Socialism and the Chinese Peasant Family*

WILLIAM L. PARISH, JR.

THOUGH there have been in China since 1949 occasional deviations in the policy regarding family life, some ideals enunciated at the start of the revolutionary regime have remained constant. The dominant policy has been that the family should be retained and its strengths used. However, family commitments should not interfere with commitments to the state or the collective, and within the family feudal customs should be eliminated. The parents' stranglehold over the lives of their children should be broken. Children should be able to marry without parental interference. There should be no buying and selling of brides, and big, ostentatious and wasteful wedding feasts should be stopped. In an effort to limit births, marriages should be delayed to age twenty-three for girls and age twenty-five for boys in rural areas. As part of the program for more equal treatment of women, parents should show no favoritism towards boys. Women like men should work in the fields, and nurseries should be established so as to help women join in productive work. At more sporadic intervals, young children have been urged to teach their parents about the thought of Mao Tse-tung in order to rid them of old feudal ideas.

In practice, reality has lagged behind the new ideal. The traditional ideal was that grandparents, parents, and children should live together in one large extended family. Because of high mortality and poverty, the common man had great difficulty in ever achieving the ideal. Now, with improved health and economic security, he may come closer to the old ideal than he ever did before. Grandparents almost invariably live with at least one grown son today. Though brothers tend to separate their finances soon after they marry, they frequently continue to live in the same compound or next door to each other with the result that their families are in constant interaction. Though the children may be consulted more than before, in a large proportion of all rural marriages the parents are the ones who lead the negotiations with go-betweens. The great majority of go-betweens are now kinsmen—particularly aunts—who live in other villages, but a small number of professional go-betweens continue to operate. Though some austere moderns eschew any exchange of gifts or money, a large number consider that a certain minimum sum of money and a few gifts are demanded by propriety. Others, with their new found wealth, give bride prices and gifts to rival that found in any traditional marriage. As in the past, some families with too many sons who must marry go heavily into debt in order to obtain proper girls for their family. Marriages are just as

*William L. Parish, Jr. is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago.

* This is a revision of a paper presented to the August 1974 Annual Meetings of the American Sociological Association. I am grateful to Marc Blecher, Ezra Vogel and Martin Whyte for comments on earlier versions. The research was supported by a grant from the Social Sciences Research Council's Joint Committee on Contemporary China, by grant GS-35309 from the National Science Foundation, and the University of Chicago Center for Far Eastern Studies.
often near the legal ages of 18 for girls and 20 for boys as they are to the ideal rural ages of 23 and 25. Boy children are preferred, and without massive administrative pressure in selected sites, the birth rate is slow to decline. Though there has been a degree of change throughout the country, and though some areas have changed more than others, the story of resistance to change is repeated over and over in the official press, by foreign visitors, in reports by overseas Chinese who have visited their home villages, and in interviews with expatriates in Hong Kong.

1 For example, "Sunlight of Mao Tse-tung's thought shines on thousands of homes," Kuang-ming ih-pao (Peking), 31 March 1970, in Survey of China Mainland Press (SCMP), no. 4034. "Unless the clan relationship is destroyed, the seal of power will not be grasped," People's Daily (Peking), 30 January 1969, in SCMP, no. 4358. "Bring into fuller play the role of women as a labor force," Hung ch'i (Red Flag), no. 3, March 1973, in Survey of China Mainland Magazines, no. 750. These articles tend to follow a standard form which is that a problem once existed but it has now been solved—at least in one place. Chou En-lai may give a clue as to how to read this kind of article. Commenting on a model play, Chou says, "It is not possible that everyone behaves like the advanced commune members depicted in the play. Otherwise, there would have been no need to stage the play. Those with penetrating eyes know that what a play calls for [in social attitudes] are precisely those things which some people still find hard to do. The play is staging something exemplary to help the less advanced catch up.... Those who come to China for fact-finding don't have to hunt for any inside information. They can discover our problems from the stage or from our publications.... When we encourage the good and criticize the bad, it means that bad things surely still exist and good ones are not yet perfect." From Edgar Snow, "Talks with Chou En-lai, 1964," in Snow's The Long Revolution (New York: Random House, 1972), paperback edition, pp. 228–29. Brackets added by Snow.

2 For example, see Snow's talk with Mao Tse-Tung in The Long Revolution, p. 44, and Audrey Topping's talk with Chou En-lai, "Return to changing China," National Geographic, December 1971, p. 813. Note the frequency with which visitors report grandparents in the homes they visit and grandparents tending kids on the street—for example, Harrison E. Salisbury, To Peking and Beyond (New York: Quadrangle, 1973), Barbara W. Tuchman, Notes from China (New York: Macmillan, 1972). Also note the detailed study of one family by Peggy Printz, "The Chen family still has class," New York Times Magazine, 14 November 1973.


4 Twenty-five former residents who had spent some time in villages were interviewed in Hong Kong during 1973. They included officials who had made many visits to villages in the course of their administrative work, administrators who had been sent to May 7 cadre schools in or near villages for two years, peasants who had spent all their work life in a village, and students who had been sent from the city to work in the countryside. Most were from Kwangtung province just north of Hong Kong, but three had their primary experience in north and central China. Two others, though Cantonese, had spent some time in the North.

There were a number of means to check on these people's veracity: Two were not refugees but rather people who had left through legal application procedures. Though one of these people was rather critical of bureaucrats, both tended to be positive about China, villages, and villagers. One looked forward to occasional visits back to his friends in China. Both served as useful checks on other informants. Even among those who had left illegally there was a wide spectrum of opinion. Some of the students who had been sent to a village were very positive about China, very negative about capitalism and Hong Kong, and only regretful that they had not been able to earn enough to eat in the village or had not been reassigned to an urban job. Others were more negative, but even among the most negative, by asking for very specific features and events it was still possible at times to get very useful information. By comparing the responses of those of varying opinions, it was possible to draw conclusions about the general accuracy of different respondents.

The most problematic biases, however, were not those involved with a general negativity or positiveness towards China—these biases were rather easy to detect. Rather, the most problematic biases were those involved with idiosyncratic personal histories. One youth who had a personal conflict with his team leader was a very poor informant on local leadership though an excellent informant on other aspects of the village. Another person who had been attacked by students in the Cultural Revolution was, by his own admission, not a very good informant about students and youth but excellent on the intricacies of the bureaucracy. The most important guard against these idiosyncratic biases was...
The description of women and their position in the family by Soong Ching Ling (Madame Sun Yat-sen) in *Peking Review* is but one example from the press:

Today in our country there are people's communes in rural places where women receive less pay than men for equal work in production. In certain villages patriarchal ideas still have their effect. Proportionately more boys than girls attend school. Parents need the girls to do household work. Some even feel that girls will eventually enter another family and therefore it would not pay to send them to school. Moreover, when girls are to be married, their parents often ask for a certain amount of money or various articles from the family of the would-be husband. Thus the freedom of marriage is affected. Finally, as farmers want to add [to] the labour force in their families, the birth of a son is expected, while that of a daughter is considered a disappointment. This repeated desire to have at least one son has an adverse effect on birth control and planned birth. A women with many children around her naturally finds it too difficult to participate in any productive labor. Another thing hampering a working woman is her involvement in household work. This prevents many women from full, wholehearted participation in public services.

Soong Ching Ling attributes this situation simply to the survival of feudal customs. No doubt this is in part true. In many villages, the period since Communist "liberation" spans only 25 years, and most parents grew up with a different set of ideas. While accepting this argument, this article will maintain that the "feudal customs" are retained longer in China than they might in another social system because of structural arrangements.

Change is also slowed by the Chinese Communist propensity to rely on education and persuasion rather than coercion. Though the press has frequently spoken out against wastefulness at wedding feasts, for example, direct administrative sanctions are rarely used to stop the practice. Though the peasant can not, or should not, borrow from his team or local savings bank to finance a big wedding, this does not stop him from borrowing from kin and friends.

---

extended contact. It was very important to get detailed personal histories and to keep asking informants whether they had actually seen such and such an event or whether they were just reporting an opinion about it. Contact with the informants ranged from a low of two or three hours up to forty or fifty hours over twenty separate interview sessions. Contact with those informants relied on most heavily in this paper exceeded fifteen hours and six or more interview sessions. Except for a few villagers who could not speak Mandarin, the interview was one-for-one with no outsider present. For most interviews, notes were taken by hand during the interview and then typed within twenty-four hours.

Another check on the veracity of informants was that some who reported one village as very backward would also report another village as very advanced. Two informants who had lived in northern and southern villages reported great admiration for the political activism of the northern and exasperation with the backwardness of southern villages they had lived in. A similar phenomenon was found when informants were asked to give a household census of their production team. This was the most exhilarating part of the research and the major basis for this paper. Revealed in the village was a wide range of personalities and households. Some households were harmonious, well run and prosperous. Others were filled with bickering, others were deeply in debt. Some individuals were committed, hard workers. Others were lazy. Some individuals hardly said anything in public; others were super-critical and running off at the mouth all the time. Some thought only of saving for their family; others were incurable playboys or dedicated drinkers, using up all their family's resources. It does not seem that such a wide range of types, often reported by the same informant, could come out of some mysterious bias.

Old customs are retained in the family, however, not only because of feudal survivals or the go-slow, persuasion policy of the government. There are good, rational reasons for retaining many of the old family forms. The present economic structure of the countryside makes the traditional family, with its emphasis on parental control, preferences for several male children, and an early marriage age a reasonable adjustment to present realities. The “realities” to which the contemporary family must adjust fall into three large groups: First, the peasant household is still an important unit for economic production. Although the household no longer holds much land to speak of, through cooperation of members with different skills, it generates a crucial part of the peasant’s income. Second, the welfare system is still based on the family. Except in rare circumstances, the state assumes that those who cannot support themselves will be supported by their families. Finally, in contrast to many other developing societies, strict migration laws keep young adults away from the cities and in their home villages, close to their parents.

Rural Economy

The structure of the family is greatly influenced by the economic arrangements in the countryside. Three aspects of the rural economy are important: the nature of collective work, the nature of private work, and the role of the household as a property-holding unit.

Collective Work. Families lost their rights to land in the collectivization movement of the mid-1950s. Land is now held by the production team, a unit of 20 to 40 households that shares the profits of the annual harvest. In contrast to the Kibbutz in Israel, however, payment is not according to need but according to work. Because of this, some families fare better than others. The more able-bodied laborers a family has—particularly male laborers—the more it will earn. The well-being of a village family is highly dependent on its hand/mouth ratio. Except for a few families with members working outside the village in a factory or government office, the most affluent families in the village are those with the most male hands and the fewest mouths to feed. The consequence for the family is that there is a tension between having more children to insure more male hands in the future and having fewer children to minimize the number of mouths to feed. The tension seems to be resolved more often than not in favor of having several children early in life. It is only after three, four, or five children have been born in rapid succession, and after there are one or more boys among them, that a family begins to think of limiting births.6

Though the commune system creates a degree of security for the average peasant that was unknown in traditional villages, the differences that remain still cause anxiety. In relatively prosperous communes visited by foreigners in the mid-1960s, differences between the highest and lowest per capita income in a single production team averaged about three-to-one. Individual teams occasionally had a ratio as high as seven-to-one.7 However, ratios of three or seven to one fail to convey the

---

6 Based on household censuses from interviews TCT, PAPt, HYH, KCK. Also see Janet Salaff, “Youth, Family, and Political Control in Communist China,” unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1972, and the comments by Mao Tse-tung in Snow, The Long Revolution, p. 44. 
7 Keith Buchanan, The Transformation of the Chinese Earth (London: Bell and Jones, 1970), pp. 136-137. Also see the excellent discussion of
urgency of having a better income in the village. Peasants are not only worried that they will get less cash than the next family but also that they may get no cash at all. This occurs when a family draws more grain than it could normally afford. Families overdraw grain when it is allotted, in part, according to the number of household members rather than completely according to labor power. The grain allotted to household members according to their number and ages, termed “basic grain,” usually ranges from 30 to 70 per cent of all grain distributed. Since a family can draw this grain even though they do not have money to pay for it, it provides the basic food security for the villager. However, in principle it must eventually be paid for, and a family which continually has too many mouths to feed and too few hands to work can go for years without receiving any cash income from the collective. Any cash they have for buying daily necessities will have to come from sales of vegetables from their private plot or from sales of eggs, pigs, and handicraft products. The proportion of households in debt to the team is highly variable. If well led, a production team will try to give families on the verge of debt a little extra work. Production teams near cities and in fertile valleys have higher average incomes, and they will have few if any overdrawn households. Former residents of villages in southern province Kwangtung report that villages located further away from the cities usually have a couple of overdrawn households. Articles in the Chinese press mentioned overdrawing as a perennial problem in the mid-1950s when a similar grain distribution system was in effect. Today, government directives still urge local leaders to reduce the number of overdrawn households. In most villages, then, there are likely to be examples of what can happen to a family if it does not have enough able-bodied laborers.

Even when there are no families in debt, there are likely to be families who have had to take children out of primary school to put them to work. Tuition at two, three, or four yuan a year is not terribly expensive, and it can be waived for those with little money. Though to purchase all new school books might cost as much as five yuan a year, hand-me-down books can be found. However, even when school fees and books costs are minimal, a less affluent family may need the child to tend

income inequality in Peter Schran, The Development of Chinese Agriculture 1950–1959 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1969), Ch. 6. Though Schran’s discussion is for the 1950s, the wage system that exists in most places today is virtually the same as that which existed in 1957. Some places adopted the Tachai modification of this system between 1968 and 1971, but since 1971 most places have returned to the earlier system.

Overdrawing is not an infallible index of poverty. Some families overdraw because their main laborer works in a salaried job outside the production team. (See Myrdal, Report . . ., p. 154; interviews TCT:19, HYH:21, 23. The numeral following the colon indicates the page number in the interview transcript.) Others overdraw because they skimp on collective work while devoting more energies to their own private plot or other private sidelines (PAPi:42). Though a well-run team will squelch the second type, both types tend to prosper and at the end of the year they simply repay the team for their overdrawn grain. Even allowing these anomalies, most southern Kwangtung teams appear to have one or more poor, and overdrawn, households (censuses in interviews TCT, PAPi, HYH plus estimates by KCK, TKM:15).

For example, Li Yen, “The grain free supply system is as good as can be,” Li-lin Hsuieh-hsi (Theoretical Study Monthly), Liaoning, Vol. 18, no. 12 (1 December 1959), p. 27.

pigs and chickens, to cut grass, and to earn a few work points by tending a collective buffalo or by doing light work in the fields.\textsuperscript{11}

Disease too impresses families with the necessity to have several children and to have them early in life. This was brought home to one student sent down from Canton City to the countryside. In the village to which he was sent, it was the custom in the summer for the men to gather at a certain spot on the edge of the village after supper to catch the cool evening breeze and converse. On one of these occasions, the student seized the opportunity to talk about the problems of marrying too early and having too many children. The farmers gathered about quickly retorted that he did not understand their problem. If they were to wait until they were 30 years old to marry, then they would be 50 years old before even their first son would be old enough to be an able-bodied laborer. What would happen in the meantime if the parents should get sick? Particularly, what would happen if the father became ill with TB or some such disease? There would be no adult male to support the family and they would sink into poverty. They therefore had to marry as near age 20 as possible.\textsuperscript{12}

Indeed, though health conditions have improved in recent years, it seems that almost every village in southern Kwangtung has one or two adults with TB or some other chronic disease.\textsuperscript{13} Although the production team will try to help, those families with an able-bodied member stricken are often among the poorest in the village. Though Chairman Mao has started a campaign more nearly to equalize urban and rural health care, it will be some years before all memory of chronic disease is eradicated from the countryside. Even were no new cases of TB or other diseases to appear, those older cases that linger on would still serve as constant reminders of what can happen to a family if it does not plan for the future by bringing up a new generation of laborers as quickly as possible.

To be really useful to the family, the next generation of laborers must be male. Though many females now work in the fields, this is less true in the North than in the South. Women usually work fewer days per year than males. In their late 30s and 40s when they have several children, when grandmother has passed on, and they are tied down with housework, they stop field work altogether. Even when they are working full time, they earn fewer work points than men. Because it is considered that their work is lighter than that for men, they get six, seven, or eight points while the average male gets eight, nine, or ten points.\textsuperscript{14} Finally, it is only men who can bring women permanently into the household. Though there are exceptions, it is still assumed that a newly married couple will reside in the husband’s village, if not in his parent’s home, and that they will owe primary loyalty and financial

\textsuperscript{11} On rural school expenses, see Myrdal, China: The Revolution . . . , p. 139; Alley, Travels in China, p. 369; interviews TCT:10, 54; PAP:151; TKM. Myrdal shows that girls are pulled out of school more often than boys (p. 139). Because senior middle school fees are higher and because senior middle schools usually remove the child from the village, it is even more unlikely that a less wealthy peasant could have his children continue on in school (see Myrdal, Report . . . , Ch. 24; interview TKM:12).

\textsuperscript{12} Interview TCT:46.

\textsuperscript{13} The material on TB and other diseases did not come from direct questioning on the topic. Rather, it arose incidentally as informants were asked to enumerate and discuss the households in their production team. Examples are found in TCT:16, PAP:163, HYH:18, TKM:16.

\textsuperscript{14} On women’s work and workpoints, see Klaus Mehnert’s visit to Tachai in China Returns (New York: Dutton, 1972), Ch. 6. Also, Myrdal, China: The Revolution . . . , pp. 45, 109, 135; Chen, A Year . . . , pp. 136, 160, 194, 197.
support to his parents. Daughters are lost when they marry at about age twenty, not long after they have become full-fledged workers earning income for their family of birth. There is, then, a rational as well as traditional basis for the continued favoritism towards boys in the village.

Private Work. A second feature of the rural economy which has a strong influence on the family is a significant private or household sector separate from collective work. This sector affects the family by making the work of the young and the old valuable, or at least by making them less of a burden than they would be in a setting where all production took place outside the home. The private sector includes not only private plots which comprise about five per cent of the total team land but also activities such as pig and chicken raising, cutting of grass to be used as fuel, mat making, and such occasional oddities as catching of snakes—a delicacy in some parts. The non-collective work of the household includes both an income and a non-income component. Though the exact value of the income component is difficult to calculate, visitors to China report that in the more affluent communes private production has usually been 10 to 25 per cent of the total income of the production team. The largest proportion observed was 33 per cent. In 1956-1957, when a similar economic system was in effect, income earned in the private sector ranged from about 15 per cent in north China to about 30 per cent in south China.15 Regardless of the exact figure, these proportions fail to capture the full significance of the household sector. For the peasant, the most significant aspect of the household sector is that it provides him cash throughout the year. Without it, he would have cash for daily necessities such as matches and oil only twice a year after the summer and fall harvest when the collective earnings are calculated and distributed. Only with the most miserly budgeting could he maintain a cash supply from one harvest to the next. Under the present arrangements, by sending children or older, unemployed women into the hills to cut grass and then taking this grass to the rural free market which meets every few days, the peasant can have cash whenever he needs it. He can do the same by having someone in the house take eggs, vegetables grown on the private plot, or mats woven at home to the free market. At somewhat longer intervals, he can take the pig so carefully fattened by his wife or mother to a ripe weight of 120 or more catties to the state purchasing cooperative. To realize how important the pig is, one must note that cash obtained for the pig may well equal the cash obtained from collective work for the whole year. Since in a production team most payment is in grain, average families in an average team may get little more than 80 yuan per year in cash from the collective, very close to what they can get from the sale of just one pig. It is little wonder then that the pig, so carefully fed over a period of time and then turned in for such a large cash dividend, is sometimes referred to as the "farmer’s bank."16

Though the income earning aspects of household labor are obviously crucial to its existence, the non-income earning contributions of its members should not be

---


16 On the time and care involved in feeding the pig as well as a discussion of subsidiary work for women and children, see Chen, A Year. . . , passim; Myrdal, China: The Revolution. . . , p. 48. Also interviews LY, TCT:50, HYH:20, TKM:4, 6.
overlooked. Even when grandmother's direct cash contribution to the household is small, her indirect contribution can be quite significant. This is particularly true in the South where almost all young mothers work in the fields. With grandmother at home tending to the stove and the kids, the mother can spend more time in the fields and earn more work points. Nurseries have been tried now and then, and a number of places now have temporary baby sitting during the busy planting and harvest seasons. Most places, however, are without daily nurseries. When grandmother is not at home to tend the kids, mother must stay nearby to nurse the youngest. Or, if older, the kids just run about, sometimes under the care of older siblings but always with the danger of some mishap such as falling into the village pond and drowning. Why rural nurseries should be so few is not completely clear. Partly it is the result of a bad impression left with people from 1958-59 when several ill advised programs including nurseries were introduced too rapidly without proper testing. Also, nurseries must be relatively rare because they are not cost free. In some places the mother who leaves a child in the nursery is assessed up to a point a day out of her meager six, seven, or eight points. Elsewhere even when the mother does not pay directly, the expense of the nursery must come from the annual budget of the village. Being paid by a relatively small group of neighbors, the costs even if indirect are obvious. Under these conditions, grandmother may be seen as a cheap alternative.

In sum, the household is a differentiated production unit. Males take care of the heaviest work in the fields and earn the most points. Men do most of the work in family's private plot. Women, the young, and the old tend the family pig and chickens. Older women and children go into the hills to collect grass for the market. Older women stay at home to tend to the kids and do the cooking, mending, and sewing. The household is, thus, most efficient when it includes a moderate number of people all doing their separate kind of work. It is not only cooperative work that holds the family together, however.

Property Holding. A third family strengthening aspect of the rural economy is the dependence of the family on its private property. Its claim to private land is highly variable; the size of the plot varies with the number of members in the household. A few square meters are added or subtracted as each new household member is born or as the old one passes away. Also, in some areas the exact location of the plot is rotated among team members from time to time so as to ensure that no one gets land more fertile than another and possibly to guard against possessive-
ness. The family does have more permanent claims to other kinds of property, however. Article 27 of the Sixty Articles governing communes states that peasants have the right to own small tools. It is only the larger tools such as water pumps and water buffalo which are specifically reserved to the collective. More important, article 45 of the Sixty Articles specifies that peasants shall own their house as well as have the right to buy, sell, or rent it. In accordance with articles 12 and 14 of the 1950 marriage law, this further implies the right of children to inherit their parents' house.

The importance of household ownership for the family is that it makes grown children more dependent on their parents. When a son decides to marry, he can not just request a house from the collective. He may request a small plot of land on which to build a new house, but the building expense must come out of his own or his family's pocket. Houses are not cheap. In the village of Willow Grove, visited by Jan Myrdal in 1969, one family was building a house which cost 600 yuan out of their savings of 50 to 60 yuan a year. Their savings came mostly from the wife's efforts to grow an extra pig each year. Except for money they may have borrowed from friends or kin, they had to save for at least ten years before they could build the house. In southern Kwangtung villages, it also takes ten years or longer to save enough money to build a complete new house. In addition to the costs involved there is often a shortage of timber for the rafters and, less frequently, a shortage of bricks. The result of both the expense of building and the occasional shortage of building materials is that most sons must live close to their parents. By the time he is ready to marry in his early twenties, a man will not have been able to save enough money to build a new house. He must therefore either simply stay within his own parents' house, take money from the combined family savings to build a new wing onto the old house, or take even more savings to build a more complete house elsewhere in the village. The exact practice followed varies according to the wealth of the village, the wealth of the family involved, and according to whether the village is already densely built leaving little room to build adjacent structures. The most common practice seems to be either to remain with the parents after marriage or to build an additional room or set of rooms very close by. If parents control the sum of money being used for building it is reasonable to assume that they might see to it that children did not move too far away. When the children have settled in the same house or just next door, the grandparents are then in a good position to help their children with house care, cooking, and child care. The influence from generation to generation is carried on with less interruption than it might be in a system not so tightly organized.

---

21 It is the 1962 revised draft of the Sixty Articles which is used here. Recent government documents still cite the Sixty Articles as the touchstone for rural policy. (See the documents in footnote 10.)


23 Sixty Articles, article 45. Interviews PAP1, HYH. Some villages are reluctant to allocate crop land to housing, with the result that new houses can be built only where an old one has been torn down (interview TKM:9).


Welfare

A second major reality in rural China is that welfare still depends almost entirely upon the family. Except in rare circumstances, the state assumes that those who cannot support themselves, particularly the old, will be supported by their families. Among mature peasants who have begun to think of their declining years, this creates a particularly strong desire for more children—specifically, for more sons.

Government Policy. When rural cooperatives were first formed in the mid-1950s, a social security system was provided in their charter. It assured people that when they gave up private land, their traditional basis for security, they would not be neglected. However, this new system, called the five guarantees, was interpreted to apply only to those people who had no children to rely on. Even the Marriage Law of 1950, in article 13, stated that “children have the duty to support and assist their parents.” This law and the restrictive interpretation of the five guarantees have not gone unquestioned. In the mid-1950s, sons and daughters of some former landlords and counter-revolutionaries reasoned that since they were under Party orders to “draw a clear line with their parents,” they could not economically support them. The state would have to assume this responsibility.27 The reply came back that “drawing a clear line” implied no such thing. To make such an inference, the reply maintained, was to think too mechanistically. To be sure, during the revolutionary period and during land reform, it had been necessary to overemphasize the need to separate oneself from one’s parents’ ways of thought and behavior. It was now, however, a time of socialist construction, and except for unusual circumstances one must support one’s parents whatever their background. Not to do so would be to lose an opportunity to reeducate them.28

The debate on parental support was later broadened to include all parents whether they were of landlord background or not. Rural families were told not to artificially divide their household. As a 1957 editorial in the People's Daily said:

some cooperative members use the “five guarantees” system to divide their family off from their parents as they please. They push the responsibility for the livelihood of the old completely off on the agricultural cooperative. . . . Those who at their convenience divide from their parents say, “If the family does not take care of the livelihood of the old, they can enjoy the five guarantees from the cooperative.” Among those who so speak, some misunderstand the principles of the five guarantee system and labor compensation, but most simply use this excuse to escape their own responsibility. It should be pointed out that the behavior of those who do not take care of their parents’ livelihood violates our country’s morality. Each of us when we were young received our parents’ nurture. After we have grown up, each of us has the responsibility to support our parents who have lost their labor power. We oppose the blind filial obedience of feudalism, but at the same time we support respect and care for the elderly. If anyone violates

---

27 “Revolutionary youth should properly treat their own landlord and rich peasant families,” Chung-kuo ch'ing-nien (China's Youth), 1954, no. 17, pp. 31-32. Ch'ao Sheng-hui, “How to deal with landlord and counter-revolutionary parents and their kin?” Chung-kuo ch'ing-nien, 1956, no. 22, pp. 23-24. 28 Ibid.
this kind of social morality and deserts his own parents, this not only is reprimanded by public opinion, but it is also not permitted by national law.\textsuperscript{29}

Or as Li Ye, writing in \textit{China's Youth}, put it:

For a strong, able bodied male to even think of tossing off his elderly parents to become a five guarantee household is not only a joke but also a disgrace. Agriculture, sidelines, and housework in the village have much that can be done by those with only partial or even minimal labor power. As long as they are not grandpas and grandmas on the edge of the grave, they probably can't be considered “eating for nothing.”\textsuperscript{30}

Some unnamed individuals had gone so far as to propose that the state provide social security benefits for all old people, but in the mid-1950s as the first five year plan was being implemented officials grew aware that China could never develop unless state welfare expenditures were restricted. Li Ye replied to the “dreamers” that if all old people were supported the economy would be in a shambles. For the state to “rear the old” would “seriously hamper the business of socialist construction.”\textsuperscript{31} The eventual goal was still greater welfare and equality for all, but for the time being socialist construction was to be equated with capital investment. The tightening up on welfare in 1957–1958 extended beyond the rural areas. In industry the minimum ages and number of years to be worked before maximum retirement benefits could be obtained were made more stringent. Many of those on state welfare as well as those otherwise idle were urged to go to work in street industries, handcrafts, and state farms.\textsuperscript{32} Some of the street industries were later disbanded, but the general restrictions on who could get aid in rural areas remained. Aid was to come from the local production team of 20 to 40 households rather than the state, and as before it was to be only for those old people without children. A 1964 pamphlet giving questions and answers concerning the marriage law reaffirmed the policy. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, foreign visitors found the same policy in effect.\textsuperscript{33}

\textbf{Consequences.} The consequences of this welfare policy in rural areas varies according to whether the parents have at least one son, no children at all, or only daughters. When a family has just \textit{one son}, there is a great impetus to have more. One son, it is feared, would not be able to provide adequate support in old age. As one student sent to the Kwangtung countryside reported, “in both Canton and the countryside, one hears it said that if one has several children—

\textsuperscript{29} 9 February 1957.
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Hun-jin-fa wen ta} (Questions and Answers on the Marriage Law), Hefei: Anhui People's High Court and the Legal Administrative Bureau, 1964.
male children—one can both retire earlier and live a much more comfortable old age. If one has several children, each need contribute only a few yuan per month and then one can live quite comfortably.34

Those with no children have the option of being supported by the team at the average standard of living of all other team members.35 In practice this means that the old person gets a set amount of grain per month, oil, fish, and whatever other foods are grown and distributed collectively. Grain allotments are set on a scale which assigns less to the non-working old just as it assigns less to the non-working young. In addition to the food allotments, there is also a cash allotment of one, two, or three yuan a month, depending on the wealth of the production team. Though some former residents felt the cash distributed to be terribly little, it appears to be not much smaller than the per capita distribution to other members at the end of the year. As is true of other members, whether an old person receiving five-guarantee support lives well or not is determined to a great deal by whether he can engage in private endeavors such as raising chickens or tending a private plot. Some who are unskilled or too ill to work live a minimal existence. Others who are good at private endeavors can live so well that they will refuse to even accept five-guarantee support. If they were to accept five-guarantee support, their house would revert to the collective at their death. Instead they prefer to sell the house privately and then live off the profit of the house sale and their private endeavors.36

The most problematic situation of all, however, can be that for people with only daughters and no sons. Local administrations differ in how they deal with such a situation, and parents themselves may choose among several alternative tactics. The most common solution is for the production team to assume that old people with daughters are no better off than people with no children at all and, thus, to give them five-guarantee support. In the village of Willow Grove, visited by Jan Myrdal for a second time in 1969, for example, one elderly man with a daughter was to receive five-guarantee support.37 However, information gathered from the press and interviews with expatriates reveal other villages which only grudgingly give aid to old parents with daughters. In one Kwangtung village the production team supported an aged mother from 1958 to 1971, and then, after thirteen years, tried to get her daughter living in another village to take over her support. They proposed that if the daughter would pay for the grain her mother had consumed in the past thirteen years, the daughter could claim her mother’s house on her death.38

However, even if the team would willingly assume their support, parents themselves may prefer to avoid reliance on their team members in favor of reliance on kinsmen. The most desirable tactic is to find a rich son-in-law for the daughter to marry. Then, regardless of where the couple lives, they will have enough money

34 Interview TCT:46.
36 Some of these people lose their gamble and live so long that the proceeds of their house sale are used up, thereby causing quite a problem for their production team.
37 Myrdal, China: The Revolution . . ., p. 52. Meijer also finds frequent articles in the press on support of parents with only daughters, Marriage Law and Policy . . ., p. 261.
38 Interview HYH:36. Also see examples in Meijer, op. cit., p. 261.
to support both the husband's and wife's parents.\(^\text{39}\) Another tactic, chosen by a few, is to arrange a matrilocal marriage whereby the son-in-law moves into the bride's home and provides support for her parents in old age. Such marriages are limited, however. Men have always disliked being put in such a subordinate position, and as incomes have risen it has become less necessary for them to be so placed. The bride's village, particularly if it is a single surname village, may object to another male of different surname sharing their grain. And higher level officials tend to disapprove of men moving. If free movement were allowed, then able-bodied men would desert poorer production teams for richer ones. The poorer ones would be left with insufficient labor to bring in the crops.

The support of parents with girls is, thus, more uncertain than that for parents with boys. If supported just by the team, they will have to live quite frugally. If their production team supports them only grudgingly, they may have to spend considerable energy to find a better alternative. It is little wonder, then, that many parents would prefer to simply have sons.

**Migration**

The third reality which shapes rural family life is the restraint on migration. Though village to city migration was rather substantial in the 1950s, migration since then has been low. The new 1958 law restricting migration was difficult to enforce at first, but by 1962 many people who had moved in the intervening years were being sent back to their home villages. Article two of the 1958 Regulations Governing Household Registration states,

> A citizen who wants to move from the countryside to a city must possess an employment certificate issued by the labor bureau of the city, a certificate of admission issued by a school or a moving certificate issued by the household registration office of the city of destination, and must apply to the household registration office in his or her permanent place of residence for permission to move out and fulfill the moving procedure.\(^\text{40}\)

Discussing this issue in further detail, one author notes that even when men are selected by an industry they cannot bring their wives and children to the city. Wives and children must remain agricultural workers. If they left agriculture and moved to the city, a great sum of money would have to be spent on additional housing, food, and social services. "If [this] colossal sum were to be so spent, we might as well shelve our five-year plans and forget about socialism."\(^\text{41}\) Just as with welfare expenditures, then, migration has to be limited lest state funds be diverted from capital construction to unnecessary frills.

The degree to which the legal restriction on migration is observed is uncertain. Some observers note that although moving to the city without permit can deprive one of grain rations, there is a black market in surplus ration coupons and sufficient surplus grain in the households of kin and friends to allow some illegal

---

\(^{39}\) Chen, *A Year...*, p. 76.

\(^{40}\) Regulations Governing Household Registration (Standing Committee, National People's Congress, 9 January 1958), translated in H. Yuan Tien, *China's Population Struggle* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1973), appendix L.

migrants to cities to survive. From the viewpoint of the major cities on which the migrants converge, the number may indeed seem large. From the viewpoint of the individual village, however, migration seems minimal. In the villages of southern Kwangtung, for example, as much as 90 per cent of the men in their twenties and thirties are living in the village into which they were born—often in the same house with or right next door to their parents. Even when the men have moved, the women are usually left at home. As stipulated in the regulations governing household registration, women and children cannot join their husband or father in the city. Thus, with or without migration, the women stay close to the husband’s parents. The attention of the man, in turn, is pulled back to the village. Even when he is too far away to visit regularly, he periodically sends back money to support his wife and parents. Family ties are maintained.

The low rate of out-migration is quite in contrast to that of other developing societies, particularly that of societies which are otherwise similar to China. In the province of Taiwan, which is 98 per cent Chinese, men who have moved to the city also occasionally leave their wife and children at home and they regularly send back money. However, over half the young peasants have left their home village, and some will lose all contact with their village in a generation. This situation is also different from other communist states which have had a longer history, and faster pace, of industrialization. In Russia and Romania, for example, many of the young peasants are either away from their home village or commuting daily to city jobs. In China, as the pace of industrialization increases, the situation may change towards greater rural-urban migration. For the time being, however, most industrial workers are being selected from the rapidly growing urban population. The urban population has been growing so fast that the direction of migration is the reverse of that in most developing societies and many students are being sent to jobs in the countryside. Since many Chinese villagers would prefer the higher pay and amenities of the factory worker, they should look with hope at the increasingly successful campaign to limit births in the city as well as the increasing rate of industrialization. If they are very sophisticated, however, they may have occasional qualms over the sporadic talk about building more local industry, which could help keep the peasant in his village. The policy alternative eventually adopted—large industrial centers versus dispersed local industry—will have a great impact on the future of the peasant family.

Variation and Change

To this point we have been considering the modal or most common type of family in rural China and the structural constraints which keep it from changing more rapidly. There is, however, some change in the family as well as both regional and temporal variation in how fast it changes.

42 On the basis of household censuses of four production teams and estimates from other teams.
Regional Variation. Though the evidence is scanty, there seem to be two main determinants of regional variation in the family: the ideological spirit or commitment of an area and its economic prosperity. First, some villages are so politically committed that they tend to respond to appeals to revolutionize the family even when these appeals run counter to what otherwise could be considered in the family’s best interests. The constraints of higher pay for male laborers, the need for child care, housing, and old age support are to some extent ignored. To the outsider, the story of someone letting her own sheep die while she stayed up all night with the collective calves may seem like never-never land. And, indeed, though frequently repeated in the press, instances so extreme must be rare in China as well. Nevertheless, former residents do report that certain villages, like individuals, do respond to political appeals more than others. In contrast to the situation in many villages where peasants can be aroused only for meetings to announce production plans and harvest payments, peasant in activist villages show up eagerly for study meetings. They actively discuss the latest directive suggesting programs such as birth control or simpler feast and try to implement them in their village. Though spread throughout the country, such villages tend to be found disproportionately in the North. Often mobilized in the war against Japan in the 1940s, these villages have long had a grass roots exposure to the Communist cause. Their experience differs from many villages in the South which were overrun by the People’s Liberation Army in 1948 and 1949 as Nationalist resistance suddenly collapsed south of the Hwai River, providing little time for grass roots organization. Also, after 1949, because of the longer organizing experience, northern villages tended to have more Party members and more servicemen retired from the revolutionary struggle. In the mid-1950s, for example, northern Shansi province had 3.12 per cent of the population in the Party while southern Kwangtung province had only .93 percent of the population in the Party. At about the same time, 1.21 per cent of the Shansi population had been in the Liberation Army while only .08 per cent of the Kwangtung population had been in the army. There was some duplication in these figures, of course, for retired servicemen had not infrequently joined the Party while they were in the Army. Nevertheless, it is hard to overstate the significance of these Party members and retired servicemen. When new programs such as birth control are announced, it tends to be these ex-soldiers and Party members who are first called into meeting and asked to lead the way by becoming living examples. They are the ones who accept the first vasectomy, who first marry their daughter without receiving a bride price, and who introduce Mao Tse-tung thought study classes into their homes. When the number of examples is deficient, the program lags behind.

A second determinant of regional variation in the family is the economic prosperity of the region. The range in wealth between rich and poor villages is tremendous. The best-off villages tend to be those that specialize in growing fruits and vegetables for the cities about which they cluster. Able-bodied males in these villages frequently earn 1.50 yuan or more per day in work points and,
though their work in the open fields is at times difficult, they have a standard of consumption as good or better than that of many an urban worker. In villages somewhat further away from the city, incomes can be highly variable. Even within the same village, the average team income may range from as high as 1.10 yuan per work day to as low as .30 yuan, a ratio of almost four-to-one. However, in general, villages with relatively flat fields some distance from the city tend to average .60 to .90 yuan a day. Villages in hilly lands even more distant from the cities and fertile plains tend to have the worst life of all. There are miracle villages such as Tachai, but in many hill villages wages run as low as .20 or .30 yuan a day and sweet potatoes or millet rather than the preferred rice or wheat become the dominant staples in their diet. In these areas, there are not many resources to spare after the daily necessities are met, and it is difficult for leaders to motivate farmers to exceptional efforts.

These differences suggest a number of consequences for the family. In wealthier areas, there do not need to be so many able-bodied laborers to support a decent standard of living, either during youth or old age. When a few laborers can produce as much as many laborers could in the past, when some savings can be accumulated to meet future expenses, and when health improves, the pressure both for early marriage and many births should decrease. In richer villages it is also easier to build a new house or room for a man who wishes to marry. Even when the funds for this building come from the household's rather than the individual son's account, the son is likely to have made a substantial contribution to the household budget. Since fewer laborers are needed to maintain an acceptable standard of living in a rich village, the father may also retire earlier, giving the son ample opportunity to contribute to the support of the family and possibly to have a greater say in family affairs. When building is extensive new houses are likely to be separated by some distance. The parents will almost invariably continue to live with one son or another, but brothers will no longer meet each other every time they step out the door of their room.

The effects of the private plot in richer villages is somewhat indeterminate. A peasant near a city can get more money by selling more chickens and vegetables off his plot to residents who come out from the city and pay high prices. This occurs in some locales. However, in some other places foreign visitors are told that once the collective income rises, people are less concerned about the private income from the family plot. The situation with respect to nurseries is also somewhat indeterminate. Richer villages could more easily afford to hire special nursery attendants, to buy special equipment, and set aside a special room, but since in these same villages there is less economic necessity for women and the old to work, household labor may be sufficient for most child care. Data are insufficient to determine which is the more common pattern. Most likely in wealthier villages there is simply great variation in the use of both private plots and nurseries.

Temporal Variation. Besides the variation from region to region at any one time, there is variation in how much the government emphasizes family change
from time to time. The most extreme period was in the 1958–1959 Great Leap effort when in an effort to free women for labor and transform the family a few places introduced not only mess halls, nurseries, collective sewing and laundry groups but also collective homes for the aged. Only a few places adopted all these measures, and after a few months almost all places dropped them. However, at other times, both earlier and later, there have been other efforts to change the family. The first period in which vigorous change was attempted was in the early 1950s when the marriage law was introduced. Though the marriage law was generally moderate in tone, calling for the abolition of feudal/bourgeois customs rather than the abolition of the family, its introduction was sufficiently traumatic in some places to cause many divorces and suicides. Since that time, however, divorce and family-related suicide have been rare. By 1954, the more strident calls for family reform were gone and replaced in the press by a call to support the aged.48

There was the 1958–59 attempt at drastic change, but after that family policy was again relaxed. In the early 1960s, though the Women’s and Youth’s journals fretted about how a new generation revolutionary successors was to be properly trained, the emphasis was still on training within the family. The old were simply not to let the young forget about their past sufferings. In the initial stages of the Cultural Revolution, youth turned against old customs and on their rampages destroyed objects such as ancestral plaques which supported the traditional family. However, as the Cultural Revolution became progressively more violent, many youth became frightened and returned to the safety of their homes for a period of intensive togetherness.49 The result may have been that the Cultural Revolution eventually did as much to strengthen the family as it did to weaken it. At the close of the Cultural Revolution, the government again mounted a campaign for change in the family, this time through classes for the study of Mao Tse-tung’s thought in the family. As proclaimed in the press and over the radio throughout 1969 and 1970, the politically advanced young were to teach their parents and grandparents, and old ideas about authority were to be destroyed. As ideas about authority were destroyed, so would be the remnants of other feudal customs. The campaign, if we can judge from the press and radio, did not spread much beyond its test sites.50 Former residents of Kwangtung province report that their brigade secretaries either passed over the idea of study classes lightly in a single meeting or did not mention it at all. Since that time the family has not been frontally attacked, though the spreading campaign for birth control can not help but touch it. Before families will willingly limit their births, they must be convinced that doing so does not threaten their chances for survival.

Why government policy should fluctuate in its efforts to change the family is not completely clear. In part, the fluctuation is the result of a campaign approach

---

48 For the changes in policy, see Meijer, \textit{Marriage Law and Policy} . . . as well as the journals \textit{China's Youth (Chung-kuo ch'ing-nien)} and \textit{China's Women (Chung-kuo ju-nü)}.  
49 Interview TCT:38. Personal communication from a Hong Kong resident who went to visit his kin in Canton for extended periods during the Cultural Revolution. Also see the forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation by David Raddock, Dallas State University.  
to politics whereby for a period of a few weeks to a year massive governmental
efforts are concentrated around a single theme. With other themes competing for
attention, the family can be the center of attention only ever so often. In part,
the fluctuation in policy must also represent disagreement among the top elite,
some believing with Marx and Engels that the family must disappear and some
others believing that in China the family will disappear only slowly, if ever. As
these opinion groups win and lose power, policy changes as well.

From the outside, it seems that change in the Chinese peasant family is likely
to be very gradual. Though there was some tinkering between 1968 and 1971,
local economic arrangements seem to be well institutionalized. The arrangements
of 1974 are basically those of 1961. Barring a radical coup, the constraints on the
peasant family today will be those of the future. As older people die, some
traditional ideas will fade away. As village life becomes economically more secure,
some of the pressures towards early marriage and many births will decline.
However, the changes will be gradual and, if Japan can be taken as a model,
the appearance of the isolated nuclear family will be slow indeed. In Chinese
cities just as in Japan through the 1960s, the stem family with grandparents and
one married son and an occasional married daughter living together is the norm.
Since stem families persist in cities, where both work is more secure and state-
sponsored retirements benefits more plentiful, the village family, it would seem,
cannot help but change even more slowly.