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THE FAMILY AND THE ETHICAL SYSTEM

ONE of the oldest and most careful observers of Chinese life has stated that after spending most of his years in the study of Chinese customs, he seemed to find as much still to learn as he had at the beginning. Another writer observes of present Chinese usages that they must be regarded as the product of durability, multiplied by numbers, and this modified by a third factor, that of isolation. The result is a stupendous mass of tradition and usage produced by the accumulation, unbroken by change, of three thousand years. A complete description would fill a library. Yet it is said that there is no single statement about China that will hold true of all Chinese.

Our only hope of forming even an outline picture of Chinese life is by projecting it upon the screen of general social evolution. This will at any rate enable us to assign more adequate proportions to the different factors and perhaps assist in clarifying their connections. There appear to me to be two matters which, if firmly grasped, will serve as keys to many facts that might seem strange and confusing.

The first is that the family in China fills almost the full circle of life for every individual. As to the nature of that family life, while it appears in a special form, it can be understood as having the same basic qualities as elsewhere. One writer tells us that if we could lift the roof from a Chinese home and observe all the doings inside, we might be able to understand China. The reply is that

what we would find taking place is essentially the same as what takes place in every other home on the face of the earth, and through all time since settled habitation had its beginning. Here are matters that are really unchanging, east or west, the same elemental facts of existence, of parenthood and childhood, of birth and marriage and death, of love and joy and sorrow. The Neanderthal man probably had the kind of toothache with which we are familiar. Home is everywhere the place where life is lived, and while it changes in appearance, it changes very slightly in nature.

If, therefore, home life is largely inclusive of everything that constitutes individual life, the resultant society will come only slightly within the category of change. How much difference could we expect to find between the patriarchal household of Greece, the manorial household of western Europe, and the Virginia plantation household of the old type? Have not the cottages of the peasants witnessed the same kind of living from the beginning to the end of European history?

It is in the connections outside the family group that change takes place, in the combinations for fighting or for work. It has to be remembered that history, which is the record of changes, covers but a moment in the life of mankind, and it is almost exclusively concerned with matters distinctly public in character. Private life is the vast, unrecorded, anonymous, unchanging basis of these little surface stirrings known as historical events. When, therefore, it is understood that public relationships and affairs have been for the Chinese relatively insignificant, we are able to comprehend why the Chinese change so little. They do not change because they are principally engaged in living, and living does not change.

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The second key which may permit us an entrance into the Chinese scheme of things is the nature of custom. Here again we are concerned with nothing that is different in kind from what we already know. There is merely more of it. It is easier for us to perceive a body of custom practiced by another people than by ourselves. No man fully appreciates how much of his action is automatic, how completely he is an organization of habits carefully constructed from his earliest days. He simply uses his habits and never thinks about them. Custom is community of habit, a social automatism which guides human conduct from underneath, but itself seldom emerges to view. Custom is always taken for granted. It is easier to recognize it in the more superficial aspect of convention. Even in convention one can note a concentration of social power, an effective determination of the ways in which people deal with each other. Mode of dress, form of meeting, manner of eating—all these lesser matters are so fully arranged and strictly regulated, that he who chooses to be unconventional quickly finds himself an outcast.

But custom is far more fundamental than convention. It provides us with attitudes of thought and modes of conduct, determines for us right and wrong, and generates for us the prejudices which we spend our existence in exercising. Custom, like habit, resists all change, and it seeks the destruction of any one who effects an exposure or attempts a criticism. The fate of reformers is well known. If we believe that the fundamental attitudes and forms of conduct of the American people have altered in pace with mechanical invention or public association, we deceive ourselves. Our rate of change seems greater than that of China, but a cycle of Cathay is very much the same as a cycle of custom-controlled existence anywhere else.

In order to locate the Chinese system of social organization on the level which served for the building of Chinese civilization, let us survey briefly the steps by which the human community has moved to the stage that we occupy. First of all, it is a mistake to assume with Aristotle that man is by nature a political animal. There is good reason to assume a closer kinship between man and the solitary, carnivorous animals living in isolated, monogamous families than with the gregarious, promiscuous herd. Human beings are isolative and exclusive whenever this quality has opportunity to express itself. Social relationships have always been precarious, tentative, and conditional. Every public has found it necessary to protect the private.

Two examples are known of an apparent entire lack of social organization—those of the Veddahs of Ceylon and the Yahgans of Tierra del Fuego. These are cases of natural family groups living in isolation in natural families of parents and children, with habitations fixed or semi-nomadic. The family life is quite similar to that of a modern individualized state, in the character of its domestic organization. There is affection for children and equality between man and wife. The women do the homework while the men secure food by hunting.

From the level just indicated, aggregation, and with it social organization, made its beginning. Expansion took place by an enlargement of the family group. For most of the stages of human evolution society has meant kinship. The expanded group fell into two forms, the clan by mother-right and the clan by father-right. In the first, descent is recognized through the mother and the children belong to the mother clan, while the converse holds in the second. Both types were in the main ruled by the principles of exogamy, which prohibited marriage within the group of close

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kin, and usually provided that intermarriage should take place between connected or related clans. With mother-right is associated totemism and the loose combination of clans known as the tribe.

It will be readily seen that with the husband and father having no settled or integral place within the clan that possessed the family, an arrangement of this kind would prove a weakness when coöperation between clans became necessary. For this reason mother-right was replaced by father-right. An exception to this may be found in the combination of American Indian tribes such as the league of the Iroquois, which involved, however, a semi-political principle.

A clan based on father-right was a compact defensive and coöperative unit. The problem of intermarriage was solved by the incorporation of woman into the husband's group. In this way the larger aggregation felt itself joined by the blood tie, with the simple relations of elders and children, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters. The consciousness of descent, instead of being so dispersed that only by a semi-magical relation to some animal form could it be maintained, as in totemism, becomes associated with the male ancestors in continuing line, back to the first supreme ancestor who is regarded as god and father of all. Ancestral spirits are not only revered parents and their progenitors, but sponsors and protectors of the group in all that it does. Traditions are the behests of the ancestors and present themselves with the same force as parental commands. Ancestor worship and filial piety are everywhere and inevitably associated with the father-clan. Conditions under which the advantages of father-right are continuously needed produce the patriarchal family in which the characteristics are accentuated into fixed and durable forms. This type is the basis of the development of European society as well as that of Asia.

The kinds of aggregation described have in many cases perfected themselves without definite territorial location. The solidity of the nomadic patriarchal shepherd clans is well known. So long as the hunting ground or pasture is free of aggression, the group shifts habitation according to convenience. But with the beginning of agriculture and the sedentary mode of living, a new factor enters. This is the organization of land holding and cultivation in a manner to accommodate diverse family units. The village may be composed of a single family, but in course of time it usually includes a number of coöperating and intermarrying kinship groups. The solution of the problem appears in several directions. If the kinship bond is sufficiently close the village is communistic with respect to all holdings. If several families are involved, there is division for support and cultivation, but with reservation of certain portions for common use as for pasturage and fuel. A still further separation into separate family units involves the bringing of all land holdings under private ownership. The unity of the whole group is, under these circumstances, maintained by the needs of defense and coöperation for welfare, with difficulties that may arise being met by custom regulation. A community may use the kinship principle but avert the consequences of its exclusiveness by the development of an adequate ethical system.

The casual visitor to China is often misled by seeing only certain large centers of population. These are really special developments due to location advantageous to commerce. The Chinese people live in villages, which throughout the whole territory run into the hundreds of thousands. Each of these is, for the most part, self-supporting and independent, so far as the necessities of life are concerned. They are agricultural, with such specialization in crafts-

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manship as may be required for local needs. They may be occupied exclusively by a single large family, or as is usually the case, by several. The property seems to be held under private ownership without other communism than is found always within each family. The heads of the various families are the village elders who are jointly responsible for the conduct of its constituent members. Within each family we find ancestor worship as in all father-right clans, and emphasis upon the principle of filial piety or parental veneration.

Relations between families have been adjusted by age-long experiment, the results of which are fixed in the body of custom and in the ethical system. In general, the Chinese provide a complete exemplification of father-right groups, associated in the village community, with all relationships so completely defined that every cause of disruption has its almost unailing remedy.

The type of social organization described, while secure within its own economy, is not free from external disturbance. It can be overcome and held by any band of marauders. Village life even when economically self-sufficient, has to find working connections outside for defensive purposes, or it has to adjust itself to an overlordship imposed by conquest. These difficulties bring us to the next large development in social organization, that which may be called political. It concerns the manner in which authority is asserted and exercised by some dominant group usually after conquest. The method adopted almost universally by conquering despots has been to delegate control to their comites or followers who are deputed to represent the central authority. These satraps as agents of despotic rule naturally develop power that is semi-independent of the central government. If the land itself is given into their possession

and exploitation ensues, the result is the feudalism that is familiar in our own social history. Sooner or later the nobles contest the field of authority with the monarch.

On the other hand a method may be adopted by which the central despot safeguards his own authority, and deputed rule is kept continuously dependent upon the favor of the monarch. For this it is necessary to keep the official from securing any foothold of his own in the territory under his control. It was a system of this type that became established in China.

While every form of government involves an element of compulsion, there is no form which does not seek to transmute force into authority. As Bryce says, sovereignty *de facto* changes itself as quickly as possible into sovereignty *de jure*. Rule by terrorism is costly and precarious. Rule by right means acceptance by the subject. Examples may be found close at hand. The South American dictator finds himself in control as the result of successful revolution. He proceeds at once to clothe himself in the habiliments and trappings of constituted authority. The election by which he is duly raised to the presidency is a very one-sided affair, in which members of the opposing party are kept away from the ballot boxes by fear of violence. But an election has been held, constitutional form observed, and the claim to rightful authority established. No matter how artificial the constitution may be, it is always a means by which conformity with usage is effected and acceptance secured.

The method of ancient despots was to adopt that equivalent of modern constitutions which was suitable to the time and conditions. This was some form of religion. The will of heaven, which was for most societies the will of a vast aggregate of ancestral spirits, was invoked by rulers as the

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most potent of all sanctions. A massacre might be persuasive but was never so impressive as a drought or earthquake. The will of heaven was in reality the accumulated social will of the people as expressed in tradition. The ruler who could place himself in line with these supernatural sanctions became enormously authoritative. Priestly functions were therefore assumed, or else the despot himself came to be regarded as divine. In China the emperor was Son of Heaven, and mediator between heaven and all the people. He was to blame for any natural disaster and a protracted drought or serious flood might create doubt as to his future acceptability to the divine powers. His position depended upon favorable conditions winning in the long run.

Even in the priestly function of the Chinese emperor can be seen an expansion of that responsibility which inheres in the headship of the family. Chinese culture dominated all rulers by the emphasis it was able to give the patriarchal principle, even when carried into national affairs. This larger interpretation was the work of the sages. Confucius never tired of insisting that there could be order in the state only through order in the household, which was in turn produced by self-rule according to the dictates of propriety. The Analects is a series of discourses on the duties of princes, and the works of Mencius are comprehensive treatises on political philosophy. It is just here that we must catch the distinguishing genius of the Chinese state. It was a state by expansion of ethical principle. The method of successful rule is, first and last, to be virtuous and upright. Government in the West never moves far from the circle of authority; in China it is regarded as impotent when found outside the circle of virtuous conduct. We are told over and over again that the benevolent and upright ruler needs no armies to secure obedience from the people. He

overcomes merely by being, by displaying an irresistible virtue. Mencius stands at the opposite pole from Machiavelli, but it may be that he bespeaks a profounder reality.

It was in the forms of the ethical state that the Chinese rested in their political development. Within its framework they perfected their civilization. The additional story of the structure built in the West is largely unknown to them. This is the society of citizenship, of independent personality, of conscious rights, privileges and responsibilities. For a self-governing and self-directing society, a constitution is the ladder by which ethical control climbs into the formal rule of the law. The individual stands by himself in his responsibility for conduct, with formally defined relations to the body politic. In other words life with us is predominantly public, in contrast with that of China which is almost exclusively private. The distinction needs continuous emphasis since judgment of persons, events and actions must take into account the difference in point of view and the difference in motivation. We regard the Chinese as guilty of a pervasive dishonesty, whereas our standards have been evolved strictly in relation to the requirements of our types of association. If these types are unknown in China it is foolish to expect to find identical standards. The Chinese are likely to regard our private life as loose and even vicious, whereas the center of gravity of our society lies in the field of public relationships.

It is not to be supposed from the foregoing that the Chinese have no connections outside the family circle. There is no country in which associations can spring up more easily. Some of these serve a merely temporary purpose but others are of solid and permanent construction. Guild organization is universal among all types of craft workers. The point of distinction is that all these groupings

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represent an expansion of the family conception into the region of occupational or other interests. A guild serves the same purpose for a group of workers as the family for its members. It is a coöperative or mutual aid association. It drives non-members to the wall, and will float a member through a period of difficulty. It eliminates almost completely the element of competition from Chinese commercial transactions. Products are standardized and prices are fixed, and the member who violates the regulations incurs heavy penalties. It is an occupational brotherhood. In furtherance of this type of solidarity it uses the religious motive, has its patron saint, its altar, and its ceremonial of worship. Moreover it maintains order within its own field and settles disputes among its members. The rights and responsibilities of members are fixed by custom, and the weight of the organization secures unflinching conformity.

The same motive that holds a family united—the fear of being left alone without support—passes over to all Chinese associations. Every Chinese has some arrangement by which in time of difficulty, somebody will come to his aid. This appears to be the reason for the secret societies that have at various times and in varying degrees, honeycombed the country. One of the most familiar sights in any city is the provincial club, often with palatial quarters, which combines persons deriving from the same province into a society of mutual aid. If patriotism can be said to exist, it has to be thought of as provincial rather than national, but even so the provincial club is merely another application of the brotherhood principle. It is useful for maintaining communication with the home province and for transmitting news of home affairs. The club transmits the bodies of dead members to their homes for interment.

One finds again in every city that neighborhoods are organized to meet certain general needs. As municipal service is for the most part unknown, each neighborhood has to take care of itself. One important function is to maintain a fire company with its equipment. This is little more than a set of pails to be passed from hand to hand, or else a pump operated by hand like those used in this country a hundred years ago. But the neighborhood house and organization accomplish much more. There is a well-established practice in the giving of relief, and in almost every house at the present time a school will be found in operation. All of these associations are custom ruled, quite without official status or political function, and are a further exemplification of the fact that China survives by the principle of mutual aid.

In the matter of restrictions upon conduct, the Chinese is of course carefully hedged by custom. But custom embodied in habit is not felt to be a limitation of freedom. It merely seems to be conduct that is right and proper. He is comparatively free from legal regulation and enjoys liberty in many more directions than does a Westerner. He has freedom of speech and assembly, freedom of movement and of trade. These again are felt to be merely natural, because nothing interferes or seems likely to interfere with their exercise. It does not, however, constitute what is known as freedom in the West, which pertains rather to the sense of individuality, of initiative, and of choice. There is no necessary correspondence between the sense of freedom and the measure of actual liberty. Personal choice is with us a continuously narrowing field. Moreover, there is no exercise of volition which does not fall within the larger determination of morality. What people do after throwing off some restriction considered irksome is pretty

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much what they were doing before. Conduct in any society proceeds in terms of habit and therefore of custom. Freedom never means the privilege of doing merely what we please, but the privilege of choice under the moral law. In this respect we are in much the same position as the Chinese.

Many observers consider that the mode of village government found in China is an example of the purest democracy. Certainly it is a method of self-government of a very direct kind and without the cumbersome machinery of authority. At the same time it cannot be regarded as democracy in our modern sense of the term for the reason that our conception implies a group of independent personalities acting freely in the exercise of citizenship, whereas village government is a kind of corporate, undifferentiated self-expression. It cannot be denied that this form of community self-rule is a thing of great importance in the development of political institutions. It is similar to the folk-moot of our ancestors which was the cradle of self-government in the West. We can recall, too, the significance of the town meeting in our early history. It was described by Jefferson, who found it a bar to his enforcement of the embargo, as the most powerful instrument ever devised by the wit of man for the preservation of liberty. If this is true there is in China a great matrix out of which the institutions of self-government may in time develop.

It is difficult for the Westerner to comprehend the quasi-religious aspect of the Chinese ethical system. Ancestor worship, for example, classifies itself for us as a rather curious and very heathen kind of religion. We can comprehend filial piety if interpreted as respect for parents. But if we search for the significance of these attitudes instead of attempting to fix depreciatory labels, we discover a complete consistency with the whole spirit of family life.

It is beside the point to declare what is or is not a form of worship. The reverential attitude may be inclusive of many objects and yet to be in essence the same thing. Western society is continually producing objects of reverential regard. We may say that we worship only God and reverence the saints, but this is merely a definition to accord with an accepted major premise of theology. The attitude is much the same. We may say we reverence the saints and respect our country's great men, but the actual experience is nearly identical. Everyone is familiar with the apotheosis of our major historical figures, and with the resentment we feel when reminded that they had the usual qualities of human beings. We celebrate their birthdays; we build monuments to commemorate their deeds; we hold memorial services; we feel their personalities as pervading and vitalizing the national life. Recall again that we live publicly and the Chinese privately. We do the same thing in our social field that they do in theirs. None of these matters are special or unrelated; both morality and religion are pragmatic. Both arise from and are made to serve the practical arrangements of life.

Where, therefore, existence is conceived as a continuous process through the generations, where an individual is regarded as merely a twig on a great immortal tree, and where the present is merely the projection of the past, how could it be otherwise than that this arbor vitæ should seem to incarnate the great aggregate of ancestral spirits, and that everyone should regard with pious devotion his immediate parents as the links by which his own existence is sustained? Moreover who is prepared to claim that the Chinese attitude is altogether wrong? If it is natural for us to create gods of community life, how much more natural for them to regard their own ancestors as tutelary deities.

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The essentials of Chinese ethics are presented in two of their most ancient classics, the Book of Reverence, and the Book of Rites. These two were intended to be taken together. Propriety must be informed and vitalized by reverence. The Taoists were, from the beginning, critics of the tendency of Confucianism which seemed to fix all social behavior in rigid forms. The Chinese have ever been reminded that propriety is in danger of becoming no more than an empty husk. It may be true that a social ritual has at times degenerated into a trite and empty formalism. But it would be a serious mistake to dispose of Chinese propriety as being nothing more than this. No formalism could have provided a framework of social life for so long a span. No empty husk could have survived invasion, revolution, and the repeated up-surge of the social forces in Chinese civilization. Moreover, one is quite conscious in personal contact with the Chinese, that this exquisite ritualism is a genuine and vital thing. One never feels the superficiality of Chinese courtesy as he is very likely to feel with that of Japan or France. One is constantly amazed by the comprehensiveness of this propriety. A Chinese seems to be prepared to know how to act in every possible contingency of life. A coolie can display the gentleness, dignity, and sincerity of bearing that we associate only with a *grand seigneur*.

The stress laid upon propriety and the universality of training in the forms of proper conduct, explain the need felt by every Chinese to preserve appearances in every situation, or as it is commonly stated, to "save his face". The fact too that no person stands by himself but always involves at least the members of his own family in a collective responsibility, reinforces the necessity of seeming to conform with the requirements of right and proper conduct.

Face-saving devices are perhaps more numerous than with us because our community life has more of reality. It is merely because their conventions vary from ours that the deception seems to be greater. Essentially it is of the same kind. Our white lies serve the purpose of smoothing the roughness of intercourse. No one misunderstands them and no one would do without them. As for more serious matters it is doubtful if the Chinese solicitude to save appearances is any more pronounced than our own. We have many crooks who pose as honest men. We have many vicious persons parading behind the cloak of respectability. We have a conspiracy to disregard awkward and scandalous facts. We are always horrified when a newspaper drags them out to view. We should therefore have no difficulty in comprehending what face-saving means. It merely falls in a different area of life. No Chinese has anything to hide in the matter of his private relationships, but must operate all the mechanisms of pretense in his community connections. It is just the reverse with us.

From whatever direction we begin to search for the elements of strength in Chinese social organization we are led directly to the structure of the Chinese family. In other lands the patriarchal family has been the deepest cause of disunity, the difference being that the Chinese closed the gap by ethical instead of political principles. In so far as continuity and durability of social organization are desired, they can be secured by the Chinese method. If they cost too heavily and the effects of interplay of free personalities are desired, obviously a shift to the western basis is needed. It is somewhere on the scale between the poles of ethical and of political control that human societies find their fullest effectiveness, and realize what is for them the highest good. It is doubtful if in a world of complex rela-

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tionships, any society can hold its own if it approximates too closely to either of these poles. The whole historical drift is unmistakably in the direction of personal separateness held in the orbit of political organization. The same forces that created states in the Western world are now acting upon China, and in a manner intensified by Western example. The problem is how far the process can be carried. In our case the whole legal growth depends upon ethical roots. In spite of our drift the family is still essential to the state; law is still manufactured out of custom; the sense of right is a necessity to the enforcement of any regulation.

Recent movements in China, notably among the students, have aimed at a thorough critical plowing of the Chinese field. Their intention is the "remaking" of civilization. It might have been expected that this remade civilization would be patterned very largely after the Utopias projected by youthful American and European radicals. This of course does not matter if it affords intelligent Chinese a means for self-examination. The consequent dissatisfaction may be a useful antidote to the universal resentment that appears whenever a custom is brought into question or even under examination.

My own opinion is that the rigid family system may be modified without losing its fundamental strength, by an improvement in the status of woman. Every social order in its efforts to maintain itself, seems to cast its disadvantages into penalties which are placed upon its women. Certainly the Chinese have purchased family durability at the cost of practically every form of feminine welfare. It would be sad to confess that there can be no social strength without the submergence of half the race.

The greatest success of Christianity in China is found among the women. It treats them as personalities who

have a place in the world and to whom some consideration is due. In the families of such women there is a noticeable relaxation of traditional domestic servitude. This is of course sometimes painful, just as it is said that the unbinding of feet can cause as much misery as the process by which the mutilation was brought about. It is impossible to believe that the increase in woman's capacity, with more intelligence and more voluntary coöperation, cannot supply a greater strength than that of the old cruel rigidity.

We need not expect, nor should we desire, that the Chinese become as we are in our family organization. Western society based upon the conception of free personality was certain to make marriage a matter of individual choice. It may be doubted if the romantic personal method is a conclusive success. Marriage is after all a thing far transcending the likes and dislikes of persons. It is a primary concern of the species, beside which inclination is a thing of smaller importance. It may be that we have moved to the extreme limit at which freedom becomes irresponsible, and must soon find a basis on which the family group will play a larger part, and in which the corporate good will be embedded in personal growth rather than enforced from outside.

It would conceivably be highly beneficial if a group of Confucian missionaries—which is unfortunately a contradiction in terms—could be brought to live and teach in our western society.