



BRILL



brill.com/joch

# Distinguishing Past and Present in the Study of the Family: a Confucian Interpretation of Changing Family Forms

*Huang Yushun* 黃玉順

Professor, Advanced Institute for Confucian Studies, Shandong University,  
Jinan, Shandong, China

*hys0531@163.com*

Received 6 March 2026 | Accepted 27 March 2026 |

Published online 16 September 2026

## Abstract

Debates over “family values” often turn the family into the symbol of a culture, invoked to mark China’s difference from the West and to diagnose the moral crises of modernity. In this article, I offer a Confucian analysis of the modern transformation of family forms. I further critique recent calls by some Confucian scholars for a “return” to the traditional Chinese family as a badge of cultural superiority and a cure for contemporary social ills. I argue that such proposals both exaggerate China—West differences and overlook a shared historical logic of family organization: nuclear families can expand into lineage families, and lineage families into larger clan-based groups. Yet the long-term trajectory of civilization is not toward ever-larger familial formations but toward deconstruction and miniaturization. In China, the first major transformation dismantled the feudal clan order, leaving the lineage family as the primary social unit; the second transformation, beginning in the modern era, dissolved the imperial lineage family, leaving the nuclear family, and increasingly the individual, as the fundamental unit, while the family lost its central productive and political functions. Because particular family forms correspond to particular social formations (clan families to feudal aristocratic kingship; lineage families to centralized monarchy), nostalgic restoration is neither feasible nor desirable. The article concludes that revivalist calls are also inconsistent with Confucianism understood as an institutional ethics grounded in principles of justice.

## Keywords

family forms – clan and lineage – nuclear family – Confucian interpretation – modernity – justice

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, a current of thought advocating a “return to the family” has emerged within Chinese academia. Some Confucian scholars have called for the reconstruction of the traditional Chinese family, regarding it as a defining feature that distinguishes Chinese culture from, and renders it superior to, Western culture. They further hold it up as an instrument for counterbalancing the West and as a means of solving various problems of modern society. However, it is my view that this current of thought exaggerates the differences between Chinese and Western family forms, while at the same time obscuring their historical transformations across time. It lacks not only a reliable synchronic concept of “the family” applicable across contexts, but also a diachronic perspective on the evolution of family forms.

What, then, is the object of this proposed “return”? It is certainly not the modern nuclear family. Is it the lineage family of the imperial era? Or the clan-based family of the feudal, kinship order? Or perhaps even the clan structures of remote antiquity? In the sections below, I explain why a return to China’s earlier family institutions would not be desirable in the modern age.

## 2 The General Concept of the Family

In the case of China, clarifying the concept of “family” (*jia* 家) requires tracing it back to the oracle-bone inscriptions. Liu Xinglong 劉興隆 (1927–2006), in his *Xinbian jiaguwen zidian* 新編甲骨文字典,<sup>1</sup> lists several usages of the graph 家 in oracle-bone script: (1) a personal name, though clearly, this is not the sense of “family” with which this article is concerned; (2) a ritual chamber. This is not the original meaning of *jia*, but rather an extended sense, as the primary meaning of *jia* is “room” or “dwelling,” that is, a residence, comparable to the Western term “house”; (3) one’s own kinship group. Here, *jia* no longer refers to

1 Liu Xinglong 劉興隆, *Xinbian jiaguwen zidian* 新編甲骨文字典 (Beijing: Guoji wenhua chubans gongsi, 1993), 436–37.

the dwelling of family members, but to the family members themselves, comparable to the Western term “family.”

The *Hanyu da zidian* 漢語大字典, edited by Xu Zhongshu 徐中舒 (1898–1991),<sup>2</sup> lists two primary meanings at the outset, consistent with Liu Xinglong's dictionary. The first is “a dwelling place.” It cites the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, which reads, “*Jia* means dwelling [*ju* 居].”<sup>3</sup> The entry in the *Yupian* 玉篇 reads: “*Jia* is a place where people reside; such a place is generally called *jia*.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, when we turn to the *Shijing* 詩經, we find a passage that reads: “When Gugong Danfu 古公亶父<sup>5</sup> excavated caves and earthen hollows, there were not yet houses with enclosed rooms” to which the early Han dynasty commentary by Mao Heng 毛亨 (fl. 212 BCE) states: “*Jia* refers to having enclosed rooms.”<sup>6</sup>

The second meaning of *jia* given in the *Hanyu da zidian* is “a family.” It cites the *Zhouli* 周禮: “On superior land, a *jia* consists of seven persons,” to which the commentary by Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200) reads: “Only when there is a husband and a wife does there come to be a *jia*.”<sup>7</sup> In the *Mengzi* we find a passage that reads: “With one hundred *mu* of farmland, if the proper seasons are not interfered with, a household [*jia*] of several mouths may be free from hunger.”<sup>8</sup>

From the above we may derive the broadest general meaning of *jia*. In correspondence with Western languages, the original meanings of the Chinese term *jia* may be summarized as follows: (1) the dwelling place of a family, roughly corresponding to “home” or “house”; (2) the family members themselves, roughly corresponding to “family”; (3) a combination of the above two senses, roughly corresponding to “household” or “house.” This may serve as a general definition: whether in China or in the West, *jia* refers to relatives who live together within a specific residential space.

However, the above explanations based on oracle-bone inscriptions fail to mention a crucial factor: marriage. Living together does not necessarily constitute a family. In fact, *jia* refers to those who live together on the basis of marital relations. If we abstract the common elements of all family forms across time and cultures, the only universal feature is marriage (including de facto

2 Xu Zhongshu 徐中舒, ed., *Hanyu da zidian* 漢語大字典 (Chengdu: Sichuan cishu chubanshe, 1986–1990), 930.

3 Xu Shen 許慎, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1963), 150.

4 Gu Yewang 顧野王, *Daguan yihui yupian* 大廣益會玉篇 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 54.

5 Literally, “The Ancient Duke, Patriarch Dan,” a legendary figure whose approximate date of birth can be inferred to have been around the year 1500 BCE. Patriarch Dan was posthumously given the title of “King Tai of Zhou” 周太王.

6 Ruan Yuan 阮元, coll., *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 509.

7 *Ibid.*, 711.

8 *Ibid.*, 2666.

marriage), or more precisely, the conjugal relationship, whether monogamous, polygynous, or polyandrous. This is precisely what Zheng Xuan's formulation indicates: "Only when there is a husband and a wife does there come to be a *jia*." Other factors are not necessarily essential conditions of the concept of "family" (as will be discussed below).

This, in fact, corresponds to the concept of the nuclear family. That is, as a universal concept encompassing all forms of family, the "family" consists, in its core meaning, of a co-residing conjugal pair. The notion of the nuclear family was introduced by the American anthropologist George Peter Murdock (1897–1985) in his influential work *Social Structure*.<sup>9</sup> It did not originally refer specifically to the modern family form, but rather to the common structural core found across different cultural traditions, namely, a family composed of a married couple and their unmarried children. In Murdock's account, the nuclear family fulfills four basic functions: the satisfaction of sexual needs, economic support and subsistence, reproduction, and the education of children.<sup>10</sup> In fact, reproduction and child-rearing are not necessary conditions of the nuclear family; the question of property likewise requires further clarification (see below).

Murdock further maintains that the nuclear family constitutes the basic unit underlying all other forms of family, and indeed of society as a whole. If we confine ourselves to premodern societies, this is broadly accurate: the modes of family composition in China and the West are fundamentally similar. Multiple nuclear families combine to form larger lineage families, and multiple lineage families (*jiazu jiating* 家族家庭) in turn form even larger clan-based kinship (*zongzu jiating* 宗族家庭) groups.

### 3 Historical Forms of the Family in China

Whether in China or in the West, both the actual forms of the family and the ideas associated with it undergo historical transformation, corresponding to changes in modes of life and in social formations. Viewed across the history of human civilization, the evolution of family forms exhibits a trend precisely toward the deconstruction of the aforementioned compositional structure; that is to say, a movement in the opposite direction toward increasing miniaturization. This constitutes a general law of human society. In China, it is manifested as follows: the first major social transformation during the Spring

9 G. P. Murdock, *Social Structure* (New York: The Macmillan, 1949).

10 See also Melford Spiro, "Is the Family Universal?," *American Anthropologist* 56, no. 1 (1954): 839–46.

and Autumn (770–476 BCE) and Warring States (475–221 BCE) periods led to the disintegration of the clan system of the feudal age, with the smaller lineage family becoming the fundamental unit of society (i.e., the social primary unit); the second major social transformation from the modern period onward (1911 onward) resulted in the dissolution of the lineage family of the imperial era. Thereupon, the smallest unit, the nuclear family, became the fundamental social unit, and eventually even the family itself has ceased to serve as the basic unit of society (to be discussed below).

Chinese society has passed through several such historical formations: the clan-tribal society (*shizu buluo shehui* 氏族部落社會) of remote antiquity; the kinship-based royal (clan) society of the Western Zhou (1046–771 BCE); following the transformation of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, the lineage-based imperial society from the Qin (221–206 BCE) and Han (206 BCE–220 CE) dynasties onward; and finally the modern period of transformation.<sup>11</sup> Corresponding to these social formations are several socio-historical forms of the *jia* (family) in China: the primitive clan family; the clan-based (lineage) family of the Western Zhou; the lineage family from the Qin–Han period onward; and the modern nuclear family.<sup>12</sup>

### 3.1 *The Clan Family of Early Society*

In the early clan-tribal society prior to the Shang (ca. 1600–1046 BCE) and Zhou (ca. 1046–256 BCE) dynasties, a *clan* (*shizu* 氏族) was, in effect, a large family bound together by ties of blood. Such clans were the precursor of the later lineage clan (*zongzu* 宗族); several clans of relatively close kinship would in turn form a tribe (*buluo* 部落). This form of clan family was grounded in relations between the sexes, that is, in a primitive form of marriage. The anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–1881) described this as “organization of society upon the basis of sex.”<sup>13</sup>

### 3.2 *The Clan-Lineage Family of the Western Zhou*

Following clan society came lineage-based society. According to Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877–1927), the paradigmatic patriarchal lineage system (*zongfa zhidu*

11 See also Huang Yushun 黃玉順, “Lun Ruxue de xiandaixing” 論儒學的現代性, *Shehui kexue yanjiu* 社會科學研究, no. 6 (2016): 125–35.

12 See also Huang Yushun 黃玉順, “‘Yi shen wei ben’ yu ‘Datong zhuyi’: ‘Jiaguotianxia’ huayu fansi yu ‘Tianxia zhuyi’ guannian pipan” “以身為本”與“大同主義”——“家國天下”話語反思與“天下主義”觀念批判, *Tansuo yu zhengming* 探索與爭鳴, no. 1 (2016): 30–35.

13 Lewis H. Morgan, “Organization of society upon the basis of sex,” in *Ancient Society*, ed. Leslie A. White (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1964), 49–59.

宗法制度) was established by the Duke of Zhou 周公 (fl. 1043 BCE).<sup>14</sup> At that time, Chinese society exhibited an isomorphic structure of “family–state–all-under-heaven,” in which the “family” referred specifically to the great lineage family of the Ji 姬 surname. Alongside this were other lineage groups, such as the Jiang 姜 lineage, which maintained long-standing marital alliances with the Ji lineage.

The symbolic center of such a lineage family was the *zong* 宗, that is, the ancestral temple. The *Shuowen jiezi* explains the meaning of *zong* thus: “*Zong* refers to the honored ancestral temple.”<sup>15</sup> A later commentary explains this further: “By honoring the ancestors one thereby reveres the lineage; by revering the lineage one thereby unifies the clan; by unifying the clan the ancestral temple is thereby held in solemnity.”<sup>16</sup> A lineage family of this kind was extensive, encompassing five generations, namely great-great-grandfather, great-grandfather, grandfather, father, and oneself.<sup>17</sup> Within and around these five generations were incorporated numerous lineage families and nuclear families. The degree of closeness of such families was articulated as the “five degrees of mourning” (*wufu* 五服) according to the system of mourning garments and as the “nine kinship groups” (*jiuzu* 九族) according to degrees of kinship.

On the basis of such lineage families, with the Ji lineage at the core, the entire social order was structured as a nested hierarchy of “greater lineages” encompassing “lesser lineages.” This formed the isomorphic order of “family–state–all-under-heaven,” a kind of order referred to as feudalism (*fengjian* 封建). As Chen Li 陳立 (1809–1869) explains:

When the Son of Heaven establishes a state, the feudal lords constitute the greater lineage within the state, yet in relation to the Son of Heaven they are lesser lineages; when the feudal lords establish their own households, the ministers [*qing* 卿] constitute the greater lineage within those households, yet in relation to the feudal lords they are lesser lineages; and when ministers establish subsidiary households, together with the two lineages of great officers [*dafu* 大夫], and the subordinate sons and younger members of the *shi* 士 [minor aristocrat] class, all of these can be extended and made manifest.<sup>18</sup>

14 Wang Guowei 王國維, *Guantang jilin* 觀堂集林 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 453–54.

15 Xu Shen, *Shuowen jiezi*, 151.

16 Ruan Yuan, *Shisanjing zhushu*, 1508.

17 Ibid., 2592.

18 Chen Li 陳立, *Baihu tong shuzheng* 白虎通疏證 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994), 152.

### 3.3 *The Lineage Family of the Imperial Era*

With the transition into the Eastern Zhou period (770–256 BCE), China entered its first great social transformation. The previously described clan-based family and its associated social institutions accordingly disintegrated. Mao Heng describes it thus: “As the Way of the Zhou royal house declined, the nine kinship groups were abandoned.”<sup>19</sup>

From the Qin and Han dynasties onward, China entered the imperial era. The reason why the lineage family of this period should no longer be termed a “clan” (*zongzu*), but rather a “lineage” (*jiazū*), lies in the essential distinction between the two. As Liu Dakui 劉大樞 (1698–1779) points out: “When the feudal order was abolished and the institution of the great lineages ceased to function, the lesser lineages likewise lost their basis; consequently, the lineage head [*zongzi* 宗子] gradually transformed into a clan elder [*zuzhang* 族長].”<sup>20</sup>

The symbol of this transformation was the change in the institution of the *zong* 宗, that is, the ancestral temple system. Under the feudal order of royal authority, lineage groups at different ranks maintained ancestral temples according to strict hierarchy: “The Son of Heaven had seven temples, the feudal lords five, the great officers three, and the minor aristocrats one.”<sup>21</sup> In the imperial era, however, ancestral temples became the exclusive preserve of the imperial house, and scholar-officials (*shi dafu* 士大夫) were no longer permitted to establish such temples. As Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086) remarks: “Under the institutions of the former kings, from the Son of Heaven down to the various officials, all possessed ancestral temples. ... By the time of Qin ... in exalting the ruler and debasing the ministers, none outside the Son of Heaven dared to construct ancestral temples.”<sup>22</sup>

Corresponding to this transformation was the rise of the aristocratic lineage system (*menfa zhidu* 門閥制度). This system began in the Eastern Han (25–220) and flourished during the Wei (220–265), Jin (265–420), and Northern and Southern (420–589) dynasties. Those powerful lineages were known as “elite lineages” (*shizu* 士族) or “hereditary houses” (*shizu* 世族), while those lacking such power were termed “common lineages” (*shuzu* 庶族). Even without significant political influence, they nevertheless remained “lineages,” that is, family formations of a lineage type.

19 Ruan Yuan, *Shisanjing zhushu*, 332.

20 Liu Dakui 劉大樞集, punct. Wu Mengfu 吳孟復 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990), 313.

21 Ruan Yuan, *Shisanjing zhushu*, 1335.

22 Sima Guang 司馬光集, annot. Li Wenze 李文澤 and Xia Shaohui 霞紹暉 (Chengdu: Sichuan daxue chubanshe, 2010), 1602.

Politically, the fundamental difference between lineage (*jiazu*) and clan (*zongzu*) lies in the following: in the age of clans, the Ji-surname lineage governed “all-under-heaven” through the patriarchal logic of the isomorphism of “family–state–all-under-heaven,” that is, through “feudalism” (*fengjian zhi* 封建制). By contrast, in the later age of lineages, the imperial ruling house’s “great unification” (*da yitong* 大一統) did not operate according to this patriarchal logic, but rather according to a bureaucratic logic, namely the “commandery–county system” (*junxian zhi* 郡縣制). The various large and small lineages across the realm did not stand in relations of hierarchical subordination of the kind characteristic of the patriarchal system. If the imperial house failed to secure the support of other powerful lineages, it could scarcely maintain its rule. At the same time, tensions and conflicts existed between the imperial lineage and other major lineages.

In premodern society, the reason why the family was so important was because it constituted the basic unit of society, embodying a fundamental mode of life that in turn determined the ethical and political forms of that society. Corresponding to the clan-based mode of life were clan-based ethics and a clan-based politics, namely, the feudal system of royal authority. Corresponding to the lineage-based mode of life were a lineage-based ethics and a lineage-based politics, namely, the autocratic system of imperial sovereignty. For precisely this reason, the current revivalist trend advocating a “return to the traditional family” warrants particular vigilance, for it logically entails a political orientation toward either feudal monarchy or imperial autocracy.

#### 4 Basic Characteristics of the Modern Family

Regardless of East or West, the lifestyle of modern society makes it impossible for genuinely clan-based or extended lineage families to exist. Only the nuclear family remains viable. In the section below, I outline the reasons why this is the case.

##### 4.1 *The Concept of the Modern Family*

As mentioned above, according to Murdock, the family has four basic functions: the satisfaction of sexual needs, economic support and subsistence, reproduction, and the education of children. However, the reality of the modern family is that reproduction and childrearing are not in fact necessary conditions for the nuclear family. For example, many couples, even if they lack the ability to reproduce, still maintain their marital relationship; some may not

intend to have children at all, the so-called “DINKS” (Dual Income, No Kids). In such cases, the issue of childrearing does not arise.

Why, then, do people establish families through marriage? Observing the general situation of modern families, one may draw the following conclusion: there are only two necessary conditions for forming a family through marriage, namely, a legally sanctioned sexual relationship and a special form of cooperative relationship. This, then, is the most precise definition of the “modern family.”

The first function listed by Murdock, the satisfaction of sexual needs, is indeed a necessary condition for the formation of a family. Marriage and the family undoubtedly contribute to the stability of sexual relations. The primary foundation of this stability is, first of all, the legitimacy of the marital relationship, that is, the sexual relationship is recognized by social morality and by law.

The reason people establish a family, aside from sexual needs, lies primarily in a special form of cooperative relationship that brings additional benefits to both partners. This corresponds to what Murdock referred to as the provision of livelihood security, though it is not equivalent to the issue of “property.” Although marriage and the family have been associated with property since ancient times, observation of modern life makes it clear that the formation of a modern family does not necessarily aim at property from the outset. In fact, although marriage laws stipulate property relations between spouses, many couples maintain separate finances (split accounts). Therefore, we can only say that forming a family does indeed bring a range of benefits to both parties. For example, a legally recognized marriage and family may enjoy certain social welfare provisions, as well as various advantages arising from mutual assistance between partners. These benefits are numerous, but all ultimately fall under the benefits of “cooperation.” In this sense, the family is a special form of social cooperation.

The distinctiveness of this cooperative form in the modern family lies in a cooperative relationship between autonomous individuals, one that is linked to sexual relations. The notion of the “individual” here stands in sharp contrast to the past: in antiquity, the family was a form of cooperation between two clans or lineages. Hence the saying, “The marriage rite serves to unite the good relations of two surnames, so that above they may serve the ancestral temples, and below they may provide for future generations.”<sup>23</sup> By contrast, the modern family is a form of cooperation between individual men and women (this discussion does not take into account same-sex families).

---

23 Ruan Yuan, *Shisanjing zhushu*, 1680.

#### 4.2 *The Non-productive Nature of the Modern Family*

Even so, this form of cooperation in the modern family does not carry much economic significance. Of course, the modern family does have a certain economic aspect, in that it functions to some extent as a unit of consumption (that is, spouses cooperate in consumption). However, it does not have a productive function. In other words, the modern family is not a unit of production.

What, then, is the purpose of establishing a family through marriage? In premodern society, the answer to this question was quite clear. The family had two most basic functions: production and reproduction. Reproduction is also a form of production; Karl Marx (1818–1883) referred to it as the “reproduction of labor power” or the “reproduction of human beings.”<sup>24</sup> The ancient family was a unit of production, primarily engaged in agricultural production, but also in handicrafts and other forms of labor. At the same time, it was a unit of reproduction, that is, a unit for the “reproduction of human beings.”

In modern society, however, neither of these functions holds. People do not form families in order to establish an enterprise, for example, not necessarily to create a partnership business or a family-run shop. Nor do people always form families for the purpose of bearing and raising children, as seen in the “DINK” families mentioned above, as well as same-sex families. Even from the perspective of society’s demand for labor or population, the fulfillment of this demand does not necessarily have to proceed through marriage and the family. In fact, the proportion of births outside of marriage has been increasing, a slow but steady long-term trend.

All of this is because, in modern society, the primary agents of economic activity are no longer families but individuals. Accordingly, the economic actions of each spouse do not represent those of the other: one cannot seek or hold employment on behalf of the other, and the income earned by each does not include that of the partner, and so on. This stands in stark contrast to premodern society, where the economic actions of the household head represented the economic activity of the entire family, including all its members. The difference arises because the modern family is not, as in the past, a cooperative form between lineages or clans, but rather a cooperative relationship between individual men and women. Moreover, the very premise of this relationship is precisely the independence and autonomy of each individual.

#### 4.3 *The Non-political Nature of the Modern Family*

In premodern times, the family also functioned as a subject of socio-political action. The clan-based family served as the political actor within a feudal order,

---

24 See *Makesi Engesi xuanji* 马克思恩格斯选集 (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 2012), 4: 35–94.

while the extended lineage family functioned as the political actor within an imperial system. By contrast, the modern family is by no means a political actor; that is, it is not a political unit.

A clear and widespread phenomenon illustrates this point: in premodern society, a clan or lineage, regardless of the number of its members, possessed a single political persona. In modern society, however, each spouse possesses an independent political persona, that of a citizen. For example, the rights to vote and to stand for election do not belong to the family as a whole, but to each individual member. To give a simple example: in premodern society, a family had only one vote, and the household head decided how it would be cast; in modern society, each spouse has their own vote, and they need not vote in the same way. This shows that the true subject of political action in modern society is not the family, but the individual.

It is especially important to emphasize that the problems brought about by the dissolution of the traditional family cannot be resolved by a nostalgic return to earlier family forms. Specific family structures are matched to the modes of life, social formations, and political systems of particular historical periods. In Chinese history, the clan-based family corresponded to the feudal order under kingly authority, while the lineage-based family corresponded to the imperial system. Are we to return to a feudal monarchy or an imperial autocracy? Therefore, I think it follows that calls to “return” to traditional Chinese family forms are not only practically impossible, but also undesirable in terms of values.

## 5 A Confucian Explanation of the Evolution of the Family Form

If we wish to understand and explain the historical transformation of family forms from within a Confucian perspective, we must first reconceptualize Confucianism itself. To be specific, we must strictly distinguish between Confucianism's fundamental principles and its historical manifestations. Confucianism is not static; its historical forms represent the diachronic unfolding of its underlying principles. These principles, in turn, are the synchronic crystallization of those historical forms, that is, a theoretical construction that transcends particular historical periods, and from which new historical forms of Confucianism may be derived, such as a modern form.<sup>25</sup>

Here we consider several of the most basic categories in Confucian thought: benevolence (*ren* 仁), righteousness (*yi* 義), ritual propriety (*li* 禮).

---

25 See also Huang Yushun, “Lun Ruxue de xiandaixing,” 125–35.

The fundamental concern of the Confucian tradition is the problem of ritual propriety, that is, the construction of social norms and institutions, including concrete institutions such as the family. According to the thought of Confucius (551–479 BCE), “ritual admits of loss and gain” (*li you sun yi* 禮有損益),<sup>26</sup> meaning that all social institutions and normative systems, including the family, undergo historical change. According to Mencius (372–289 BCE), “it is simply benevolence and righteousness” (*renyi eryi* 仁義而已)<sup>27</sup> that is to say, the basis for the construction and transformation of *li* (of institutions and norms) lies in benevolence and righteousness. I refer to these as the “two principles of justice”: the principle of legitimacy embodied in *ren*, and the principle of appropriateness embodied in *yi*. Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) provided perhaps the most precise formulation of these two principles: “To love broadly is called *ren*; to act in a manner that is fitting is called *yi*.”<sup>28</sup> The first clause expresses the principle of legitimacy, and the second expresses the principle of appropriateness.

### 5.1 *Ren and Familial Affection*

Han Yu’s first statement (“to love broadly is called *ren*”) articulates the principle of legitimacy, which requires that all actions, including the construction of institutions, embody a spirit of universal concern. This spirit of broad love is not in itself tied to the family; that is, it is not the kind of “differentiated love” based on degrees of kinship closeness or distance, but rather an undifferentiated “ontological parity of *ren*” that treats all as a single body.

For example, the core or foundational concept in Mencius’s system of thought is undoubtedly the “heart of compassion” (*ceyin zhi xin* 惻隱之心). Yet his argument for it has nothing to do with the family:

If people suddenly see a child about to fall into a well, they all have a feeling of alarm and compassion, not because they seek to ingratiate themselves with the child’s parents, not because they wish to gain praise from neighbors and friends, and not because they dislike the sound [of the child’s cries]. From this we can see that one who lacks the heart of compassion is not human ... The heart of compassion is the beginning of *ren*.<sup>29</sup>

26 Ruan Yuan, *Shisanjing zhushu*, 2463.

27 Ibid., 2665.

28 Ma Qichang 馬其昶, *Han Changli wenji jiaozhu* 韓昌黎文集校注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), 13.

29 Ruan Yuan, *Shisanjing zhushu*, 2691.

It must be emphasized here that although familial affection is certainly one manifestation of *ren*, it is by no means sufficient to be called “broad love” (*bo'ai* 博愛). The essential point of broad love lies precisely in transcending familial affection, that is to say, going beyond “differentiated love” toward the ideal of “oneness of *ren*.” Familial affection is indeed a form of *ren*, but *ren* is not limited to, and rather surpasses, familial affection. Otherwise, people may show the utmost care only toward their own family members, while remaining indifferent to the suffering of others. This is precisely a troubling social phenomenon that has frequently come to light in recent years, and it greatly hinders the formation of public morality as well as the construction of a healthy public sphere and its norms.

## 5.2 *Yi and Family Forms*

Han Yu's second statement (“to act in a manner that is fitting is called *yi*”) expresses the principle of appropriateness, which requires that all actions, including the construction of institutions, be suited to the fundamental modes of shared life in a given historical era. This is precisely what the *Zhongyong* 中庸 indicates in the phrase, “*yi* means appropriateness.”<sup>30</sup> Han Yu's point is clear: although broad love is a universal sentiment, its concrete modes of realization are not abstract, but rather specific and conditioned. Such modes of realization are what is meant by “acting in a fitting manner,” that is to say, appropriateness.

In fact, the ways in which broad love was realized were indeed different under the lineage-based mode of life in the imperial era and the clan-based mode of life in the earlier feudal era. Accordingly, under the conditions of modernity, the realization of broad love must also differ from that of premodern life. For example, the notions of “loving the people as one's children” (*ai min ru zi* 愛民如子) and “loving the ruler as one's father” (*ai jun ru fu* 愛君如父) may be understood as premodern ideas that are both grounded in familial ethics and extend beyond the family sphere; yet they are by no means appropriate as modern values. Modern values are not those of “ruler-as-father” (*junfu* 君父) and “people-as-children” (*zimin* 子民), but rather those of “public servant” (*gongpu* 公僕) and “the people” (*renmin* 人民).

The Confucian principle of appropriateness applies equally to institutions such as the family. Indeed, the historical transformation of family forms is itself a typical manifestation of this principle. The family form of the clan era became inappropriate, and therefore unjust, in the lineage-based era. Likewise,

30 Ibid., 1629.

the family form of the lineage era has become inappropriate, and therefore unjust, in modern society. For example, parental love toward children ought to be impartial among all offspring, without favoritism. This may be regarded as a form of broad love within the family. Yet when it comes to the institutional question of inheritance, we cannot say that the system of primogeniture (inheritance by the eldest legitimate son) in premodern society lacked compassion toward non-eldest sons. However, at the same time, we cannot claim that such a system remains suitable under modern conditions. If one insists that primogeniture alone constitutes the Confucian model of inheritance, this implies that Confucianism is no longer relevant to modern life. Conversely, if one maintains that Confucianism can adapt to modernity, then Confucian inheritance practices need not be confined to primogeniture, and one must instead acknowledge the legitimacy of modern systems of equal inheritance.

### 5.3 *Li and Family Ethics*

The foregoing discussion shows that, in light of the spirit of broad love arising from *ren* and the principles of justice embodied in *yi*, *li* (meaning social norms and institutions) must be adjusted in accordance with changes in ways of life. This is what I think Confucius means when he says “*li* admits of loss and gain,” as discussed above. Confucius must also have had the same kind of meaning in mind when he said “*yi* is taken as the substance, and *li* is used to put it into practice.”<sup>31</sup> This means that institutional norms (*li*) are the enactment of the principles of justice (*yi*). Only in this way can we understand the historical evolution of the ritual and normative orders governing clan-based families, lineage-based families, and modern families.

A salient feature of the modern family is the equality among its members. Of course, “equality” is not a value unique to modernity. As I have noted elsewhere, “liberty, equality, fraternity ... are not concepts exclusive to modernity ... only when grounded in an individualist value framework do they become distinctly modern values.”<sup>32</sup> Equality within the family includes the equality between spouses under the principle of gender equality, as well as equality between parents and children. Admittedly, the relationship between parents and minor children is one between guardians and wards, which may appear unequal; yet this is precisely a matter of appropriateness. Given that minors do not yet possess the capacity for independent life, the institution of guardianship is in fact a legitimate and appropriate institutional arrangement that embodies parental love and even the broader spirit of universal concern.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 2518.

<sup>32</sup> Huang Yushun 黃玉順, “Rujia ziyou zhuyi dui ‘Xin Rujiao’ de pipan” 儒家自由主義對“新儒教”的批判, *Dongyue luncong* 東嶽論叢, no. 6 (2017): 39–44.

## 6 Conclusion

Some phenomena from family norms of previous ages persist, even to this day. Such phenomena range from the minor, such as women being barred from sitting at the table during meals, to the major, such as women needing men to “settle” or provide for them. Such practices, which some Confucians openly praise, are in fact nothing more than residual elements of, or revivals of, the ritual norms of the premodern lineage-family. As such, they are developments that must be approached with vigilance and subjected to critical scrutiny.

In sum, some Confucian scholars have called for a return to the traditional Chinese family, taking it to be a defining feature that distinguishes, and even demonstrates the superiority of, Chinese culture over Western culture. This position, however, exaggerates the differences between Chinese and Western families while obscuring the historical transformations of family forms in both contexts. In fact, whether in China or the West, the basic mode of familial composition has been largely similar: multiple nuclear families combine to form larger lineage families, and multiple lineage families in turn constitute even larger clan-based kinship groups.

Viewed across the history of human civilization, the evolution of family forms follows a trajectory of deconstruction that runs counter to this compositional logic. In China, this pattern manifests as follows: the first major social transformation led to the disintegration of the clan-based family of the feudal, kinship order, after which the smaller lineage family became the fundamental unit of society; the second major social transformation resulted in the dissolution of the lineage family of the imperial era, leaving the nuclear family as the basic social unit. Moreover, in modern society, even the family has ceased to function as the fundamental unit; rather, the individual has assumed that role, as the family has lost its most important productive and political functions.

The problems arising from the dissolution of traditional family structures cannot be resolved by a nostalgic return to premodern family forms, since specific family forms correspond to specific social formations: clan-based families align with feudal systems of aristocratic kingship, while lineage families correspond to imperial systems of centralized monarchy. It follows that calls for a return to the traditional Chinese family are not only impracticable in reality, but also normatively undesirable. Furthermore, such calls are inconsistent with the principles of Confucianism, particularly insofar as it constitutes a form of institutional ethics grounded in a theory of justice.

*Translated by Thomas McConochie*