

## The family in ancient China and Rome

Sunny Y. Auyang

The family, not the individual, was the basic unit of society in both ancient Rome and ancient China. In sociopolitical contexts, “family” took on a broad spectrum of meanings, many of which referred to entities much more extensive than the nuclear family of parents and siblings. Most broadly, it referred to a clan, a patrilineal group descend from a common ancestor whose members were identified by the same family name. In Rome, a clan was called a *gens* and its branch a *familia*.<sup>1</sup> In Chinese, *xing* 姓 stood for both a clan and its family name. A branch of a clan was called a *zong* 宗 or *zu* 族.<sup>2</sup> A related concept was the house, Roman *domus* and Chinese *shi* 室, which included not only biological relatives but also social dependents and physical properties.

The relative importance of families in various societies is suggested by the naming systems. In many ancient cultures, a person had only one name with perhaps a patronymic, such as Jesus, son of Joseph, which conveyed very little information about family relationship. In contrast, a Roman or a Chinese had, besides a given name (*praenomen* or *ming* 名), a family name (*nomen* or *xing* 姓) and, if he was a aristocrat, a surname (*cognomen* or *shi* 氏) that kept track of clan branches. A Roman example: Julius was the *nomen* for the *gens* that claimed Trojan descend. A *familia* in the Julian clan adopted the *cognomen* Caesar. The most famous member of the Julius Caesar family had the *praenomen* Gaius. Gnaeus Pompey, Gaius Julius Caesar’s rival, was an upstart with *nomen* and but no *cognomen*. A Chinese example: Ying was the *xing* of the lords of the states of Qin and Zhao. The Zhao lords, as a *zu* of the Yings, adopted Zhao as their *shi*. The Qin lords retained their *xing* as their *shi*.

Married women in both worlds were known by the family name of their father. Thus all women from the Julii family were called Julia, as all women from the Chen family were called Chen *shi*.

The elaborate naming systems helped recognition of distant relatives and social networking. It also preserved intergenerational and historical memory, facilitating power endurance. Tracing the family names of rulers and magistrates become a research tool for historians to study social mobility and changes in the composition of ruling classes.<sup>3</sup> When you are confused by the recurrence of some names in narratives covering centuries, you have a glimpse at the persistent of familial power.

The Roman and Chinese societies were both patriarchic, although with varied customs. As the head of family, the Roman father, *paterfamilias*, had extensive and unrestricted legal power over family members, including all male offspring, married or not. Originally, they even had the right

to kill adult children. Although right became obsolete in the mid-Empire, authoritarian paternal power spread throughout the Roman Empire and persisted beyond its fall.<sup>4</sup> The power of the Chinese head of family, although more customary than legal, was no less extensive and enduring. The father, *fu* 父, could punish family members corporally, even when they held high government posts. Confucians elevated filial piety to the top of virtues and taught subjects to obey the ruler as children obey their parents.<sup>5</sup> To rule the state by filial piety, *yixiao zhiguo* 以孝治国, became the Confucian motto of several dynasties.<sup>6</sup> Authoritarianism began at home.

The fount of nature and nurture, the family transmits not only genes but also wealth and life style, skill and knowledge, and in some cases, prestige and power. It has been a cornerstone of tradition, whose authority ideally maintained sociopolitical stability with minimal coercion. Before schools appeared with Confucius in China in the mid fifth century BCE and Greek teachers in Rome in the mid second century BCE, children got their education at home or clan establishments.<sup>7</sup> It is no surprise that families and clans formed the foundation of aristocracy, the hereditary elite and ruling class in ancient times. Ancestor worship pervaded China and was also practiced in Rome.<sup>8</sup>

A relatively small number of aristocratic families occupied key positions and controlled the wellsprings of power in Rome. Roman senators were called *patres*, fathers, “either because of their age or because their duties resembled those of the father of a family.”<sup>9</sup> *Pater patriae*, father of the fatherland, was an official title for Augustus and some other emperors. A Chinese state in feudal times was undifferentiated from the royal household where relatives doubled as ministers. Chinese emperors and their pre-imperial forerunners were called *tienzi*, son of heaven. “*Tienzi* acts as the parents of the people and the lord of all under heaven.”<sup>10</sup> *Guojia*, literally state-family, is the common Chinese term for the state.

Marriage and family relations weighed heavily in the politics of both realms, but with a crucial difference. Pre-imperial China was mainly feudal, where aristocrats fused rank, fief, and government office, all hereditary. In contrast to the nobility of pre-imperial China or post-feudal Europe, Roman *nobilis* lacked legally heritable ranks, which is why it is often translated as “notables” instead of “nobles.” Scions of notable families still had to win elections for offices, although familial prestige conferred so large an edge in elections many deemed service “hereditary.”<sup>11</sup> The Roman legal distinction between private and political relations manifested a fundamental difference between Rome and feudal China.

---

1. K-J. Hölkeskamp, Under Roman roofs: family, house and household. In *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Republic*, ed. H. I. Flower. Cambridge (2004) pp. 113-138.

2. C-Y. Hsu and K. M. Linduff, K. M. *Western Chou Civilization*. Yale (1988), 148-150. Yang Kuan 楊寬. *Xizhou Shi* 西周史 (*History of Western Zhou*). Shanghai Renmin (2003), pp. 436-439.

3. For Rome, see K. Hopkins, *Death and Renewal*. Cambridge (1983). For China, see C-Y Hsu. *Ancient China in Transition*. Stanford (1965).

4. Hölkeskamp, Under Roman roofs. A. Arjava. Paternal power in late antiquity. *The Journal of Roman Studies* 88 (1998): 147-165.

- 
5. T-T. Ch'ü. *Han Social Structure*. University of Washington (1972), pp. 20-26. L. E. Eastman. *Family, Fields, and Ancestors*. Oxford (1989), chapter 2. Fairbank 1992: 18.
  6. The idea of rule by filial piety originates from *The Canon of Filial Piety*, probably written by Confucius' disciple Zhengzi
  7. K. Hopkins. *Conquerors and Slaves*. Cambridge (1978), pp. 76-77.
  8. For China, see Hsu. *Ancient China*, p. 19. Yang Kuan 楊寬. *Zhanguo Shi 戰國史 (History of the Warring States)*. Shanghai Renmin (2003), pp. 436-9. For Rome, see H. I. Flower. *Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture*. Oxford (1996), pp. 209-11. L. B. Steadman, C. T. Palmer, and C. F. Tilley. The universality of ancestor worship. *Ethnology* 35 (1996), p. 68.
  9. Sallust, *Cataline*, 6. E. S. Gruen, E. S. *The Last Generation of the Roman Republic*. University of California (1974), p. 47.
  10. *Shangshu*, Hongfan 《尚書·洪範》. Hsu, *Ancient China*, p. 78.
  11. T. J. Cornell. *The Beginning of Rome*. Routledge (1995), pp. 340-4. K. A. Raaflaub, K. A. ed. *Social Struggles in Archaic Rome*. University of California (1986).