Family Change in China

Martin King Whyte

How has the Chinese revolution affected the Chinese family? Attempts to answer this question have yielded a number of conflicting interpretations: Important changes in family life were underway well before 1949; the Chinese Communists have set out to destroy traditional family life; family change has not been a high priority goal in the People's Republic of China; marked changes have taken place in areas such as women's roles and the role of religion in family life; many traditional family customs have shown a stubborn ability to survive attempts to change them. Any attempt to sort out such conflicting impressions raises issues about how one interprets both official policy toward the family in contemporary China and the process of family change that has occurred. We will argue here that many prevailing interpretations of these issues are based on a misleading assumption; that what happens to family life is the result of a direct conflict between the government's effort to change family life and the population's desire to preserve family customs. We argue that much of the explanation of the pattern of persistence and change in Chinese family life can be found not in these terms, but by considering the indirect effects on family life of other changes in social structure that have occurred since 1949. Since the sorts of social structural changes that have occurred have been so different in rural and urban China, we are forced to consider the pattern of change in these two sectors separately (1). In doing this in the pages that follow we rely heavily on information collected during two year-long interviewing projects in Hong Kong, the first in 1973-4 focussing on rural life, and the second in 1977/8 focussing on cities (2).
In rural Kwangtung many customs associated with traditional family life are still visible, although important changes have taken place as well. One critical change is that there are no more corporately organized lineages dominating rural social life. Post 1949 developments, particularly the confiscation of lineage property and ritual centers, and the struggle against lineage leaders during the land reform campaign, deprived lineages of most of their former power and solidarity. In most villages collective ritual life by lineages is gone, and in quite a few places it is now permissable to marry within the lineage (although not within the smaller lineage branch). Conflicts between teams and brigades which share kin ties are about as common as conflicts between units composed of different kin groups (3). Of course there are still many cases in which entire teams or even brigades are made up of people of the same surname, but the point we would stress is that team and brigade units now have their own interests and solidarities, and that these units, and not lineages, are now the fundamental ones in rural political organization.

Even though village life is no longer dominated by corporate lineages, at the household level many traditional principles still apply. Patrilocal residence after marriage is still virtually universal, and brides are thus still uprooted from their natal families and incorporated into the families of their husbands. Most families still expect to go through a stage of living in a three generation unit, although usually now in the middle generation there will be only one married son present. Within a three generation family perhaps the aged have somewhat less power and more work burdens than in previous times, but still separate residence for young marrieds or the aged are unusual occurrences. Thus family units based on ties through males tend to maintain the prevailing kin group composition of villages, even in the absence of corporate lineage power.
nuities and changes. Gone from village life are the concubines and adopted daughters-in-law that were visible in earlier times, albeit in small numbers. But at the same time rural males and females still marry considerably earlier than the government would like. In the post-Cultural Revolution period minimum marriage ages of 23 for females and 25 for males were supposed to be enforced in rural areas, but in our Kwangtung villages we calculated that the average ages at marriage were about 21 for females and 25 for males. Parents do not dominate mate choice in most cases these days, but they often take the initiative, and they have a veto power even if the young couple has met and decided to marry on their own. There still are only limited opportunities for young males and females to get to know each other well in most villages, a fact that continues to foster parental involvement in the search for a mate. When and if the parents and the young couple agree on a match, the parents in virtually all cases still have to sit down and bargain over a bride price to be delivered to the bride's family. The value of this bride price, usually composed of cash, food items, clothing, and so forth, is often quite substantial, even though payment of it is illegal under the 1950 Marriage Law (4). Finally, weddings are still the occasion for major feasting in spite of the government's advocacy of frugality, and may include many traditional customs - the fetching of the bride - toasting or even bowing to the new in-laws, "teasing" the new bride, and so forth. Almost nowhere are the officially espoused simple teaparties and political speeches to be seen.

Within the family the older members in general seem to have less absolute power today, and there may be a trend toward earlier turning over of family leadership to a son. But old people still play crucial roles in the family, including managing many private economic activities (tilling the private plot, raising pigs and fowl, making handicrafts) and domestic chores while the able-bodied members of the family are at work in the team's collective fields. There is little visible trend toward disrespect toward older family members
or toward youth rebellion. Other family relationships do not seem to have undergone fundamental changes. Husbands still do very little to help around the home, and women have to manage most domestic chores while also working in the collective fields on a regular basis. The result is that women have less time and energy for leisure activities, participating in political affairs, and so forth. Early childhood is still a period of general indulgence, to be followed by increasing emphasis on demands for obedience, reinforced by physical punishment - especially for sons. In general a very strong ethic of family loyalty and solidarity is still stressed, with apparent success. A speculated trend toward peasants putting the interests of the commune, the Party, or Chairman Mao ahead of their own family does not appear in the evidence at hand.

Rural women continue to suffer disadvantages besides the "double burden" of work inside and outside the home already referred to. In spite of official policy they still do not inherit parental property, which goes solely to sons. (On the other hand they are not obligated to support their aged parents as sons are, since they leave and are incorporated into the families of their husbands.) In the event of a divorce, which is not a common occurrence, women leave with little more than the clothes on their back. Any contribution their earnings have made to new housing and consumer durables is ignored, and any children remain with the husband's family, unless they declare they do not want them (most likely with younger, female children). In marriages of short duration, with no children or period of sustained economic contribution, the woman or her family may even have to repay the (illegal) bride price before commune authorities will approve the divorce. Women have begun to bear fewer children in recent years, but they still do not strictly conform with the government's policy of limiting families to two or at most three children, particularly in cases where none of the existing children are sons. In general the political and economic changes of the past generation have not weakened emphasis on family life based upon ties through males (5).
When aged family members die they are still buried, rather than cremated, and funeral ceremonies are largely traditional in form. The prevailing custom is not the officially espoused brigade "memorial meeting", but a family-organized procession to the grave. This is preceded by a number of traditional observances, including donning mourning clothes, "bying water" to wash the face of the deceased, and standing and wailing through the night. Strewn paper money, banners, and other ritual items may be used in the procession to the grave, and then domestic worship at seven day intervals afterwards, and on holidays in subsequent years, is still common. Furthermore, the "second burial" is still widely practiced in rural Kwangtung, with the bones dug up 3-10 years later, cleaned, placed in a pottery urn, and sited again into the hillside. In most villages ritual specialists (local priests, feng-shui specialists, etc.) are either gone now, or serving a limited clientele covertly. But peasant families continue to observe a variety of traditional rituals by relying on their own laymen's knowledge and recollections.

On balance one could stress either the major changes or the important continuities in the family life of Kwangtung peasants. A reduced role of lineages, increasing freedom of mate choice, the reduced power of the aged - these and other aspects clearly represent major alterations. On the other hand continuities in areas such as patrilocal residence, the disadvantages of being female, and funeral customs prevent us from placing a too one-sided emphasis on the extent of change. The nature of this mixture of old and new is placed in a clearer context when we compare it with the pattern of family change in China's cities.

Urban China

In China's cities family life was diverging from customary forms even before 1949, particularly among the minority of educated and Western-influenced families. Trends since 1949 have not reduced the gap between rural and urban family patterns, but have widened it still further. In Chinese cities clan organizations were never as important
as lineages were in villages, and today these and other particularistic associations - native place associations in particular - have disappeared. The patterns of family to be found in contemporary cities also seem somewhat more varied than is the case in the countryside. Three generation households are still quite common, and it is unusual for old people to reside separately from their grown offspring (although still more common than this would be in the countryside). But patrilocal residence after marriage is less the general rule than it is in the villages. Some young couples live with the groom's parents, some with the bride's, and some get assigned to an apartment where they live separately from either family. Informants can offer a variety of reasons why families end up following one pattern or the other, including relations with each child, the availability of housing in the work units of various children, and the vagaries of the "sending down of youth" program, which may remove many or all of the offspring from the city. Indeed, in recent years this massive sending down of urban youths has made the matter of joint residence less of an issue to parents than simply the question of whether their offspring will be able to remain in the city at all. In any case the nature of urban life and policies in China is such as to make it difficult to establish any sort of large, extended family compound, and also to a considerable extent optional whether the minimal extended families that get established do so on the basis of traditional patrilineal ties or not.

In terms of marriage urban patterns more closely match the "modern" forms espoused by the government. Very few urban youths succeed in marrying below the officially set "late marriage" ages, and these are also later than they are set in the countryside - generally at 25 for females and 27/28 for males. Parents play a less central role in mate choice in Chinese cities as well. In the majority of cases the couple has met on their own, or have used their own friends and work-mates to help them locate a potential mate. Parental approval is still generally sought, but urban informants are able to supply a variety of examples
of couples who went ahead and married in spite of parental opposition. In many cases parents seem to feel that there is no use trying to stand in the way of a choice they disapprove of, and so they grumble but do not try to insert a veto. Marriage finance is also quite different in the cities. Generally there is no direct negotiation between the two families, or presentation of bride price demands, as there is in the villages. In some cases the bride-to-be or her family demand that the male provide her with substantial gifts, such as a watch or a sewing machine, as a sign of his seriousness. But these go to the woman and not to her parents, unlike the rural bride prices. In many and perhaps most cases there are no gift demands at all, and the couple decides to marry without any substantial exchange of valuables. The wedding celebration is also a modest one in most cases. Feasting in restaurants seems rare in recent years, and even politically risky. Festive meals in the home are more common, but these generally are small affairs, with only close kin and friends invited. And many couples marry without any wedding banquet, and instead adopt the officially advocated style of inviting close friends and workmates to a simple teaparty held at the work unit, or in their new apartment. Whatever is the nature of the celebration, the more elaborate customs of rural weddings, such as processions to fetch the bride, late night "teasing" of the new bride, and so forth, are generally absent.

Relations within the home are more variable by occupational background and other factors yet to be analyzed than is the case in the countryside. If the parents were highly paid professionals and owned private homes as well, then even in retirement they may remain the central authority figures in the family. In other families in which the parents have not held high paying jobs or have not worked long enough to receive a pension, they will be much more dependent in their declining years, and urban informants much more than rural informants feel that family power is based upon economic contributions. Parent-youth conflicts also seem much more a feature of some urban
families, particularly in the minority of families bearing "bad" class background labels (6).

Husband-wife relations are also somewhat variable in urban areas. Women still do more domestic chores than men in most families, but factors such as work schedules and other obligations intervene to qualify this impression, and the division seems more equal both in younger and in more educated families. In many families, particularly if there are no able-bodied grandparents available, children assume important domestic duties at early ages, including shopping, cooking, and even washing their own clothing. Parents still generally opt for obedience over learning abstract moral principles in their approach to childrearing, but among the more educated there seems to be a trend toward less reliance on physical punishment in child discipline. Family mutual aid and solidarity are still important to urbanites, but less so than in rural areas. Urbanites know that their families cannot solve many of their problems, and urban parents often feel a sense of helplessness at not being able to control the forces that will affect the lives of their children, and may send them far away from their urban roots.

Women are still underrepresented in urban jobs with high pay and authority, and overrepresented in neighborhood factories and services that have low pay and minimal fringe benefits. But generally daughters do retain a share in any inheritable parental property. Furthermore, urban divorce seems more evenhanded, or even biased in favor of women (as the 1950 Marriage Law implies that it should be). Family property is split or divided on the basis of which member contributed it, and custody of children is negotiated and either divided, or given to one parent, most often the mother (sometimes with child support payments from the father, as well). Another side of these changes is that daughters are now obligated to share in the support of their aged parents as well as their husbands' parents, even if their parents live with one of the brothers. On another note, urban fertility has dropped much more rapidly than
rural, and very few cases in recent years occurred in our interviews of urban parents wanting or succeeding in having a third or higher parity child (even when the first two were daughters).

When aged city residents die, cremation is now virtually universal, at least in the largest cities, and most funerals involve the "modern" memorial meeting form, with the body displayed in a funeral parlor where workmates and family members may pay their last respects and hear speeches by the superiors of the deceased. Mourning garments have been replaced by a simple black armband or black patch on the pocket, and other ritual activities and paraphernalia are largely gone. Ancestor worship in later years is gone in many homes, but in others it continues to be engaged in furtively, most often only by older members of the family. And of course "second burial" is not an issue, as no bones, but only ashes, remain. Some families keep a box with the ashes of the deceased in the home, while others place this in a repository attached to the funeral home. Family members may visit and view the ash boxes on occasions such as the Ch'ing-ming festival, but nowadays flowers and not the traditional incense and paper ritual objects are the ritual items used.

Urban family life has not been completely transformed from its traditional patterns, but nonetheless the contrasts with the rural patterns discussed earlier should be quite clear. This difference can be said to have two aspects. On the one hand urban family patterns are more variable and optional, with particular forms less fixed by local custom. (Rural family customs are somewhat variable from one village to another, but tend to be widely shared within a particular village.) The other aspect is that on balance less traditional family behavior survives in urban China and more conformity with official family ideals is visible. (In urban areas deviations from official ideals for family behavior are also more likely to be engaged in surreptitiously.)

It could be argued that the contrasts between rural and urban patterns sketched here are not surprising,
for after all aren't urbanites in all societies more "modern"? I would argue first that in certain of the areas discussed above urbanites in developing societies are not necessarily more modern than their rural counterparts (7). But even if the nature of the differences in family life sketched here were universal, I would argue that the contrasts are especially sharp in the case of contemporary China (8). To what are we to attribute these contrasts? Is it the case that Chinese peasants today are that much more conservative or "backward"? Does the government really only care about whether people in cities conform to official family ideals or not? In our view neither of these would be the appropriate interpretation. To understand the contemporary contrasts between rural and urban social patterns we need to consider primarily the different ways in which urban and rural social structures have been transformed since 1949.

Rural and Urban Social Structure

Communes are an organizational form that is bureaucratic at the apex, but non-bureaucratic at its base. Peasants are organized into teams and brigades based upon their previous residential alignments, and thus these subordinate units of communes foster the solidarity of kinsmen and lifelong neighbors. In most places the production team is the unit that directs the daily work in the collectivized fields, and is the basic accounting unit within which rewards are shared. Team and brigade cadres are local villagers rather than state cadres, and they receive remuneration that in type and amount is not very different from that of the peasants they lead. These home-grown leaders constitute a buffer between the peasants and the bureaucracy above, and their local loyalties make it difficult for higher authorities to crack down on "feudal" family customs. Within the village the family is no longer the main organizer of agricultural labor, but it is still an exceedingly important unit. Family units manage the private plots and sideline activities without which their members could not subsist. Housing is also privately built, owned, and inherited - by family units. Support of the aged and care of preschoolers is for almost all managed by
the family, and not the team (not to mention the commune or the state). The pressures created by the need to balance demanding collective work schedules with sidelines and domestic work make subordination of individuals to family interests essential. The locally-based nature of rural schooling, restrictions on outmigration, limitations on non-agricultural employment, and hostility in other villages to those with "stranger" surnames act in concert to insure that the great majority of rural males sink down roots into the villages where they were born. The central economic dependance of peasants on their families and teams, and secondarily on their brigades, creates solidarity and vested interests in these basic level units, and rivalry with other nearby units, even when these are composed of kinsmen as well. In subsequent pages we will illustrate in more detail our contention that these basic structural features of rural life, combined with a few others, such as increasing school enrollments and female earnings in collective labor, can explain many of the continuities, as well as changes, in rural family life.

Urban social organization is much more thoroughly bureaucratic in form. We have noted that the voluntary and neighborhood associations of earlier eras are gone, and in addition the market principle plays a restricted role in urban life, making residents there more entirely dependent upon bureaucratic systems of allocation to satisfy their needs. One cannot decide to reside in a particular city on one's own volition, but must be assigned there and have one's school or work unit arrange with police authorities to get you an urban household registration. One has to deal with work unit or city housing authorities to acquire a place to live, or to change housing. (In the largest cities perhaps 10% or less of the housing is still privately owned, and in provincial cities perhaps a quarter, but there is little buying and selling these days of the remaining private housing.) (9) Urban jobs are assigned by city labor bureaus, in conjunction with work units, schools, and neighborhood revolutionary committees. Much of the food, clothing, and other necessities of life are rationed, and urbanites have to learn to cope with
a bewilderingly complex system of ration tickets, books, and certificates controlled by work units, police stations, markets, and other organizations (10). Access to health care, child care, and other services are also dependent upon satisfying proper bureaucratic procedures. These features of urban life mean that families do not control most of the resources their members need in order to sustain themselves, and that they have to deal with a variety of bureaucratic agencies and procedures in order to acquire those resources. Even in urban "mass organizations" like trade unions and residents' committees, the leaders and gate-keepers are not individuals tied to the interests of those they lead in the way that rural team and brigade cadres are. (Urbanites strive to develop relations of personal favoritism with gate-keepers and service providers such as doctors and shopkeepers, and this widespread effort to short-circuit the bureaucracy is labelled "going by the back door".) Urban social structure is not only bureaucratic, but is also very spartan. For instance, urban housing supplies are very tight, many families live in very cramped conditions and have to share kitchens and toilets with neighbors, and long waits for new housing are common. Urban wages have been frozen for long periods at fairly low levels, providing residents with little prospect of much increased income in later years. Tight income limits have helped to foster a trend in which virtually all urban women below middle age work full time outside the home. And many of the services that could relieve families of domestic burdens are absent or in short supply – there are few domestic appliances, daily shopping involves waiting in lines and searching for scarce commodities, there are almost no public laundries, places in preschool institutions are in short supply and often of poor quality, and so forth. These pressures force families to be flexible in their arrangements for supplying their needs, and leave little room for those wedded to customary ways of regulating family life. Finally, urbanites cannot count on a sense of security in their present arrangements, for there is always some possibility that a spouse, a child, or the entire family will be mobilized
to go elsewhere to serve the announced needs of the country.

Let us now look in some detail at several of the contrasts between rural and urban family customs discussed earlier and see how they can be explained. Take the case of marriage. Urban young people have more opportunities to meet eligible mates on their own than do their rural counterparts, and in most cases their families do not provide the housing and other resources needed in order to marry. The greater urban prospects for dispersal of family members and independent living in the future and the increasing access to pensions and public medical care in old age give city parents less motivation to try to control the process of mate choice. And even if they should try to do so, the work unit of their offspring, which has to approve a request to marry, is unlikely to back them up against their son or daughter. For a variety of reasons such as these mate choice in urban areas is more controlled by the young than by their parents.

When a rural couple or their parents want to arrange a marriage below the official minimum marriage ages, it is generally possible to do so. In some localities commune marriage registration authorities do not vigorously enforce the official minima and will allow a couple to marry after a perfunctory attempt at dissuasion. But even if they refuse to do so, "early" marriages can still occur. One device is to have the family pressure brigade authorities to write a certificate falsely testifying that each partner is past the minimum ages and use this certificate to get past the commune authorities. Another device is to go ahead and marry in the home anyway, and then wait until the couple is old enough (and perhaps children have begun to arrive) before going back to the commune to officially register the marriage. In either of these cases the brigade and team authorities have to be willing to cooperate in the deception, but they seem willing to do so generally, and afraid to alienate local peasants by refusing to do so. In the city it is another matter. Requests to marry must be approved by the
work units or neighborhood revolutionary committees of the youths, and then by a marriage registration office, and the gate-keepers in these units are not likely to agree to an "early" marriage except in very special circumstances (11). They have less reason to feel obligated to the families or young people in the first place, and even if sympathetic their actions are more subject to public scrutiny than is the case with village cadres, and approval is more likely to get them into trouble. It is not easy to marry de facto in the city, and then to register the fact later. Parental housing is often too tight to house the new couple, and work units will not provide an apartment for an "early" marrying couple. But even if one family or the other has extra space, the fact of living together without registration is less likely to be accepted as constituting marriage within the urban population than in the countryside, and more likely to be reported by local activists or residents' committee leaders. There are a number of more indirect ways in which late marriage is fostered in urban areas as well. In particular, large proportions of urban youths have been sent down to the countryside in recent years, and while there most endure a long period in which they hold off marrying and other forms of putting down roots in the hope of being able to eventually return to the city. Even if they succeed in doing so, they may have to undergo a further period of education or a three year stint as an apprentice, during which time they are not allowed to marry. For a variety of reasons, then, urban youths are unlikely to marry below the officially approved ages, even though these are set higher than they are for rural marriages. Similar comments could be made about wedding feasting and rituals, which in urban areas not only require quantities of food items that are not easy to come by given the tight market and rationing system, but may subject the families involved to criticism from unsympathetic work unit and neighborhood authorities.

The two settings also have different implications for fertility. In rural areas lowered infant mortality and shortages of arable land may increase peasant willingness to control fertility, and an
efficient communications system insures that most peasants are aware of official family planning policy and of a variety of contraceptive methods. Nevertheless, a number of features of the rural scene promote higher fertility than the government would like. At an early age children can help supplement family income by assisting on the private plot and raising animals, and even by earning a few work points from the team for performing simple tasks. Since there is no general old age pension system, peasants also know that how they will live in their declining years depends on how many children they have to support them. Since daughters still marry out and do not provide such support, it is only sons who count in the long run, and families have a strong reason to keep having children until they have at least one son, and preferably two or even three. They also know that they can expand their private housing fairly easily to accommodate a larger family and that there is little danger of a son being "lost" through being sent away from the village and unable to contribute to the family. Finally, they know that the enforcers of the two or three child limits are village cadres who are again unlikely to want to jeopardize their support within the village by being too hard-hearted about family planning.

In the cities almost all of these considerations are reversed. Lowered infant mortality and effective communications again foster willingness to consider birth control. Children may help around the home, but they are unable to make any real contribution to family income until they are employed. An even with both father and mother earning it is often difficult to provide for more than a very small family. Increasing proportions of old people are now able to rely primarily on pensions in their old age, so that support from children becomes more supplementary. Daughters are now able to provide some of this supplementary support and may be the ones parents decide it is most suitable to end their years living with, factors which make it less essential in cities to bear sons. Housing is very cramped also, and work unit and city housing authorities will not allocate more specious housing to families whose need comes from having an "over-
quota" child. Most women of child-bearing ages are working full time, many have no old folks at home to help tend the children, and bringing up many children can be a hassle as well as quite costly. (Husbands may not help out much, child care facilities may be in short supply, inconveniently located, and expensive, and so forth.) Furthermore, in recent years the program of sending urban youths down to the countryside meant that parents were faced with the prospect that having "extra" children would simply mean that more of their offspring would end up being sent to the countryside, where many would need to rely on parental funds to survive. Finally, urban work units and residents' committees have been strictly organized to pressure residents (particularly women) to use contraceptives and to accept abortions for "over-quota" pregnancies, making it difficult to find support for non-compliance. For all of these reasons it is not surprising that urban fertility behavior has changed more dramatically than rural.

One final area we want to briefly touch on concerns funerals. In rural areas traditional funerals are not a source of great concern to authorities. In many localities there are no crematoria nearby in any case, and uncultivated hillsides for gravesites and wood for coffins may not be too difficult to secure (in the latter case, particularly if it is kept in mind that peasants may start acquiring the wood and preparing a coffin many years before they anticipate dying). The family-oriented nature of funeral activities, and of later ancestor worship and second burial rituals, suit the rural situation in which peasants see their interests as closely tied to the efforts of family members, past, present and future. In large cities there are no hillsides or graveyards within convenient reach, no coffin carriers or means of transport of coffins to distant sites are easily available, and in most places coffin shops have disappeared. When people die their bodies are generally transferred directly from hospital morgues to funeral home-crematoria, and work units often bear much of the costs of cremation for present and former employees. The complex and bureaucratic nature of urban life must also weaken the conviction that family fortunes are
tied together tightly, and depend upon proper care of ancestral bones. For reasons such as these it is difficult if not impossible for residents of large cities to arrange a traditional burial, and old people who oppose cremation must be willing to forsake the amenities of the city to spend their remaining years back in some rural native place.

Many aspects of the contrasts between rural and urban family life have not been discussed in detail here, but the examples given should illustrate our contention that the source of these differences can be found mainly in the very different structures of China's contemporary villages and cities. There are two aspects brought out by the examples we have discussed. First, when elites initiate efforts to change family life directly through campaigns and mobilized group pressure, they are able to secure compliance more readily in urban than in rural areas, because families are dependent there on resources controlled by bureaucratic authorities who cannot be easily persuaded to overlook non-compliance. In rural areas, in contrast, such efforts are less successful because families are more self-reliant (and thus less dependent on bureaucratically controlled resources) and because the enforcers of official policies are local kinsmen and lifelong neighbors who can be included more easily to overlook non-compliance. The second aspect is that, even in the absence of direct family change efforts by the government, urbanites in facing the altered, more bureaucratic social structure in which they live are likely to adapt their family behavior in more "modern" directions. For instance, many of our urban informants claimed that most people they knew had already become convinced that it didn't make sense to raise more than two children even before the government made the two children limit a requirement. In rural areas, in contrast, the non-bureaucratic basic social units in which peasants live are such that many traditional family customs are not outmoded "survivals", but are perfectly suitable to current conditions, and are reinforced by official policies (such as the restrictions on out-migration of young males).
In conclusion, we need to state more clearly one implication of the argument developed here. It might again be supposed that the contrasts in family life sketched here are a temporary phenomenon, and that peasants will "catch up" with urban ways as soon as the government's messages more effectively penetrate rural villages and modern urban influences and economic development "trickle down" into the countryside. We doubt that this is the case. For one thing, in our examination of variations from one village to another within rural Kwangtung, we found no consistent tendency for villages located closer to cities, with higher rice yields, more Party members, or better communications, to have more "modern" or urban forms of family life (12). We are arguing, then, for a fundamentally different view of the change process, in which the dramatic contrasts between family life in town and country are not likely to be substantially reduced unless the structural principles upon which these two sectors of contemporary Chinese society are based are transformed and made more similar.

Notes

1. We would concur with the view of Daborah Davis-Friedmann that, "in contemporary China the social, economic, and political constraints on family life are so distinct between rural and urban areas that it almost appears that within the national boundaries of the People's Republic of China there exist two autonomous societies". Stated in her dissertation, "Old People and their Families in the People's Republic of China", Boston University PhD dissertation, 1979, p. 15.

2. Both research projects were carried out jointly with William L. Parish of the University of Chicago. The first project deals only with villages in Kwangtung, and the major publication resulting from it is our book, Village and Family in Contemporary China, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978. The second project focussed on urban areas in Kwangtung, large and small, but also included interviews with informants from some other cities elsewhere in China. The results of the second study are as yet in a preliminary stage of analysis.

3. See William L. Parish, "China - Team, Brigade or Commune?"
4. One important change in these marriage finance customs is that the substantial dowry that brides' parents used to have to supply is now gone, so that the custom is more of the proscribed "marriage by purchase" than was the case in the past. For further details see our book, Chapter 10.

5. See further discussion on this issue in my article, "Revolutionary Social Change and Patrilocal Residence in China", Ethnology, July 1979.


7. For example, in cities of some developing countries, such as in Cairo, the levels of urban fertility are not any lower than in the surrounding countryside. See Janet Abu-Lughod, "Urban-Rural Differences as a Function of the Demographic Transition", in Charles Tilly, ed., An Urban World, Boston: Little, Brown 1974.

8. I would argue that the contrasts are not as sharp in Taiwan today, nor were they in late Imperial China. For a concurring view on the latter point, see F.W. Mote, "The Transformation of Nanking, 1350-1400", in G.W. Skinner, ed., The City in Late Imperial China, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1977.


10. Rationed items in most cities would include not only grain, cooking oil, and cotton cloth, but also pork, fish, soybean paste, some synthetic fabrics, sugar, eggs, chicken, soap, coal, kindling, powdered milk, bicycles, sewing machines, and wristwatches, to mention only some of the most important. See the discussion in Lynn T. White, III, "Deviance, Modernization, Rations, and Household Registers in Urban China", in A. Wilson, S. Greenblatt, and R. Wilson, eds., Deviance and Social Control in Chinese Society, New York: Praeger, 1977.

11. A special circumstance might be a premarital pregnancy, but even then local authorities might press for an abortion instead of approving the marriage.

12. There were important village-to-village variations in family customs turned up by our research, but these were related to things like the size of the village, the local degree of remittance dependency, and ethnicity (Cantonese versus Hakka), rather than to some dimension of modernization of urbanism.