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China: The Kinship Society

Granet and the Analects: Cultural Evolution of Kinship in China

Granet¹ uses texts of ancient songs, poems and anecdotes as sources of information, similar to how Schwartz worked with the oracle bones. Granet thus succeeded in sketching a vivid picture of life in ancient China as it was lived in the distant past among members of the nobility and among the people in the countryside.

As an illustration I quote from a marriage song of the peasants which Granet interpreted. In it the texts go back and forth between questions and answers: “How is hemp cultivated? – The furrows must be crossed! – How does one take a wife? – The parents must be notified! – How does one cut branches? – It can’t be done without a hatchet! – How does one take a wife? – it can’t be done without a match-maker” (Granet 2013: 153). The lyrics of songs like these hardly need any interpretation. Provided the translation is reliable, they speak for themselves: “The rainbow is in the East! – No one dare point to it... The maid when she will marry – leaves brothers and parents a long way off... When she will marry, the maid – leaves far away brothers and parents” (ibid: 154). The sad complaints of young brides about being suddenly separated from the loved ones in whose presence they grew up, point to the patrilineal character of the family system which has hardly undergone any change even to the present.

When a young Chinese woman gets married, she (even today, in the overwhelming majority of cases) leaves her parents and joins her husband’s family. The same is true in the Confucian traditions of Japan (Reinhold 1981) and

1 In his introduction to a German edition of *La civilisation chinoise* by Marcel Granet, the German sinologist Wolfgang Bauer pointed out that C. Wright Mills (1916–1962) has been familiar with the work of Granet (Bauer 1988). Bauer referred to the article by Mills and Meyer Fortes (Fortes 1906–1983 was a cultural anthropologist) on Ancestor Worship (Mills, Fortes 1961). In addition, we have access to an early manuscript by Mills, published as one of his *Collected Essays* with an introduction by Irving Louis Horowitz. That introduction is dated June 1962. The title of the chapter by Mills is *The Language and Ideas of Ancient China* (Mills 1962). The piece was actually written by Mills in 1940 when he was a student at the University of Wisconsin. (Personal communication from Javier A. Trevino). In addition, Mills also worked with Granet’s companion volume *La civilisation chinoise*, in which Mills observed Granet delineate “the distinctive features of the societal and political system of the ancient Chinese” (ibid: 473).

in Korea. Different from “the West” which introduced the bilateral kinship system under the influence of Christianity, these societies have consistently followed the patrilineal (and patrilocal) family system. Accordingly, the bride needs to get to know and love not merely her husband, his parents, siblings, and grandparents, but also his ancestors as equivalents of the clan’s specific *saints*. Those are her husband’s personal protectors in the beyond who perform as the guardians of his kinship group! Perhaps ancestors and saints are hard to compare; maybe ancestors help families, while saints help individuals. In the background of these distinctions are millennia of history of culture difference that we need to learn to understand.

The young person who is expected to make the ancestors happy under these traditional conditions is typically not the daughter but the son: The daughter must say farewell to her father’s ancestors when she gets married, but the son is never required to change ancestors throughout his whole life. Advice to the son is summarized as follows: In book I of the *Analects of Confucius* the entry no. 13 ends with the lines addressed to any future husband: “Marry one who has not betrayed her own kin and you may safely present her to your ancestors” (Waley 1989: 87).

Understanding family relations in China is difficult for a Western person, as long as the observer looks at Chinese facts from a Western perspective. Here is a recent dialogue as illustration: The young woman returns to her home village in Southern China. She proudly presents her college degree to her relatives. Her father’s oldest brother, the family head, is delighted to see the diploma. He tells the young graduate: “You make the ancestors of our family very happy, even though you are a girl!” The uncle’s praise should be read like this: Even though soon, when you get married, you will have to leave our family and our ancestors, we are happy that now, while you are still single, you make the ancestors of your father’s clan very proud of you by your academic achievements.

Granet reminds us that in China the central concept of family life is – and has been for millennia – *filial piety* (孝). We are familiar with this concept from the chapter on Confucianism. It is the foundation “of domestic and even of civic morality” (Granet 2013: 310). An ethical rule with firm foundations in the kinship system applies, however, to other areas of society as well: People respect their monarch because they experience in him a father-figure. The latter of course occurred in Western history as well.

On the subjects of the origins of loyalty and obedience of the oldest son to his father, called, as we have seen, *filial piety*, Granet refers to Confucian texts which seem almost casual but are attributed sacred qualities nevertheless. They make use of anecdotes which have the purpose of teaching listeners the correct way to behave. The listeners interpret what they hear as a description of

the rules that have been observed by the immortal ancestors themselves while they lived on earth. This meaning gives those texts the quality of Holy Scripture in spite of their casual and anecdotal style. The reference to the beyond also makes it appear plausible, that the teachings implicit in the anecdotes were first implemented in the ritualized conduct of early Chinese nobility.

Granet confronted those tales with historical events and other indications of cultural evolution. He made the striking discovery that filial piety as it has been handed on from generation to generation did not grow out of sentiments of emotional closeness between father and son. Instead he found the ritualized respect of the son for his father to have evolved out of ancient rites which had no family background but originally controlled and secured agnatic (from Latin *agnatio*) succession in civic leadership.

According to Granet it must have taken a long time before father and son even acknowledged each other as relatives. Before that happened, they were related as superior and underling in a relationship of public service, and – as Alfred Weber (A. Weber 1943: 99f.) has pointed out – this they could conveniently have done under matrilineal kinship conditions. The hypothesis that in ancient China a matrilineal family system preceded the patrilineal one is plausible also in light of the findings of Fei Xiaotong according to which there are pockets of ancient local ethnic minorities in China who live according to a matrilineal family order to this day (see the next segment of this chapter!). In this context it is noteworthy that the Chinese character for *family name* or *last name* is xing (姓). It consists of two parts which mean woman (女) and born (生). Accordingly, if a Chinese is asked for his or her family name, the question in fact aimed originally at the woman of whom they were born.²

The Latin legal terms from the ancient Roman Empire *agnatio* and *cognatio* play an important part in Granet's analysis. *Cognatio* means to be related by blood, based merely on who the mother and the begetter has been. In modern terms it would come close to the idea of sharing similar genetic information. *Agnatio* by contrast refers exclusively to kinship relationships *among men* and is limited to male offspring who was born into a legitimate marriage relationship. Different rules and regulations for behaviour in kinship contexts can be distinguished with the use of these two terms by asking, if cognation or agnation were the intended effect of the respective rule. It is clear that starting in an early stage of its evolution the Chinese kinship culture, as Granet has shown, developed in the direction of an agnatic family system.

2 In modern Chinese asking for the last name has a similar ring in China as the question "where are you from?" It is reminiscent of asking "in which village did you grow up?" (See here the reference to the visit to a village reported in the author's preface!).

Father and son were related as superior and underling, because – as we have seen above – what initially created a lasting relationship between them, was “a bond of infeudation, a juridical and not a natural bond, and moreover, a bond of extra-familial nature” (ibid: 311) without requiring any biological basis. In the beginning the son respected in the father his feudal lord, and only in a later stage of evolution did father and son acknowledge each other as relatives. Granet concluded from this insight that the conventional wisdom explaining political ethic, like obedience to the leader as a projection of domestic moral, must be abandoned.

Rather the opposite is true: The ritualized feudal order came first; it later permeated (in Granet’s words it “impregnated”) kinship relationships. Granet summarized his findings about the origins of the Chinese kinship system as follows: “While the domestic order seems to rest entirely upon paternal authority, the idea of respect takes absolute precedence of the idea of affection in family relationships. Regulated on the model of court assemblies, domestic life forbids all familiarity. Etiquette rules there, not intimacy.”³

Clearly, in the days of Confucius the special type of loyalty between father and son was not the same all over the country and certainly not the same in the different social strata of society. That is spelled out explicitly in the Analects of Confucius in the chapter that is named after his student Zi Lu. In a conversation that took place in 489 BCE the Duke of She (沈諸梁) informed Confucius, saying, “Among us here there are those who may be styled upright in their conduct. If their fathers have stolen a sheep, they will bear witness to the fact.” Confucius said, “Among us, in our part of the country, those who are upright are different from this. The father conceals the misconduct of the son, and the son conceals the misconduct of the father. Uprightness is to be found in this.” No matter how that may appear to a Western observer of Chinese culture, the great sage himself here defines law abiding conduct in the “public sphere” to be of lesser dignity than the family duty of *filial piety toward a father*.

3 Ibid. – Here follows the French original of this crucial passage: «On les lit pour trouver en eux le code des bonnes mœurs; nul n’oserait imaginer que ces mœurs n’ont pas été celles des anciens. En revanche, dès que l’on tient compte des données historiques, on aperçoit que, loin de sortir d’une simple codification de sentiments naturels, les règles de la piété filiale dérivent d’antiques rites par lesquelles s’obtenait primitivement l’affiliation agnatique. C’est au terme seulement d’une longue évolution que le fils et le père se sont considérés comme des parents. Le premier lien qui les a unis est un lien d’inféodation, lien juridique et non pas naturel, et, de plus, lien de nature extra-familiale. Le fils n’a vu un parent dans le père qu’après l’avoir reconnu pour son seigneur. Il convient donc d’inverser le postulat historique qui est à la base des théories chinoises. La morale civique n’est point une projection de la morale domestique ; c’est tout au contraire, le droit de la cité féodale qui imprègne la vie domestique.»

In the book Mengzi, (or Mencius) chapter Jin Xin, Section 1, we find an even more striking dialogue about a father-son-relationship, this time involving a ruling monarch who finds himself confronted with a father accused of a murder. The answers are given by Mengzi, one of Confucius' most important disciples after whom the book is named, and who, as we saw above, is also known as Mencius (372–289):⁴

“Tao Ying asked Mengzi, ‘Shun being sovereign, and Gao Yao chief minister of justice, if Gu Sou (the father of king Shun) had murdered a man, what would have been done in the case?’ Mengzi said, ‘Gao Yao would simply have apprehended him.’ Question: ‘But would not Shun have forbidden such a thing?’ Mengzi: ‘Indeed, how could Shun have forbidden it? Gao Yao had received the law from a proper source.’ Question: ‘In that case what would Shun have done?’ Mengzi: ‘Shun would have regarded abandoning the kingdom as throwing away a worn-out sandal. He would privately have taken his father on his back and retired into concealment, living somewhere along the sea-coast. There he would have been all his life, cheerful and happy, forgetting the kingdom.’”

The latter story suggests unconditional loyalty between father and son. But it must also be seen through the eyes of Mengzi who is credited with the saying: *The benevolent man extends his way of treating a person he loves also to someone he does not love*. In light of this we must leave it open, how Mengzi looked at the relationship between father Gu Sou and his son king Shun. The son concealing a crime his father committed be it stealing a sheep or killing a man, may be motivated by intimate closeness or by obedience to the rule of etiquette. In either case, the result is a victory of filial piety over all possible conflicting considerations arising from the realm of government and law, or from any other segment of society outside the kinship system.

The relationship between brothers is also the topic of a famous dialog in the Analects. The brothers are Xiang and Shun, and the latter becomes king. As was well known at the time, Xiang had made nearly every attempt imaginable to kill his brother in order to keep him from becoming the ruler. After taking office, Shun establishes a record of punishing evildoers, but he spares his brother and even gives him the title of *Prince of You Bei*. Against this background Wen Zhang asked Mengzi why Shun uses clemency and even kindness toward Xiang in spite of that brother's evil intentions in the past. Mengzi replied:

“A benevolent man does not lay-up anger, nor cherish resentment against his brother, but only regards him with affection and love. Regarding him with affection, he wishes him to be honourable: regarding him with love, he wishes him to be rich. The appointment of Xiang to be the *Prince of You Bei* was to

4 All years are to be read as BCE.

enrich and ennoble him. If, while Shun himself was sovereign, his brother had been a common man, could he have been said to regard him with affection and love?"

Mengzi's reply teaches that to love someone includes wanting to make him or her wealthy. The concluding sentence of the text suggests a strong emphasis on public recognition. The imperative to treat his brother not according to an abstract law but rather to "regard him with affection" is motivated largely by taking into consideration, what impression it would have made on others if Shun had been ruler while "his brother had been a common man." The way a ruler treated his closest relatives was relevant for his recognition among his subjects. It is noteworthy how closely conduct in a family context and behaviour in public are interconnected. These dialogues from the *Analects* had, and have to this day, a profound impact on the notion of normative knowledge about family life in China.

Fei Xiaotong: Field Work on Contemporary Family Life in China

Fei Xiaotong conducted field research among villagers in Guangxi province belonging to the *Hualan Yao* minority. In the context of the family culture which Fei and his students studied the "biological father" and "social father" are not necessarily the same. All the "sons" born by a man's wife are to be accepted by him as his own. This does not mean that the village locals from the *Hualan Yao* do not understand the relationship between sex and reproductive physiology. They explained when interviewed, "The child may not necessarily be the child by a husband." But the fact that this infant is "not necessarily his own" is not sufficient reason to allow him to disclaim his responsibilities as the "social father" of the child.⁵

Fei reports these observations in his book *The Social Structure of Hualan Yao*. There he gives a detailed description of the Yao ethnic minority. These people live in the subtropical area of Guangxi, where the climate is warm and humid. Fei is interested in the coexistence of the monogamous marriage system with a semi-open lover system of the local people. He states that, in view of the sex life of the locals, marriage is just a "legal" union, and the "extralegal" relations are socially accepted by default. As long as they are not made open to all, other people do not care and let the relationship go as if unnoticed.

5 Collected Works of Fei Xiaotong in Chinese, 同6, 费孝通文集第一卷, 429页。 – I owe this information to research collaboration with Li Li, Shen Guanbao and Tang Weiming.

It is consistent with these field observations on the topic of the evolving concept of fatherhood when Simmel points out that in less developed cultures men are eager to bring their women, who in some cases are their sisters, into contact with the chief, the priest, or other prominent man (Helle, 2015: 60). This is reminiscent of the biblical report of Abraham and Sarah visiting king Abimelech or of the couple spending time in Egypt at the court of the Pharaoh.⁶ According to Simmel, men who encouraged such contacts for their women and sisters believed that any child born out of the encounter – which then would nevertheless be taken care of by the respective “father” – would inherit the admired qualities of their noble begetter. This would later benefit the whole family including the stepfather who arranged for the contact with the famous male (Simmel 1895: 10).

As the illustrations show, both Simmel as well as Fei take from very different contexts the insight that the notion of “father” must have undergone a long and complicated process of development. In the course of that it changed from (a) relating to the child merely via its mother who was close to the man helping to take care of the infant, to (b) a “direct and individual relationship between the begetter and the child” (ibid.) based on obedience and loyalty.

Simmel introduces a distinction between two ways of relating to the next generation; this can occur via handing on upon death material goods as valued inherited possessions, or via passing on genetic information via blood relations, and at the same time using that biological fact as point of departure for cultural consequences. Of course the two – inheriting material goods on the one hand, and feeling close on the basis of blood relations – can be combined, as typically happens in China. Simmel assumes, however, that in the distant past, the former (inheriting wealth) may have been a powerful motif standing on its own.

Knowing who the begetter of a son was, did not have much relevance under matrilineal cultural conditions when – as Bronislaw Kaspar Malinowski (1884–1942) reported about the Trobriand Islanders (Malinowski 1929) – the dying tribal chief hands on his power, wealth, and office to his sister’s oldest son: Blood relations between the adult male and the male child who later succeeded him as chief was defined the matrilineal way: The chief and his successor’s mother descended from the same woman. Earlier in this chapter we saw that the Chinese character for family name is xing (姓) and that it consists of two parts which mean woman (女) and born (生).

Fei, who was Malinowski’s student at the *London School of Economics and Political Science*, believes that on the evolutionary path toward patrilineality,

6 Bible, Genesis, Chapter 20, verses 1–11, and Chapter 12, verses 11–15.

the lover system he observed in his field work among the *Yao* minority culture is of great significance and influence. It creates *conditions for selection* in the sense of “survival of the fittest.” Fei uses reasoning which reads as anticipation of social biology: The effects of “sexual choice” are more significant under the lover system than under the system of monogamous marriage.

The *patrilineal* kinship system that has clearly dominated China for millennia is also characterized as *patrilocal*, meaning that the family is where the father resides. In case of a divorce, the children typically stay with the father. As has been mentioned above, the bride leaves her family of origin when she gets married, and moves to her husband's home to become a member of his clan. As a consequence, one may surmise that she is a “member” of two families, but even though one may get that impression on the basis of a superficial observation of people's behaviour: Her primary allegiance is to her husband's family, and that is ritually confirmed on festive occasions.

Local people whom Fei interviewed during his field work use the expression “incense” to describe the continuation of worshipping relatives after they die, which carries a very strong sense of religious ethics. The reason lies in their conviction, as Fei's research documented, that dead family members do not leave the family, but while staying close, live in another world an intangible life similar to the tangible one. That is why the ancestors' invisible life is ritually worshiped by their living offspring. Apart from this consideration – which may explain the special social position of *women* who change family membership, in comparison to *males* in China who do not – as a result of the patrilineal kinship system, everyone (including married women) belongs to *one family* only and not to two or more.

When Fei completed his doctoral thesis at the *London School of Economics and Political Science* in 1938 entitled “Peasant Life in China” based on the materials collected from a village in Jiangsu, he compared the matrilineal roots still visible among the *Yao* with the more typical Chinese patrilineal families of the *Han*. He clearly described the remarkable difference between the *Han* residents of the village in Jiangsu and the *Yao* people in terms of their concept of family and marriage.

For example, the village in Jiangsu is a typical patrilineal unit: There is special emphasis on parent–son relationship and intergenerational inheritance of property, based entirely on blood relation in the male line of descent. The cultural differences between the matrilineal *Yao* and the patrilineal *Jiangsu Han*, results in their completely different view of female chastity. This could be documented when in the 1980s Fei guided his students to the village of Jiangsu for a revisit. He discovered a special living arrangement in the village: When the girl reaches puberty, her parents must provide in their own bedroom a small

bed for the daughter to sleep in, until she gets married. Although the locals did not give any explanation for this spatial arrangement, it is done undoubtedly in the interest of keeping the girl in chastity before marriage (Shen 2007).

A functional explanation for the significance of chastity would point to the difficulty to determine physical fatherhood in the absence of genetic testing. It was therefore important to limit a young woman's sexual activities to have contact with one man only in order to make sure who the father of a possible child is. In order to know without doubt, who the *father as begetter* was, the respective clans needed to insist on the truthfulness of the wives during marriage and on their virginity prior to it (Simmel 1895: 10).

The unconditional limitation to having sexual relations only with the spouse thus developed earlier on the side of the women, and only there Simmel sees it founded in the principle of inheriting wealth according to blood bonds. The demand for the husband to be truthful as well, was a later and much slower development which, according to Simmel, rests on different foundations (Helle 2015: 61). But marital truthfulness became necessary in principle to establish monogamy in traditional societies.

Simmel, similar to Fei after him, stays with an evolutionary mode of arguing, applying Darwin's biological insights to culture change: The *more effective cultural form* survives in the course of competition and selection. As a result, the monogamous marriage eventually supersedes other forms, because it enables a type of socialization in the family which Simmel assumes – for the development of the children and thus for producing personalities – to be superior to any other. If the next generation grows up in a kinship group in which both parents cannot unite their efforts in bringing up their common offspring, then – according to this point of view – those children will have less favorable chances for developing.

Monogamous marriage thus entails an evolutionary advantage, comparable to more fertile soil or more advanced agricultural technology. Consequently, the struggle for survival will make it more likely that the monogamous two-parents-group will outlast other family cultures in which the mother is more or less left alone in taking care of her offspring (Simmel 1895: 13). If this is true, then it will matter in the context of this comparison of cultures: It will make the present Chinese patrilineal three-generation-family successful for some time to come, because on a global scale it will likely produce more competitive offspring than the kinship systems of other regions.

Just as it is one-sided to try to explain everything from the perspective of the economy as if money was the only thing that counts it is also one-sided to pretend that money does not matter in the life of a family. Indeed, often marriages are contracted expressly on economic conditions, and in many native cultures,

money must be paid in the event of marriage. On a low level of subsistence every adult member of a family is crucial as a farm hand who contributes to gaining the food needed.

If in such context, a young woman gets married and as we explained above, as a consequence shifts membership from her family of origin to the family of her future husband, then in economic terms, it means hiring away a crucial part of the work force. It makes sense if that loss is compensated by paying a certain amount of money to the family of the bride (Helle 2015: 62f.). It may seem like purchasing her, but that is too narrow a view of what goes on economically.

According to Simmel's line of reasoning, the money paid for the bride, requires considerable sacrifice on the part of the groom and his family, because it is difficult for them to come up with the required amount. Later it is likely that as a consequence what has been acquired as the result of making a sacrifice will be kept in high esteem; the groom who had to toil and save for years to finally be able to "afford" that bride will be determined to consider her "valuable," at least for that reason. Speaking of the "value of a bride" in money terms seems unethical in many Western contexts. In China, however, the two areas of commerce and kinship are not separated in the same way, as the following case description shows.

A Chinese student of medicine has successfully completed her work in medical and hospital training in Germany. Her widowed mother lives in China and is quite well-off financially. Nevertheless, the young M.D. takes a considerable amount of money back to visit her mother, simply because it is the common way to follow the Chinese rule of etiquette. – A former graduate student in China has completed her M.A. degree and looks for a job. Her aging father needs to be hospitalized. As is normal in mainland China, the hospital requires a family member to take care of the patient around the clock. The young woman takes turns with her mother to live in the hospital at the side of the sick father, having to share the bed with him during the night, because the hospital does not provide any other sleeping arrangement.

What do these illustrations show? The kinship relationship has priority over commercial independence of an adult child, as it does over behavior in the public sphere in general, like in the hospital. The physicians there are dealing with families, not merely with isolated patients. And, for better or for worse, the government too is dealing with families, not individuals, e.g. when fugitive Chinese citizens are retrieved by Chinese special agents in Australia or the United States. According to *The New York Times*, Li Gongjing, a captain in the economic crime division of the Shanghai Public Security Bureau, explained the agents' approach in an interview with *Xinmin Weekly* magazine in

November of 2014. "A fugitive is like a flying kite. Even though he is abroad, the string is held in China. He can always be found through his family."⁷

In the context of hunting down tax evaders, this statement may be reassuring, however, if a fugitive is under surveillance for other reasons, Li Gongjin's statement is frightening, as it may well be intended to be. It demonstrates one of the consequences of living in a kinship society; it can be promising and threatening at the same time.

Altruism and Selfishness: A Precarious Balance

As was reported here in an earlier chapter, Fei Xiaotong deplored the lack of responsibility of people throwing garbage into the water near their dwelling place. Fei wrote: "If we want to discuss the problem of selfishness, we have to take into consideration the pattern of the entire social structure" (Fei, 1992: 61). This confronts us again with these questions: What is peculiar about Chinese society? What must we take into consideration in comparing selfishness there with selfishness in the West? How do the two cultures generate altruism and how do they channel it into certain social contexts?

In order to establish the centrality of kinship in the Chinese culture, we start with something appearing superficial at first sight: Every Chinese name *starts* with the family name. It is not a person's *last name*, as in the West, in China it comes *first*. Fei Xiaotong is a descendent of the Fei family, as Deng Xiaoping had a father, grandfather, and great grandfather whose family name was also Deng.

In addition, the Chinese language is rich in words designating types of status in the kinship system. Western persons talking about their grandmother may need to explain if they mean the one from their mother's side or the one from their father's side. The person having command of the Chinese language uses distinct words for each of his four grandparents. Thus the question never arises: Do you mean the one from your father's or from your mother's side?

Similarly, if we know that a person is another person's cousin, we may have to ask to find out about the gender, but then we still have no idea if we are dealing with a child of a father's brother, of a father's sister, of a mother's brother, or a child of a mother's sister. The Chinese language provides separate words for each of those kinship relationships. Also, Western descriptions like *older brother* or *younger sister* are distinct words in Chinese. The comparative wealth

7 The New York Times, Obama Administration Warns Beijing About Covert Agents Operating in U.S. By Mark Mattezzi and Dan Levin, Aug. 16, 2015.

of vocabulary available to describe types of family realities suggests that the field of kinship relationships was more significant in the Chinese cultural tradition than has been the case in any of the European languages. Terminology used to identify participants in family life today in China and in the West, points in the direction of an important distinction between Orient and Occident.

The roots of this centrality of kinship in history can be found precisely in the period which Confucius admired so much: "...the Western Zhou represented a particular mode of ruling a vast area when the productive forces were at a relatively low level. The essence of such a system was to govern the country through kinship. Consequently, the political and economic organizations were wholly assimilated to that of blood relationship" (Li Jun, quoted by Gassmann 2006: 14).

Consider against this background the following case from contemporary China: The young woman has successfully completed her Master degree at the university. Having returned to her home after many years of absence on a college campus she re-joins the three generation family of her parents, her father's aging parents, and herself. She intends to work hard to prepare for the entrance examination in order to be accepted into the Ph.D.-program of a different university in China. Then her father and her father's parents fall ill at the same time.

Her mother takes care of her sick in-laws in the family home, but her father must be hospitalised, and she must join him as care-taker in the clinic. She must go back and forth between the hospital and the home to bring food to her father which her mother cooks. Even during the night, she must be with her father in the hospital. Nobody asks, if she would like to do all that or not: It is simply normal behaviour in a Chinese family context, it means following the rule of etiquette. If her father's parents were well, she and her mother would take turns in the hospital, but in the given case, that is not possible. As a result, of course she cancels her application for admission to the Ph.D.-program.

Fei Xiaotong writes that it is necessary to look into "the pattern of the entire social structure" (Fei, 1992: 61) in order to understand selfishness and altruism in a society. The behavior of disposing of garbage in – what in Western contexts would be called – the public sphere appears selfish, the service provided for an ailing family member in the hospital appears altruistic, but do these Western terms really fit the respective Chinese situations?

What we are faced with in the tension between individual and society are either balances, or problems resulting from imbalanced conditions. The agonizing demands in China on the individual in the context of his or her kinship unit would be unbearable unless they are balanced by freeing the person from too many additional duties outside the home. This theoretical approach

perhaps does not excuse, but it helps explain, Fei's complaint about throwing garbage where it does not belong.

In the West the demands on the person resulting from kinship obligations are limited by comparison. There is the day-care center, the nursery school, the hospital staff, and the retirement home to relieve the individual from sacrificing too much time, energy, money, and personal freedom for of his or her relatives. To still arrive at a balance that would preclude rampant selfishness in the West, one would expect various kinds of public services to be performed by individuals outside their kinship context, as in religious, government, or non-government organizations by which the volunteers would compensate for the freedom awarded them by their families. Nothing of that kind of voluntary work can reasonably be expected of the average Chinese, given the enormous involvement required inside his or her kinship group.

Possibly this observation can contribute toward understanding massive discord in Europe in 2015 and 2016 about unpaid spontaneous involvement in helping arriving refugees. The rejection of a generous refugee policy is most pronounced in less developed countries, in which the family is more demanding on its members. The acceptance of large numbers of refugees may correlate with high degrees of individualization and of low social coherence of families, as is typical in large German cities.

I explained to a Chinese friend how I concluded in this book that the selfishness Fei Xiaotong described as throwing garbage into the canals in the beautiful town of *Suzhou* near Shanghai was to be seen in connection with the altruism people display in kinship contexts. I suggested that selfishness in one situation and altruism in the other ought to be balanced against each other. My friend replied that it was an interesting idea, but one that did not really reflect the realities of Oriental culture. This is so, because what I called "altruism" was basically not an ethical preference of an individual but compliance with ancient custom by following the rule of kinship etiquette.

Accordingly, the "performer" deserving recognition and possible admiration, was primarily not the *individual* but instead the *social unit*⁸ representing the tradition, in the case under discussion the Chinese family. Just as in the hospital case we ought to admire (or consider with abhorrence) the system rather than the individual, in the garbage context we might also want to blame the system for not having been able to produce a generally accepted rule of behaviour toward the environment, at least not for the time being. Yet, as it turned out in my conversation with my Chinese friend, *selfishness* as observed

8 On the Chinese concept of "danwei" as unit and kinship group under socialism see Oskar Weggel (1994: 58f.).

by Fei and *compliance* with kinship etiquette by the young woman at her father's bedside in the hospital are incommensurable, they are not theoretically located on the same ethical level.

The garbage thrower is exposed to conditions of modernity. He or she is thus confronted with a largely uncharted territory of ethics in which there is room for spontaneous selfishness and also for deliberate altruism. That is totally different, however, in the kinship context. I asked, if what I at first perceived as "altruism" could be compared to flying into London, and after having recovered from the shock of left-hand-traffic, to then admire the Britons for being so considerate and altruistic as to drive on the side of the street that is prescribed by their traffic rules. Not a good comparison, was the reply. Apart from the fact that in London you will surely get killed in the street if you try to insist on right-hand-traffic, obedience to what the traffic system requires cannot be compared to the Chinese kinship system.

There, as we mentioned repeatedly, it is a matter of following the traditional rule of etiquette. In addition, it is the law to take care of one's parents, and – maybe most powerful of all – it is the ancient conviction that the individual's life is a gift from his or her parents. In addition, bringing up the child through the stages of infant, toddler, pre-schooler, and student is acknowledged as an admirable performance into which the parents and frequently grand-parents invested unquantifiable measures of love, time and money. If a young and healthy Chinese declares: I cannot take care of my ailing father, then he has the ancestors, the tradition of his or her culture, and even the law against him!

Does that mean, if a Chinese person neglects his or her parents, the police will be on the doorstep? That is the least interesting consideration. It will most likely never happen for that reason. The police will show up in China if you propose to overthrow the government, not if you beat up your neighbour. According to Chinese tradition even the most capable official cannot repair any damages members of a kinship group do to each other inside their family. So what chances does the reluctant care-taker of parents have to refuse? Maybe there is no realistic chance to do that. He or she may claim: I do not have the money to do anything, or, I must take care of my children and therefore have no time and energy left to take care of my parent.

These two would be the only excuses remotely possible in China's kinship society. However, such conduct would create the prediction that such a person's offspring will do unto them what they did unto their own parent. Also it will destroy much of their reputation and social prestige. As I quoted here above from Granet's research, in China the central concept of family life is – and has been for millennia – *filial piety* (孝). It is the foundation "of domestic and even of civic morality" (Granet 2013: 310). Even though my Chinese friend

rejects this comparison, I tend to believe that in China refusing to move into the clinic with your sick father to take care of him while he is hospitalized is like trying to drive on the wrong side of the road in London.

The Chinese kinship system surprises the Western observer by the absence of diversity. Compared to the wide variety of family types in the West, families in China prescribe and allow largely the same pattern of behaviour. This must be taken into consideration as a source of solidarity and mutual understanding to counteract the absence of a tradition of ethical universalism: While each person is expected to plan and toil in order to advance the wealth, health, and happiness of their relatives, all Chinese also recognize the fact that they share the same family duties as a unifying fate.