culture, its literature, and visual arts helped to bind the society together with bonds of shared values? Confucian rhetoric, in its *Doctrine of the Mean*, its Five Relationships, its Three Obediences and Four Virtues regarding women’s behavioral obligations,¹ its Seven Outs and Three Not-Outs regarding divorce,² and above all its filial obligations apotheosized under the rubric of *xiao*,³ firmly established in the public mind the analogical linkage between the state and the family, clarified the hierarchical parallels between rulers, and ruled in palace and home in terms of proprieties, properties, and mutual obligations. But anti-Confucianists as well, especially the predynastic Qin-state Legalists, are also credited with helping to establish the Chinese family model as an all-encompassing reality, the early Qin with their well-field system of land tenure, their family-based system of collective responsibility, and their universal registration of families for taxation purposes. These prescriptions point to the family as the primary social unit by which the typical individual is subjected to, subsumed by, and advanced in society, and they designate the extended three-generation family as an expected source of harmony and well-regulated discipline, as the assurance of a protective embrace throughout one’s life and on into the afterlife.

As a psychological matter, the Chinese family model contrasts with its Western counterpart, which modern culture tends to conceptualize along Freudian lines that construct personality in the context of intra-familial conflict, launching the young adult into the world as an individual, independent or at least semi-independent of his or her family of origin.

¹ The so-called Three Obediences: “The woman follows (and obeys) the man: — in her youth, she follows her father and elder brother; when married, she follows her husband; when her husband is dead, she follows her son.” *Li Chi*, trans. Legge, 1:441 (bk. 9, sec. 3). The Four Virtues: women were to be virtuous in their actions, in conversation, in their appearance, and in their work about the home; see Ko, “Pursuing Talent and Virtue,” 28–30. ² The seven classic grounds for divorcing one’s wife (the seven “outs”) were: barrenness, wanton conduct, neglect of parents-in-law, garrulousness, theft, jealousy and ill will, and incurable disease. The three barriers to divorce (“not outs”) were if the wife had kept three years’ mourning for either parent-in-law, the husband’s family had become wealthy after she was married into it, or the wife had no home to return to. ³ For a study of illustrations to the *Xiao jing*, *Classic of Filial Piety*, see Barnhart, *Li Kung-lin’s “Classic of Filial Piety.”* A typical example of the countless strictures categorized under this rubric reads, “(A son) should not forget his parents in a single lifting up of his feet, and therefore he will walk in the highway and not take a by-path, he will use a boat and not attempt to wade through a stream; — not daring, with the body left him by his parents, to go in the way of peril. He should not forget his parents in the utterance of a single word, and therefore an evil word will not issue from his mouth, and an angry word will not come back to his person. Not to disgrace his person and not to cause shame to his parents may be called filial duty [*xiao*].” *Li Chi*, 2:229.

Whereas in the contemporary Western view, family and government interests are often seen as separate and even in conflict with each other, the Chinese model fuses the familial and political into a single paradigm. In our explorations, however, we will not forget that in the play of individual and group, all is in flux historically and varied both geographically and socially, resisting too-ready generalizations about family psychology.⁴ Alternate philosophies and practices played a major role in Chinese intellectual life, such as the development of characterology (*renlun jianshi*), which focused on individual traits and not collective obligation or family dynamics, albeit such traits were usually understood as being forged intact at birth rather than gradually developed, Western style, in dynamic interaction with other family members throughout one's childhood and adolescence.⁵ The prevalence of conflict within the *real* Chinese family is also notable, both in the well-known mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship and in the distance and conflict between father and son, the latter well described by Margery Wolf. After the age of six or seven, she writes,

social pressure and the father's own understanding of "what is right" force him to create a social distance between himself and his son.... Fathers say that it is only from this aloof distance that they can engender in their sons the proper behavior of a good adult. "You cannot be your son's friend and correct his behavior." A child will not take seriously the friendly suggestions of an obviously loving adult, but he will obey the commands of a stern feared parent. This philosophy, of course, reflects (or is reflected in) the educational techniques of Chinese schools even today.... A Chinese father wants respect and obedience even at the price of fear or dislike.... He is aided in his endeavors by the sanctions of his culture, the example of his neighbors, and the teachings of the schools.⁶

⁴ Efforts to construct a Chinese developmental model that provides a culture-specific equivalent to psychodynamic principles have failed, on the same grounds that Freudian theory may be seen as unscientific and overreaching, "for treating traditional China as an undifferentiated cultural entity; for largely ignoring problems of regional, class, and individual variation in Chinese society...; and for the fairly unchanging and stereotypical picture of Chinese 'modal character' which results." Whyte, review of *Mao's Revolution*, 1355. ⁵ Qian, *Spirit and Self in Medieval China*. ⁶ Wolf, "Child Training and the Chinese Family," 40-41, 43. One of China's most memorable father-son relationships, drawn from semiautobiographical reality but transformed into "classic" fiction, is that of the protagonist Baoyu and his father, Jia Zheng, in *Dream of the Red Chamber (The Story of the Stone)*; see esp. Chap. 17, or the passage in which the father, in the midst of beating the boy, bellows in rage, "Merely by fathering a monster like this I have proved myself an unfilial son [and] now that I have the opportunity at last, I may as well finish off what I have begun and put him down, like the vermin he is." Cao Xueqin, *Story of the Stone*, 2:149.

THE FAMILY MODEL

Rather than a world of harmony, conformity, and comfort in binding one generation to the next, as found in the classic texts, the operant principle in reality was one of the “stern father, compassionate mother”: “the mother is close but not respected, while the father has respect but not closeness.”⁷

While generalizations about Chinese social psychology are made at the risk of essentializing, avoiding generalizations altogether has its own obvious drawbacks; the following is offered here at some risk:

In traditional Chinese society, life-long submission to a dominant parent is healthy; maladjustment emerges from a parental attachment *so weak* that self-determination threatens the parental right to dictate espousement; dysfunction emerges from romantic affection *so strong* that it supersedes the filial responsibility (*xiao*) to one’s parents or in-laws. Self-directed romantic attachments like that of the third century BCE poet Sima Xiangru to his wife Zhuo Wenjun were occasionally celebrated but only as exceptions. More typically, internal conflict between competing desires, between romance and filiality, can lead to an impasse in which sex must become sublimated into political or religious activity, or can lead to a rupture with one’s parents and family, or both. In two semi-autobiographical Chinese novels... *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Family*, such maladjustments led predictably to the death of the romantic heroine and an interruption of the hero’s narrative passage. In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the hero eventually renounced family and world for a sublimated orbit in the company of Daoist immortals; in Ba Jin’s *Family*, resentment toward family authority and “feudal” stagnation ultimately led the hero onto the path of political anarchism.^[8] In urban Chinese society today, marriage by choice rather than by parental arrangement is now the norm, but in psychological terms the transition to “modernity” is still incomplete. In theory, women may “hold up half of the sky” and marriage may be a “partnership,” but in reality marriage remains afflicted by centuries of patriarchal tradition: males frequently remain emotionally remote from their wives (“the interaction between husband and wife is not overly charged with

⁷ Edwards, *Men and Women in Qing China*, 123. ⁸ On *Dream of the Red Chamber*, see Louise Edwards’s essay in this volume; see also Edwards, *Men and Women in Qing China*, particularly Chap. 3, “Gender Imperatives: Jia Baoyu’s Bisexuality”; Chap. 4, “Young Women and Prescriptions of Purity”; and Chap. 7, “Jia Family Women: Unrestrained ‘Indulgent Mothers.’”; and Ba Jin, *Family*. On *Family* in film, see Jerome Silbergeld’s essay in this volume.

either positive or negative emotions [and] is indeed a secondary relationship in the context of the family”⁹), understanding love as sex, with the result that 30 percent of women reportedly suffer *significant* spousal abuse and more than a quarter of the entire world’s suicides are by Chinese women.¹⁰

In America today, where one-half of all marriages result in divorce and one-third of all births are to unmarried mothers, social policy and research tend to locate the decline of the traditional family not in traditional norms but in the larger social and industrial context, and they typically looks to the nuclear family itself as a primary source for retaining or regaining social stability. In contemporary China, as it faces the decline of the extended family, a skyrocketing divorce rate, and challenges to the integrity of the nuclear family, what values will be embraced to meet this change and what explanatory models will be adopted?

The social and economic self-sufficiency of family and clan has often been cited as the historical bulwark in modern times against the arrival of genuine nationalism, and some of the traditional Chinese family system has survived even into our own lifetime. As a mark of its durability, even as Maoists attacked the nuclear family, attempting to initiate a radical transition from extended family to communal super-family in the 1950s and 1960s, the traditional family remained the basis of its political rhetoric. Tani Barlow has written:

The modern socialist [family] *jiating* and the Maoist [state] *guojia* coexisted in unity — as concept metaphors of each other. This is how I interpret mobilizations like the 1957 campaign “Industrious and Frugal in Establishing the Nation, Industrious and Frugal in Managing the Family,” where state and family are virtually synonymous; what operated in one sphere translates directly into the other.... The work of housewives (*jiating zhufu*) must exactly mirror the work going on outside the *jiating* in the

⁹ Wolf, “Child Training and the Chinese Family,” 37–62; see also Baker, *Chinese Family and Kinship*, 61ff. ¹⁰ Silbergeld, *Hitchcock with a Chinese Face*, 20. China represents about 20 percent of the world population but in the 1990s had approximately 44 percent of the world’s suicides (four times the per capita rate of the United States) and 56 percent of female suicides. Unlike most nations, China’s suicides were predominantly rural (three to seven times greater than the urban suicide rate), and China was unusual in having more women than men who commit suicide. The working assumption is that many of these suicides were responses to stresses, including abusive marital relationships, the powerlessness of young women, and weakened family ties. China also has one of the highest suicide rates among the elderly, which has risen together with the decline of health care support for the aged, traditionally provided by the family. Phillips, Liu, and Zhang, “Suicide and Social Change in China.”

THE FAMILY MODEL

guojia. The same is true of *guojia* (postmonarchy nation/state), which partakes of an older social formation, *guo* (empire), and *jiating*, meaning a contemporary domestic unit that formed in part as a reaction to *jia* (patriline).¹¹

But only since the decline of Maoism has the *most* radical historical challenge to Chinese family structure and dynamics appeared; only since the Maoist commune disappeared into strange memory has an extraordinary rush toward urbanization — with all its concomitant modern technologies from birth-control pills to high-rise apartments and a perceived need to rein in the massive population growth triggered by Maoist policies — brought about an historic breakdown in the traditional extended family. This breakdown has included, in the broadest sense, a lessening of parental authority over their offspring, often now a pampered single-child generation, and especially a breakdown in the various private networks of support that the self-sufficient family traditionally provided for senior family members' transition into old age.

In turning from family in the most general sense to the role of family in the world of art and artists, we might first consider the remarkable number and variety of family-related themes that Chinese art and artists, and likewise their critics and historians, have consistently chosen *not* to engage. To wit, consider the following list of “universals” that characterize the family in Chinese history, as proposed by Patricia Ebrey: descent based on patrilineage, ritual offerings made to recent ancestors, family property divided among brothers, marriages among patrilineal kin disapproved (exogamy), essentially all women married and late marriages rare, adoption common to relieve childlessness, young married couples at least starting if not also finishing their lives in the homes of senior relatives.¹² To these might be added arranged marriages and the mutual bride-price–dowry exchange between maritally contracted families, the classic mother/daughter-in-law rivalry (for, among other things, the affection of the son/husband), the emotionally distant relationship between father and son (closeness seen by the father as a risk to proper discipline), concubinage, the salability of children, the high frequency of female infanticide, and the increasing expectation in later times of widowhood chastity. In a culture highly attuned to all this, one encounters such topics in literature, both directly and indirectly, both in narrative prose and in poetry; and yet, what confrontation or even hints of such issues appear in the history of Chinese visual arts? One might well ask: are these legitimate or even possible subjects for “high” art?

¹¹ Barlow, “Theorizing Woman,” 273, 278n1. ¹² Ebrey, “Women, Marriage, and the Family.”

In the realm of aesthetics made visible, the theoretical centrality of Chinese family seems to be matched in practice, for the most part, by an avoidance of depicting the family. Painting, especially, is a man's world and a world of men's friendships, where wives and children appear infrequently, where most women who do appear are not wives but entertainers of various sorts, and where the extended-family ideal seems almost to be forgotten, along with aunts and uncles, sisters and brothers, grandmothers and granddaughters. In tombs, the source of most pre-Song painting, where the living are not shown together with the dead, surviving children often have no place in the company of deceased parents. In Song and later painting, auspicious paintings of children, highly idealized, became common, but one is almost as likely to find a naturalistic parent-child relationship among animals, like Muqi's famous painted gibbons, as among people. In more recent centuries, formal family portraits were the notable exception, but these would not generally have been regarded in the same terms as landscapes, for display as collectibles or as what today we might call "fine art." Family ideals and family flaws alike are harder to spot in Chinese art than one might anticipate.

The essays in this volume collectively suggest, however, in ways direct and indirect, just how important these issues are to the understanding of China's arts. Meaningful forays into this territory do not just happen. A broad knowledge of the real world beyond the arts is required. Thus, this volume begins with the presentations and commentary by four representatives of that "real" world, to set forth perspectives in anthropology (Rubie S. Watson, "Families in China: Ties that Bind?"; and Stevan Harrell, "Orthodoxy, Resistance, and the Family in Chinese Art"), psychiatry (Arthur Kleinman, "Danger, Subjectivity, and the Chinese Family: Interpersonal Processes and the Changing Political and Moral Economies of the Self"), and social work (Vivian B. Shapiro, "The Ongoing Transformation of the Family: A Western Perspective"), both Chinese and Western. Three more sections follow: "Real and Ideal, The Family in Ancient Times" examines prescriptions and descriptions of the family, including artisan families (Anthony Barbieri-Low, "Artisan Families in Ancient China"), in life and death, found in archaeological sources (Jay Xu, "Family and Gender in Burial Custom: The Case of Western Zhou Aristocracy"), and constructed in early literature (Michael Nylan, "Families in the Classical Era [323 BCE–316 CE]"). "Presenting the Family in Art" examines the appearance of children (Ann Barrott Wicks, "Picturing Children"), adults (Dora C.Y. Ching, "Shadows in Life and Death: Family Portraiture"), and families (Stevan Harrell, "A Family Tradition That Portrays Families in Paintings without Painting Any Family Pictures: The *Nianhua* of Mianzhu, Sichuan") in paintings and prints, in

THE FAMILY MODEL

architecture and gardens (Klaas Ruitenbeek, “Mansions in Life and in Death”; Louise Edwards, “Painting Boundaries of Sex Segregation in Qing China: Representing the Family in *The Red Chamber Dream*”), and in cinema (Jerome Silbergeld, “The Ghosts of Patriarchy Past: Family Dynamics and Psycho-Politics in Recent Chinese-Language Cinema”). Finally, “The Family as Site and Symbol of Artistic Production” looks at real artist-families in China (Ankeney Weitz, “Art and Family Identity during the Yuan Dynasty: The Zhao Family of Wuxing”; Craig Clunas, “The Family Style: Art as Lineage in the Ming and Qing”) and Japan (Yukio Lippit, “The Heirloom Painting in Early Modern Japan”), as well as at virtual families, artistic lineages conceived in familial terms (*jia*) by traditional historians of Chinese and Japanese arts.

We hope that these initial explorations will generate greater awareness and stimulate further research into the rewarding study of art and family in Chinese culture.

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