

Marriage and Family in the Contemporary Rural Areas of Shaanxi: Traditions, Customs, and their Changes

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I. Introduction

The family is the most fundamental unit of society and has long been a subject of study by theologians and social scientists. Marriage and family life touch the human person in the realities of daily existence. The Catholic Church recognizes its mission is to serve everyone in marriage and family life. The family in the modern world, as much as and perhaps more than any other institution, has been beset by the many profound and rapid changes affecting society and culture. The Church's service to the family must begin with a prudent reading of the signs of the time – the challenges and opportunities which face today's family.¹ There are many different nationalities, races, and cultures in the world. In order to fulfill its task of serving marriage and family in these various situations, the Church ought to consider and understand the social and cultural differences in society.

Each culture has wisdom to offer concerning the mystery and riches of marriage and family life. The Church should remain open to support these different cultural insights.² Pope John Paul II claims that Catholic Church needs to understand the various situations in which marriage and the family are lived today. Moreover, the Church has to respond to people's important daily problems affecting married and family life.³ In Chinese tradition, marriage is regarded as a union joined by *Tian* ('God'.) Although couples can get a civil divorce, public opinion, expressing the traditional Chinese view, considers divorce shameful. Chinese culture has long considered the family the most important social unit. There are studies that demonstrate that lifestyles in urban China are becoming less traditional with respect to those in rural areas. The living situation, entertainment, income, education, and even the mode of thinking are increasingly different between rural and urban people in China. In the Shaanxi Province where the majority of society is rural and most of the residents are *Han* people, Chinese traditions and customs concerning marriage and family have largely been preserved. This article will briefly introduce the traditions, customs, and their changes regarding marriage and family in contemporary rural areas of Shaanxi. It will offer some basic information for further study on this subject.

¹ John Paul II, *The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World (Familiaris Consortio)*, Vatican translation (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1982), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 10.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

II. Contemporary Situations of Shaanxi

Shaanxi Province is located in northwestern China. It is a less-developed inland agricultural province. Shaanxi is one of the provinces with a high rate of population growth. In 1997, the birth rate was 13.31%. The average education level of the people in Shaanxi is relatively lower than national average and the illiteracy rate has always been above the national level. The majority of the population in Shaanxi is *Han* people.⁴ In rural areas of Shaanxi, people live in villages, which look like closely-knit communities. The houses are built very close. Each family has a certain *mu* (a unit of area, equivalent to 0.667 hectares) farm to plant corn, wheat, or some other crops. The farm provides food for survival and is also the main source of the family income. People go to the crop fields together in the day. They like to chat at mealtime and they may take their food to their neighbors' houses to share the meal and talk about everything they have seen and heard. As a result, they know each other very well and there are almost no secrets in the villages. If there is a wedding or funeral, most of the people in the villages come to the ceremony. Public opinions and gossip among the people is very powerful and widespread. Likewise, there exist heavy pressures on moral issues, such as divorce, pre-marital cohabitation, which are regarded as offending public decency. Therefore, rural Shaanxi can serve as a window to see the Chinese traditions and customs on marriage and family.

1. Population and the Economic Situation

The over-population problem threatens the survival and development of the Chinese nation. The total population of the entire country reached 1.295 billion in 2001. Over the past few years, the number of annual births has averaged about 12.79 million.⁵ Since the area capable of cultivation in China accounts for only one-tenth of its territory, such massive annual population growth creates a heavy burden. Feeding a growing population has become a burdensome challenge for China.⁶

The Shaanxi Province is a less-developed inland agricultural province. The total population of Shaanxi in 2000 was 36.05 million, i.e. thus placing it in the middle range of all provinces in China. The distribution of population and resources in the province can be divided into three areas: the southern, the northern, and the central part which is also called Guanzhong plain. Natural resources are unevenly distributed between the areas. In the northern part, land resources are rich but soil erosion is serious and the economic level is low. The Guanzhong plain has high-quality land, and the agricultural condition is fine, but fresh water resources are scarce. More than half of the total population of Shaanxi is living in the

⁴ Cf. Shaanxi Province, <http://www.unescap.org/pop/database/chinadata/shaanxi.htm>, access date, Dec. 13, 2001.

⁵ National Bureau of Statistics People's Republic of China, issued on March 28, 2001, <http://www.cpirc.org.cn/e5cendata1.htm>, access date, May 21, 2003.

⁶ Cf. *Facts Sheet 3- Family Planning in China*, http://www.oneworld.org/news/partner_news/china_factsheet3.html, access date, May 22, 2003.

Guanzhong plain which only accounts for 26.94% of the total land area of the province. In the southern part, there are rich mineral deposits and waterpower resources, but the area is mountainous, farmland is scarce, and the population density is very high and with many people living below the poverty line. Thus, there are very limited financial resources dedicated to education, medicine, health care, and other forms of social welfare, especially for the massive rural population.⁷

In the rural areas of Shaanxi, each family has a certain *mu* – crop field. The farm provides food for survival, and is also the main source of family income. Many peasants grow vegetables or orchards on their farm. However, the income raised cannot cover the expenses of the family. Peasants, most of them married men, must leave their homes to find suitable work to support their families. Many migrate to the cities and towns, but they are not registered officially as urban residents. Thus, they can work only temporally in the cities. These migrating workers are called the “floating population,” and they are not entitled to the urban citizen’s privilege of schooling for their children, insurance for their health, or even protection of their basic security. Their migration, consequently, is circular rather than permanent, short-distanced rather than long-distanced, and they remain rooted in their rural place of origin. Because of their poor education, the great majority, i.e. 80 percent of migrant workers, are construction workers or work in some other low-level job. Most of these rural migrant workers, because of relatively low wages and the instability of their urban employment, retain for security their family farms. These farms are operated by their wives who are left behind and assisted, if available, by the young and the old in the family. Because of poor transportation and low wages, these rural migrant workers cannot visit home often except in harvest season and during the New Year holiday. Therefore, the wives left behind not only take over the labor in agricultural production but also take care of children and elderly parents. Likewise, they also raise domestic farm animals, such as pigs, chickens, cows, or sheep, as other sources of family income. Almost two-thirds of wives contribute a half or more of the family incomes.⁸ By the end of 2000, the average per-capita income of rural residents had reached about 2630 Yuan (almost \$320 US dollars) per year. Except the costs of food, there is very few money left for other expenses.⁹

⁷ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Population Programme Databases, *Shaanxi Province*, <http://www.unescap.org/pop/database/chinadata/shaanxi.htm>, access date, May 21, 2003.

⁸ Che Fu Lee, “Rural Migrant Families in China: Changing Male-Female Household Relations” (draft, March 22, 2003). Dr. Che Fu Lee is the professor of Sociology at the Catholic University of America.

⁹ *Income and expenditure in urban and rural residents by region, 1998*, <http://www.cpirc.org.cn/income.htm>, access date, May 21, 2003. Per-capita annual income in rural Shaanxi is about 2630Yuan in 2000. If meals cost 5 Yuan (sixty US cents) per day in average, the cost of food is at least 1825 Yuan (200 US dollars) per year. Therefore, only 805 Yuan (98 US dollars) is left for other expenses.

2. Housing Situation

A big family is ideal in Chinese tradition. Several generations may live under one roof, "sharing joint responsibility of family political, financial and social functions as well as securing continuous ancestor worship."¹⁰ Four generation living together—*Si Shi Tong Tang* 四世同堂—was a symbol of happiness. The average family size in Shaanxi is above the national level. For example, in 2000, the average family size in Shaanxi was 3.57 while the national level was 3.44. The trends are quite different in an urban setting. The family size in the cities and counties was smaller than that of rural areas. The urban families live mainly in two-generation structures. The living space per capita for urban residents was 13.35 square meters compared to 22.87 square meters for rural residents by the end of 2000.¹¹ In the rural areas, most of houses are one-story buildings. The living space of each family includes the house and its front and back yard. The bathroom and domestic animals are usually located in the back yard of the house. In order to save space, it is very common that two houses share one wall similar to townhouses. Then the third house attaches to the second house through sharing another wall of the second house. The houses are built so close that they look like a line of connected railway cars of a long train.

In the rural areas of Shaanxi, almost every family dwelling has only two bedrooms – one for young generation and the other for the elderly generation. There is not enough space to set up an extra single room for children. Therefore, children live in the same bedroom with their parents until they are eleven or twelve years old and then move into their grandparents' bedroom.

3. Educational Situation

The educational level and conditions, especially for women, are very poor in the rural areas of China. According to a 1989 statistic for adult women in rural areas, those with senior middle school education or higher make up 8.9 percent; those with junior middle school education, 26.6 percent; those with primary school education, 27.9 percent; and illiterates and semi-illiterates, 36.6 percent.¹² The average education level of the general population in Shaanxi is relatively low. On July 1, 1986, the Chinese government established a law mandating nine-years of basic education. However, the percentage of children actually completing nine-year compulsory education is various and the assessment on education quality is adequate. In rural areas of Shaanxi, by the year 2002, the rate of male completion of the nine-year's compulsory education averages 80 percent, varying from 20 percent to 100 percent. For women, the average completion rate is 74

¹⁰ Cecilia Nathansen Milwertz, *Accepting Population Control: Urban Chinese Women and the One-Child Family Policy*, (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1997), 45.

¹¹ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Population Programme Databases, *Shaanxi Province*, <http://www.unescap.org/pop/database/chinadata/shaanxi.htm>, access date, May 21, 2003.

¹² *Family Planning in China White Paper*, <http://axe.acadiau.ca/-043638z/one-child/links.html>, access date, Dec.1, 2001.

percent, varying from 20 percent to 90 percent.¹³ There is usually no bookstore in a town, nor can one find a good bookstore in the local county.¹⁴ Very few people buy newspapers or magazines. Most village schools are old-fashioned and still do not have electricity. Less than ten percent of the people finish high school.

4. Cultural and Traditional Background and Situation

China, as one of the oldest nations in the human history, has her own splendid culture and traditions, which still have great influence on Chinese people today. Among the Chinese culture and tradition, Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism are the three main elements. Confucianism is often grouped together with Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism as a major historical religion. However, accurately, it is not an organized religion. Even though it does not have a missionary organization, it has spread far and wide through the influence of Chinese literate culture. "Confucian ethical values have, for well over 2,000 years, served as the source of inspiration as well as the court of appeal for human interaction at all levels—between individuals, communities, and nations in the Sinic world."¹⁵ Confucian ethics was virtually inseparable from the moral fabric of Chinese society. Therefore, in this article, Confucianism will be treated as the most important source of the Chinese cultural and traditional background.

Confucianism can be seen as an open humanism that takes the human being as the center of cosmos. Meanwhile, Confucianism is also open to the dynamism of nature. This openness, which Confucianism taught, is based on the fact that human beings are interconnected to others, to nature, and to Heaven. This interconnectedness is expressed by the term *Ren*仁.¹⁶ "Ren" ("humanity" in English) in Confucian doctrine is characterized by the keynote "love men" and is

¹³ SIA Survey Section Report Four, Shaanxi: Rural Development Institute Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, July 2002, <http://www.unchina.org/undp/documents/partners/English/Shaanxi.pdf>, access date, May 22, 2003. SIA is an abbreviation of Social Impact Assessment which is conducted by the Rural Development Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in this report.

¹⁴ The administrative division of the People's Republic of China is as follows: The country is divided into provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the Central Government; Provinces and autonomous regions are divided into autonomous prefectures, counties, autonomous counties and cities; Counties and autonomous counties are divided into townships, nationality townships and towns. Municipalities directly under the Central Government and other large cities are divided into districts and counties. Autonomous prefectures are divided into counties, autonomous counties, and cities. All autonomous regions, autonomous prefectures and autonomous counties are national autonomous areas. Towns are divided into villages. Each village has several thousands people. Cf. Constitution of the People's Republic of China, art. 30, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/constitution/constitution.html>, access date, May 23, 2003.

¹⁵ Wei-Ming Tu, "Confucius and Confucianism," in *Confucianism and the Family*, ed. Walter H. Slote and George A. De Vos (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), 3.

¹⁶ George F. Mclean, general editor, *Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change*, series III. Asia, Vol.9, Vincent Shen, "Confucianism, Taoism and Constructive Realism," in *Philosophy of Science and Education: Chinese and European Views*, ed. Vincent Shen and Tran Van Doan (Washington, DC: Cardinal Station, 1995), 112.

precisely the core of Confucian ideological system. "Humanity" has many connotations. Confucianism takes "benevolence" as its central idea and calls for treasuring human life. However, treasuring life is not the mere implication of "humanity" as advocated by Confucianism; its loftiest ideal should bring peace and happiness to the whole populace.¹⁷ The life which was treasured by Confucianism did not involve the unborn life.

In Confucian system, filial piety is one of the fundamental virtues. It is considered the root of all virtues. According to the filial piety, to marry with the view of having male heirs is a grave duty on the part of every son.¹⁸ Mencius, the illustrious exponent of Confucianism, said that among the un-filial acts, the failure to provide offspring was the greatest one.¹⁹ Sexual activities outside marriage are culturally forbidden. Thus, illegal births are negligible in China.²⁰ Marriage is necessary to keep up the family name and to provide for ancestral worship. Therefore, filial piety is the virtue by which the child is not only serving the parents, but also the ancestral spirits, and even *Tian* (Heaven or God), from whom all life comes.²¹ That is why Buddhism's first arrival in China met with strong resistance since Buddhist monks are required to abandon family and society by embracing celibacy and asceticism, therefore going against the demands of the ancestral cult and of filial piety.²²

Although Confucianism takes human being as the center of cosmos and interconnects humans being with Heaven, it does not develop the interconnectedness between human being and Heaven, rather it avoids talking about it. When his student asked him about the relationship between man and spiritual beings, Confucius replied, "paying respect to the spirits, but keeping away from them."²³ While being asked about death, Confucius said, "While you do not know life, how can you know about death?"²⁴ Confucianism developed a system of the rules of propriety to standardize the relationship among people, such as king-minister, father-son, and husband-wife relationship. In this system, the king is the master of a nation. He even had rights on his people's life.²⁵ The weakness of Confucianism is that it does not adequately explore the vertical

¹⁷ The editorial Department of The Complete Works of Confucian Culture, *The Analects of Confucius*, A Chinese-English Bilingual Edition (Shandong Province, China: Shandong Friendship Press, 1992), 15.

¹⁸ Catholic Encyclopedia: *Confucianism*, Cf. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04223b.htm>, access date, Oct.30, 2002.

¹⁹ Women of China, *New Trends in Chinese Marriage and the Family*, special series, (Beijing, China: China International Book Trading Corporation, 1987), 24.

²⁰ Zeng Yi, *Family Dynamics in China: A Life Table Analysis*, (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 30.

²¹ Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 69.

²² *Ibid.*, 126.

²³ *The Analects of Confucius*, 6:22.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 11:12.

²⁵ Cf. *Ibid.* 1:7.

relationship between God and human beings. If there is no vertical relationship as a foundation, the horizontal one will not have any roots. If it went a little bit further to seek the source of human nature, Confucianism would find the profound dignity of human being.

Buddhism, on the other hand, respects life and prohibits killing, but it rarely discusses the matter of abortion because a big family is traditionally the ideal for the Chinese; offspring are considered a blessing.

In this framework, the ideas of contraception and abortion are unimaginable in a family. Therefore, in Chinese culture and tradition, there are very few people who have thought about or discussed issues such as contraception and abortion. They think that they are personal matters. Few people think that abortion is the killing of an innocent child. Not until modern times, especially when the government of China began to promote Family Planning throughout the country in 1979, did people begin to talk about over-population, the quality of life, and the freedom of women. Thus, the Family Planning Policy and concepts of contraception and abortion emerged. The government offers a lot of information on how to use contraception and promotes new concepts such as "late marriage, late childbearing, having fewer and healthier children."²⁶ In order to control the population size and improve the people's quality of life, the government also requires unauthorized pregnant women to have an abortion and to use contraception. The freedom of speech is very limited in China. Consequently, there is no pro-life organization in China. Thus, people do not hear dissenting voices.

5. Marxism

Since the Communist party took over China, the theory of Marxism has become a required course in middle and high school. According to this theory, people's relationships are material; the history of human beings is a history of class struggle; the foundation of society is the possession of material goods; and individual value matters less than collective value. In this theory, human rights are vested in communities rather than individuals. Therefore, governments have the right to abrogate or deny some specific human rights of individuals when the rights of the community justify doing so.²⁷ Thus, the concept of human rights is considered a product of historical development, closely related to social, political, and economic conditions.²⁸ Influenced by this theory, the practice of family planning sometimes becomes very savage and dehumanizing. "Unauthorized"

²⁶ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Population Programme Databases, *The National Family Planning Program of China 1995-2000*, http://www.unescap.org/pop/database/law_china/ch_record015.htm, access date, April 4, 2003.

²⁷ Cf. James Turner Johnson, *Morality & Contemporary Warfare*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 100.

²⁸ *Family Planning in China White Paper*, <http://axe.acadiau.ca/-043638z/one-child/links.html>, access date, Dec.1, 2001.

children are considered a big threat to the country's development and, thus, must be aborted.

The government also promotes family planning as the fundamental and most important national policy. It is propagandized as a way to liberate women from productive forces and to improve the status of women in society. The government also considers population and family planning as an important component of the strategy for a sustained national economic and social development. Therefore, population and family planning are closely interwoven with economic and social issues. Without dissenting voices, contraception and abortion become very common. Little by little, people will lose the sense of respecting the dignity of unborn human beings. Contraception and abortion are thought of as personal, familial and social matters, not religious or moral matters. This idea may be the most influential element that is deeply implanted in the hearts of the modern Chinese.

6. One-child Policy Situation

Since the 1970's, the Chinese government has identified population growth as the fundamental obstacle to economic development. Moreover, the one-child policy was initiated in 1979, and it has been implemented through a strictly enforced system of administrative rewards for couples willing to stop at one child, financial penalties for couples having an unauthorized birth, and sanctions for cadres whose jurisdictions exceed annual birth quotas.

The one-child policy basically allows one child per couple. A flexible family planning policy is adopted for rural people.²⁹ All pregnancies must be authorized by local government officials. A birth permit is required before conception. In rural areas, where there is a demand for more than one child, and at least one boy, the one-child policy is met with strong resistance. The overwhelming preference for a son has led to the introduction of the one-son-two-child policy. This policy allows rural couples to have two children if the first-born is a girl, provided they wait four years.³⁰ An unauthorized pregnancy must be terminated by abortion regardless the women's consent and the stage of pregnancy. After giving birth, women's contraceptive practice is monitored, an annual X-ray check-up is administered, and an IUD is implanted by a physician every year.³¹

In China, especially in the rural areas, the main contraceptive methods are the Intrauterine Device (IUD) and female sterilization. Condoms, birth control pills,

²⁹ In Shaanxi Province, rural residents can have a second birth under special conditions. The details see *Family Planning, Fertility Regulation*, revised at the 28th session of the standing committee of the 8th People's Congress of Shaanxi Province on August 2, 1997, http://www.unescap.org/pop/database/law_china/ch_record074.htm, access date, Dec. 2, 2002.

³⁰ Susan Greenhalgh and Jiali Li, "Engendering Reproductive Practice in Peasant China: For a Feminist Demography of Reproduction," *Signs*, vol.20, no.3 (1995), 601-41.

³¹ Milwertz, *Accepting Population Control*, 102, 106.

implants, and spermicides are seldom used. In 1981, 69.46 percent of Chinese women in their reproductive years were using contraception. Among them, 50.20 percent were using IUD, while the other 25.40 percent were sterilized. In 1987, 71.21 per cent of women in reproductive age were using contraceptives with 41.48 percent of these using IUD and 38.24 percent having been sterilized. In order to prevent women from removing their IUD, the Chinese IUDs usually have no tail. Unauthorized removals are forbidden.³² Family planning workers bother women who resist abortion for second or third pregnancies constantly until they comply. Sometimes the family planning workers search for unauthorized pregnant women who try to hide themselves. If they are caught, they may be treated almost as if they are criminals.³³ Severe fines for unauthorized births often surpass what the family can afford.³⁴

Local governors regard reaching their arranged family planning targets as political merits to promote. The State Family Planning Commission of China points out that family planning work should be one of the major factors in evaluating the performance of leading cadres at various levels during their terms of office. A system of rewards and penalties should be established, under which those who have done a good job in family planning will be rewarded and those who have neglected their duties will be punished.³⁵ To get a good performance, the local leading cadres must keep the birth rate in their areas under the demographic target set by the central government. Although the family planning personnel are required to perform their duties in accordance with the law and ensure that laws are enforced in a just and civilized way, smashing houses, auctioning of property and forced sterilization are common coercions and punishments made by family planning workers against the family with an unauthorized pregnancy in rural areas.³⁶

Furthermore, in the 1980s, the entire budget for operation of the local family planning offices was reliant entirely on the national or regional government funding. Now, the government continues to mandate family planning policy, but provides little funding for implementation. Therefore, local governments have been asked to take responsibility for financing family planning programs. Pressed

³² Ibid. 106. Also see Dr. Zhao Baige, *Quality of Care of Reproductive Health in China Today*, <http://www.sfpc.gov.cn/en/rhpro.htm>, access date, May 23, 2003.

³³ Milwertz, *Accepting Population Control*, 16.

³⁴ In rural Shaanxi, if the firstborn is a boy, couples are not permitted to have another child. If the firstborn is a girl, after paying 400 Yuan (50 US dollars) called Social Compensation Fee, couples can have one more child after four years of first birth. The first unauthorized birth is fined 6,000 Yuan (760 US dollars) and followed with mandatory sterilization. About per-capita annual income in rural Shaanxi see footnote 9.

³⁵ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Population Programme Databases, *The National Family Planning Program of China 1995-2000*, chapter X, http://www.unescap.org/pop/database/law_china/ch_record015.htm, access date, April 4, 2003.

³⁶ Cf. "One-Child Population Control Policy" of Communist China, http://www.forerunner.com/lci/X0004_Population_Control_C.html, access date, September 5, 2001.

to collect revenues, local governments have come to rely on fines for unauthorized births. A first unauthorized birth is fined an amount equivalent of 2.5 to 5 times the village per-capita annual income.³⁷ The township retained retains 50 percent of the fine, the county 20 percent, and 30 percent to the village.³⁸ Thus, together with the tax office, the family planning office is the most powerful local government office, a power derived from their authority to collect money in the forms of fines and taxes.³⁹

7. Natural Family Planning Situation (NFP)

The Chinese government does not promote the development of NFP. The State Family Planning Commission of China states that family planning should rely solely on the progress of science and technology. The government insists that efforts should be made to ensure better use of the existing techniques for contraception and fertility regulation and to develop new means and methods of controlling the population size and improving overall quality of life. In the work of family planning, the priorities should be given to contraception and regular services such as contraceptive devices, induced abortion, sterilization, and other technical services.⁴⁰ Further, the Family Planning Commission demanded that by the year 2000, feature programs on population and family planning should be broadcasted on all radio and television stations at the provincial level.⁴¹ While NFP was introduced to China, it has not been widely used or promoted by the government.

III. Traditions, Customs, and their Changes

1. Concept and Dynamics of the Family

*Jia*家, the Chinese character for family, has been a very important Chinese word and concept. Almost all relationships are described in familial way. Country is literally called *guojia*国家, "state-family." The governors are called *fumuguan*父母官, "father and mother" to the people. Children call the neighbors and friends of their parents "aunts and uncles." Everyone, in Chinese, is *dajia*大家, "big family." Other person are referred to as, *renjia*人家, "the family of the person." In the Chinese tradition, the human world is a cosmos family in which all people are brothers and sisters and should take care of each other as

³⁷ Cf. Susan E. Short and Zhai Fengying, "Looking locally at China's one-child policy," *Studies in Family Planning*, vol. 29, no.4 (1998), 381, for a range of fines in sampled communities for the period 1989-1993.

³⁸ Cf. A report for a county in Henan Province, Northern China in Cao Jinqing, *Huanghe bian de Zhongguo: Yige Xuezhe Dui Xiangcun Shehui de Guancha yu Sikao (China Along the Yellow River: A Scholar's Observation and Meditations on Chinese Rural Society)* (Shanghai: Wenyi Chubanshe, 2000).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 91-92.

⁴⁰ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Population Programme Databases, *The National Family Planning Program of China 1995-2000*, chapter II, http://www.unescap.org/pop/database/law_china/ch_record015.htm, access date, April 4, 2003.

⁴¹ *The National Family Planning Program of China 1995-2000*, chapter IV.

family members taking care of each other.⁴² Family members share the housework, making the division of labor at home more reasonable; and the husband and wife support each other's work. The Chinese people have the tradition of respecting the old and loving the young. Though many young couples do not live with their parents, they maintain close contact with them. Grown up children have the duty to support and help their parents. The Chinese people attach great importance to relations between family members and relatives, and cherish their parents, children, brothers and sister, uncles, aunts and other relatives.

In the West, concern over what constitutes a legal family (man, woman, and child; single parent and child; same-sex partnership) has more to do with exclusion of benefits than with inculcating values. The Chinese concept of family is essentially inclusive, focusing on communal loyalty, respect, responsibility, love, trust, and maintenance of life essence, as well as harmony and balance, through relational living. Family is a place where pleasure, politics, spirituality, commerce, and health are interwoven.⁴³

2. Sacredness of Marriage

In Chinese traditions, marriage is regarded as a union joined by *Tian*天. The Chinese believe that marriage is a kind of *yuanfen*缘分—a predestined relationship. According to Chinese astrology, the will-be-married's birthdays and birth-hours should fit each other. Although more and more people do not believe in this practice, this understanding about marriage is deeply rooted in the Chinese hearts.

The first thing for a new couple to do in the wedding ceremony is to kowtow before the family altar to Heaven and Earth and to family ancestors. The new couple will present some fruits and foods on the family altar. This is a way to express their gratitude to Heaven, Earth, and family ancestors, and at the same time to ask for blessing from them. For the Catholic new couple, the most important thing they have to do on the traditional wedding day is to go to the village church with their friends, relatives, and villagers to give thanks to God and pray for God's blessing. This prayer is not to witness their marriage but to express their gratitude to God. Usually, a priest is not involved in this prayer. The couple will set-up something like an altar, normally with the image of the Holy Family, and decorate the altar with flowers and candles in the wedding banquet hall. This Holy Family image and the altar remind of people the presence of God. This custom clearly expresses that marriage is closely related to Heaven/God. It is not only a family event but also a sacred matter.

⁴² Howard Giskin and Bettye S. Walsh, ed., *An Introduction to Chinese Culture through the Family* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 1.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, preface & 195.

3. Supporting Group

The English word “family” has two different meanings in Chinese: (1) *jia/jiating* 家/家庭—consisting of the parents and their children, and (2) *jiazhu* 家族—consisting of all those people descended from a common ancestor, similar to a clan group. In the rural areas of China, the people in villages are organized according to *jiazhu*.⁴⁴ People live in the village and pass on the traditions, customs, and their property from generation to generation. The village becomes their roots. A *jiazhu* consists of many socially and economically independent *jiating* sharing the same family name. Although they are all independent *jiating*, the marriage or funeral of each *jiating* is considered the event of the whole *jiazhu*. In rural Shaanxi, if a *jiating* has serious problems such as major disagreements within family members, serious disease, or divorce, the seniors of the *jiazhu* will intervene and mediate a settlement. In the case of divorce, not only the seniors but also the relatives and friends of the family will offer their support to overcome the difficulties of the family and do what they can do to keep the marriage intact. In most cases, a *jiazhu* is the strongest supporting group to a *jiating*.

Beside *jiazhu*, women in the same village have recently begun to organize themselves into a supporting group. The absence of the husband in the migrant families enables the wives, left behind, to form a commonality group. They share many similar experiences, e.g. the added burden of household responsibilities, the role transitions, problems confronted them without the husband’s presence, and the new freedom of spending time outside the home. Moreover, they get together to share news about their husbands working in the cities. During their leisure time, they gather to chat, watch TV or play games as pastime in the void of their husbands. When time comes to engage in the peak farm season, they offer help to one another in the field with such work as irrigation and other heavy tasks, consult mutually in problem solving and provide childcare as necessary. Those women freely associate with other women outside the family and, therefore, form a women’s support community.

4. Family Care

In the Chinese tradition, family, *Jia* generally means a group of people who are related by blood, marriage, or adoption, living and managing their finances together. In a *jia*, sons live in their father’s house with their wives, who have been brought in from outside the family. All the productive members of a *jia* are expected to support financial decisions that do not necessarily benefit them directly. The *Jia* is also collectively responsible for supporting elderly parents and taking care of sick family members. The extended family has been gradually replaced by the stem family, which includes only the husband and wife, their children, and the husband’s parents (not the wife’s parents).

⁴⁴ In this article, “family” means *jia/jiating* unless especially mentioned.

A very famous Chinese sociologist, Fei Xiaotong, named the Chinese family model a "feedback model," which can be displayed as F1 <-> F2 <-> F3 <-> Fn (F means generation). It means that generation F1 rears generation F2, and generation F2 takes care of generation F1 when F1 is old; the relationship between F2, F3 and Fn is as same as the one between F1 and F2.⁴⁵ This mutual care is more easily managed in a stem family, in which the son brings his wife to live his parents.

In light of the poor pension system and in order to reduce the state burden on old-age care, especially in rural area, the government does not officially promote three-generation families. However, the Chinese government favors to keep them and encourages children to perform the duty of care to their parents and grandparents. Both the Chinese constitution and the current Marriage Law explicitly stipulate that child generations have full responsibility to take care of their parents in old age.⁴⁶

5. Public Opinions

As mentioned above, in rural Shaanxi, people live in very close relationships. They go to the crop fields together in the day. They like to share all the news in the village. People know each other very well. In this environment, public opinions are enormously powerful and greatly influence values and behavior.

Culturally, divorce has long been out of favor in China. Because marriage is not only a personal matter but also a family event because marriage is regarded as perpetuating the family's influence within the community. Thus, divorce has been strongly considered unpopular and immoral in rural areas. Dr. Che Fu Lee, professor of sociology of the Catholic University of America, asks wives whose husbands are working away from home a hypothetical question: "What action would you take if you find your husband astray with other women?" Nearly 40 percent of the respondents said that the question had never crossed their mind. Only 12 percent would choose to a divorce under the situation. The rest, about 50 percent, would find one way or another to reconcile and gain back their husbands.⁴⁷ Not only do the staying wives confirm the strong bond of marriage grounded on the tradition concept of a corporate family, but the migrant husbands share the same traditional view, as well. Without exception, including

⁴⁵ Fei Xiaotong, "Problem of providing for the senile in the changing family structure," *Journal of Peking University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* (in Chinese), (1983), no. 3:6-15, quoted in Zeng Yi, *Family Dynamics in China: A Life Table Analysis*, (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 14.

⁴⁶ Cf. The Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China (Adopted by the Fifth National People's Congress at Its Third Session on September 10, 1980, and put into effect from January 1, 1981), Article 15, quoted in Women of China, *New Trends in Chinese Marriage and the Family*, special series (Beijing, China: China International Book Trading Corporation, 1987), 7.

⁴⁷ Che Fu Lee, "Rural Migrant Families in China: Changing Male-Female Household Relations" (draft, March 22, 2003). Dr. Che Fu Lee is the professor of Sociology at the Catholic University of America.

those who had extra-familial relationship in the city, these rural migrant workers deem their present city residence to be temporary. Most migrant workers desire to return home and settle in their villages once they have earned enough money.⁴⁸

In rural Shaanxi, public opinion within the villages places harsh judgment on divorce, extra-marital relationship, and pre-marital co-habitation arrangements. Moreover, Chinese law puts strict penalties on those caught attempting to escape their marriage registration by living together out of wedlock.⁴⁹ Therefore, in rural areas of Shaanxi, the “trial marriage” and “free union” arrangement are very rare.

IV. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to provide a brief introduction to the traditions and customs of marriage and family in the contemporary rural areas of Shaanxi. Hopefully, it has provided some basic insight into the signs of the times, the challenges, and the opportunities that face modern families in rural Shaanxi. Indeed, each culture has wisdom to offer concerning the mystery and riches of marriage and family life. Likewise, the traditions and customs of contemporary rural Shaanxi contribute to this understanding the mystery and riches of marriage and family life. The purpose of this article has been to offer some basic information, to foster more inquiry, and to encourage further study on this subject.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Susan Greenhalgh, “The Peasantization of the One-Child Policy in Shaanxi,” in *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era*, ed. Deborah Davis and Stevan Harrell (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1993), 233.