

## PROCESSUAL ANALYSIS OF AMERICAN KINSHIP

[American society, American subcultures, Chinese-Americans, Irish-Americans, kinship, processual analysis, teaching anthropology]

### INTRODUCTION

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Because kinship is a basic subject in the field of anthropology and because independent research is considered valuable, students in introductory anthropology courses are often asked to do research papers on kinship in American society. Two theoretical models usually underlie such research attempts: the search for social structures and the search for cultural patterns. There are, however, numerous problems with an approach that is concerned with basic structural characteristics. First, a search for the underlying structure of kinship in American society is limited in the extent to which it can lead to original analyses rather than restatements of previous analyses. Second, the strategy behind such an approach involves the collecting of a large amount of data which is then reduced to its common denominator. This strategy has little value as a classroom assignment for a student who is supposed to be learning the analytical techniques of social anthropology but has limited time for data collection. Third, most analyses of American kinship are written in order to demonstrate to other anthropologists

the implications of a specific theoretical approach. The student of anthropology, however, tends to be far less interested in the controversies between competing theories than in the question of whether anthropological analysis has any value as a tool for providing a deeper understanding of personal experience than plain old common sense. Many published analyses of American kinship do not hold up well under this criterion of evaluation and tend to impress the student as being common sense expressed in complicated language. Finally, it has become increasingly common for students and other members of American culture to object to the social scientist's tendency to subordinate the actions of a specific individual to such analytical constructs as "social rules".

Each of the problems discussed above is to some extent overcome with the use of a processual, situational, or dramatic narrative model of analysis. It was with this idea in mind that students in introductory anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley during the winter and spring quarters of 1971 were required to write papers which focused on a single event or series of related events in an extended family they knew well (usually though not always their own) and analyzed these events in social terms rather than simply in terms of individual personalities. A number of the best papers written for these two courses are reproduced below. They have been reproduced for two reasons. First, they demonstrate the value of such a paper assignment. It is useful to remember that all these papers were written

by students who had completed less than half of a one quarter introductory course in social/cultural anthropology. Second, these papers demonstrate the value of a processual approach for a deeper understanding of American kinship.

Every individual has at his command information on the social interaction within at least his own family at a level of detail which is often beyond that collected by any but the most fortunate ethnographers. In addition, most American students are willing to communicate such information in a class assignment as long as they are able to disguise the identities of the individuals involved. Thus the strength of these papers comes in the interaction between the richness of an individual's knowledge of his own experience and the insights provided by anthropological concepts.

Two aspects of this interaction are of particular importance. First, any individual within American society views his kinship relations from an egocentric point of view, whereas an anthropological approach provides the perspective of a socio-centric point of view or at least a perspective which combines a number of different points of view. In particular, the drawing of a genealogy proved to be an invaluable tool for allowing an individual to view his kinship interaction as it appears to his relatives or to an outsider. The degree to which this widening of perspective presents increased insight to the individual analyzing his own kinship relations is demonstrated in the papers below. Second, the individual tends to view tensions within his own kinship network as tensions between specific named individuals.

Processual analysis requires the viewing of these tensions and conflicts in structural terms. It is not necessary to deny the individuality of the social actor but rather to consider the fact that this actor operates within a social situation involving inherent structural tensions. Six aspects of kinship dynamics are useful to keep in mind when isolating these structural tensions: 1) every child has two parents and every nuclear family thus has two sets of blood relations, 2) every generation must pass power, money, family heirlooms, and other inheritance on to the following generation, 3) the fact that any family progresses through a developmental cycle results in cyclical changes such as fission at the death of a grandparent, 4) there is a tension between different status categories based on age and sex, 5) older generations are concerned that they have successors, and 6) the incest taboo results in an opposition between ties of blood and ties of marriage.

The five papers printed below demonstrate different possible approaches to the analysis of social process. Scudder focuses on a recurring event, the family gathering, in order to analyze formal changes over time, their causes, and their implications. Lovelock focuses on a single crisis situation and the social interaction related to the emergency mobilization of extended kin. Lim focuses on a single relationship, the relation between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, as it relates to conflicts over 1) child-rearing and 2) the immigration of matrilineal relatives. Page focuses on a single problem underlying kinship relations, the struggle between successive generations over the passing on of wealth and power. Finally, Jang focuses on conflicts

concerning the relation between generations in a family in transition between a Chinese and a Western social system.

Each of these analyses stands on its own. Yet it is useful to try and isolate the particular strengths of each.

The most striking characteristic of Scudder's paper is that it makes no use of the exceptional either in terms of ethnic sub-cultures or particularly climactic social events or conflicts. It deals instead with the very commonplace events which mark important stages in the developmental cycle of the extended family. The author demonstrates the relation between the individual actor and the social structure by 1) presenting a chronology of events which were the result of chance and individual action (a move to California, a stroke, a divorce), 2) discussing the effects of these events on the social situation, and 3) discussing the resulting individual actions in terms of the changing social situation in which they occur.

Lovelock, also, is concerned with a chronology of events, although her temporal focus is the time span of a single crisis. Each action is examined in terms of a detailed analysis of the social setting in which it takes place. Particular attention is paid to the conflicting nature of social pressures and the social dilemmas in which social actors are placed, as in Mary's response to competing invitations and the continual contrast between the actions of her brother and her brother-in-law.

Lim presents a skillful analysis of a traditional conflict between a Chinese mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law which is

complicated by a cross-cousin marriage which is also a marriage by adoption or sampua marriage. A specific family conflict is considered and analyzed in terms of general characteristics of Chinese society. Lim's most valuable contribution is his demonstration of the effect of immigration patterns on social dynamics. Thus he shows how the position of a mother-in-law is threatened by the possible immigration of her daughter-in-law's mother who also happens to be her husband's sister.

Page analyzes the relation of an Irish-American woman to her daughters-in-law in terms of both social and cultural conflicts. A picture is presented of a clash between cultural traditions in which daughters-in-law do not act according to the same set of cultural rules as their mother-in-law. The old woman is shown trying to manipulate the social situation and failing, the greatest strength of the paper lying in its portrayal of the ways in which tensions could have been lessened if the situation had been slightly different. In particular, a number of potential mediators of the dispute are discussed: the woman's husband, her sons, a Catholic priest, relatives of the daughters-in-law, and a second daughter-in-law.

Jang's analysis of conflicts resulting from an inheritance illuminates the interrelations between actor and social order in two important ways. First, she focuses on the role of the rebel, beginning with Grandfather, a political rebel, and ending with Grandson,

also a rebel. In this way she firmly establishes the individual as an actor responding to rather than bound by tradition. Second, she makes skillful use of a model of social change which involves individuals existing within two social systems, Chinese and Western, and making decisions in specific situations to operate in one or the other of these systems.

Together, the papers point to a number of characteristics of American society which are of importance for understanding social processes in American kinship. First, frequent immigration and a high degree of individual mobility may result in 1) abrupt structural changes in social situations resulting from the arrival of previously absent close relatives or 2) situations in which individuals are isolated from their close relatives. Second, culture change and intermarriage between members of different ethnic groups may result in situations in which either 1) individuals have a choice between two sets of social rules in deciding how to act or 2) two individuals fail to interact successfully because they are operating according to different sets of rules. Third, despite the overwhelming importance of the nuclear family, the extended family is not an insignificant social unit in American society. Although the extended family may serve as a domestic unit only within certain subcultures, it is important to look at kinship interaction within the extended family in order to analyze 1) social behavior at periodic life crises ceremonies and calendrically determined holidays, 2) the social aspects

of responses to non-periodic crisis situations, and 3) the interaction related to kinship-determined privileges (e.g., inheritance) and obligations (e.g., responsibility for the elderly).

#### STRUCTURAL CHANGES IN FAMILY GATHERINGS

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Changes in the interaction between members of Family X can be seen in the changing structure of "family gatherings" over the last ten years. These gatherings, which take place at Christmas, Thanksgiving, and during the summer, once included all of the members of Family X shown in the accompanying genealogy. Until 1960, all the members of Family X except Granny lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The Grandparents also maintained a house in New Hampshire. Every Christmas and Thanksgiving, the entire family would gather at The Grandparents' Cambridge house. During the summer all but Granny would spend a few weeks together in New Hampshire.

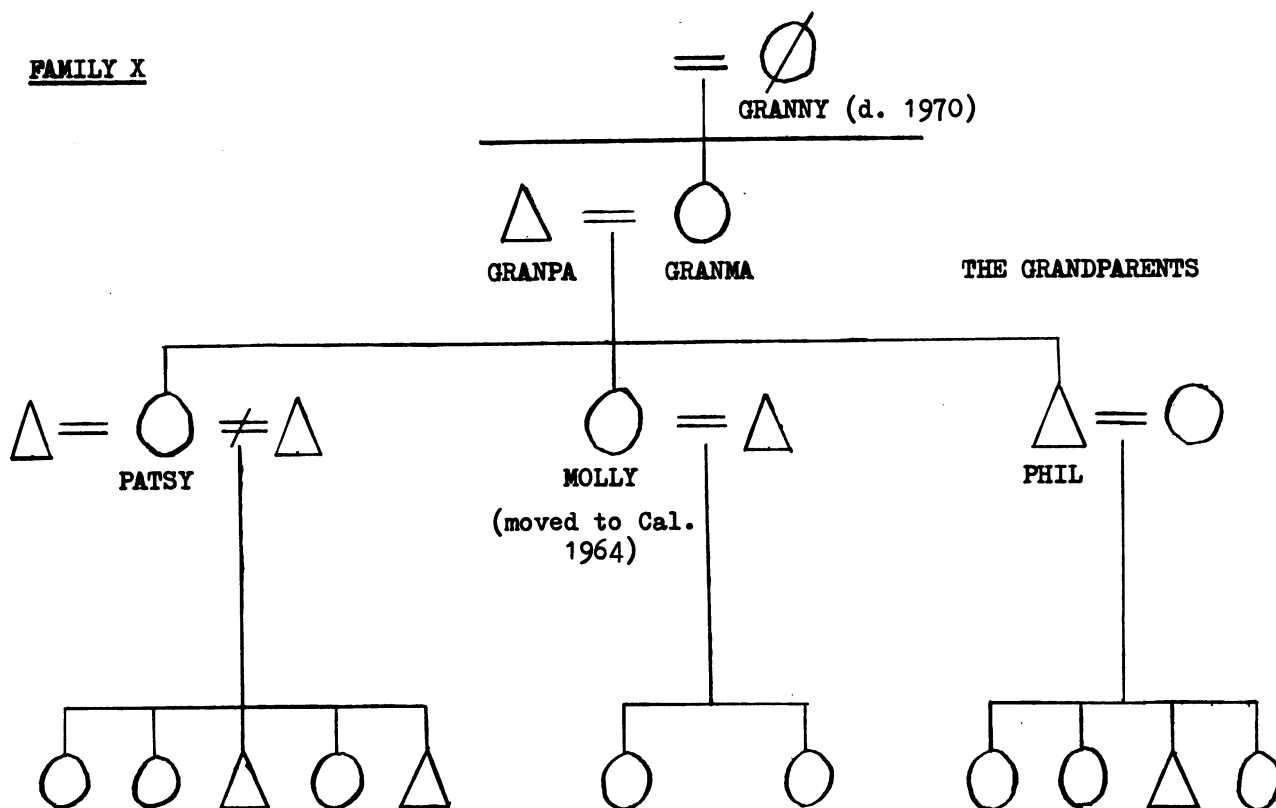
The first major change in family interaction came in 1960 when Molly and her family went overseas for three years, returning to Cambridge for a year in 1963, then moving to California. Thus after 1960, Molly and her family were rarely present at family gatherings, except for occasional summer visits.

In 1962 there was another change. Granny had a stroke and from that time on needed the constant care of a nurse. She no longer came to Christmas and Thanksgiving gatherings which were now held in



New Hampshire as The Grandparents had moved there permanently after Granpa's retirement. After her stroke, Granny would spend a month or so of each summer at The Grandparents' house with her nurse. The visits of ailing Granny put a great emotional strain on Granma who became too nervous to cope with all the children and grandchildren when Granny was there. As Granny liked to see her grandchildren and great-grandchildren, each of the three families would spend a short time in New Hampshire during the summer, instead of all being there at once. (This excluded Molly and family when they remained in California for the summer).

FAMILY X



In 1968 Granpa had an operation after which he aged very rapidly. Granpa's condition put further emotional stress on Granma, and, though Granpa loved to be around all his children and grandchildren at once, Granma could no longer handle more than one of her children's families at a time. This put an end to the Christmas and Thanksgiving gatherings which, since 1960, had included all but Molly and her family. Though the family gatherings have been gradually reduced, Patsy, Molly, and Phil still spend time during vacations with The Grandparents. There are no gatherings in which the entire Family X is together.

The reduction of family gatherings has not resulted in a change in the relationships between The Grandparents and their children and grandchildren. There has, however, been a change in the relationships between the three siblings, Patsy, Molly, and Phil. Until 1960 all lived in Cambridge, and there was much interaction between their three families. This was especially true of Patsy and Molly as their children were close in age and spent a lot of time at each other's houses. When Molly left she kept in touch with her siblings, but leaving the place where they had all grown up tended to make her less close to them.

In 1967 Patsy's husband left her. This brought Patsy and Phil closer together as he was there to help her through the crisis and act as a father to her children. Just prior to the divorce, Patsy and Phil each had another child. Having children of the same age

tended to bring them still closer. While Patsy and Phil were growing closer, Molly was becoming alienated from both of them. The fact that she had married an anthropologist and had lived abroad created differences in values between herself and her siblings who had never left upper-class Boston society. (Witness the differences in family size). The changes in the relationship between Patsy and Molly have not affected the closeness of their children, who continue to visit each other every summer. Patsy's children have also become closer to Phil's for, as they grew older, they acted as babysitters for them. There has never been a close relationship between the children of Molly and Phil, as Phil's children were all born after Molly left Cambridge.

The interaction between members of Family X as it stands today is a result of the factors discussed above. Phil and Patsy see each other almost every day with their younger children, and their families always spend Christmas eve and Thanksgiving together. Both families spend some time during Christmas and summer vacations at The Grandparents' house. Molly and her children spend part of every other summer with The Grandparents, and some of Molly's and Patsy's children always see each other in the summer, either in California or in Cambridge and New Hampshire.

## RESPONSE TO A FAMILY CRISIS

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A few months ago, a conflict became acute between David and his father, Robert. This conflict, gradually building up over a series of months, resulted in Robert's leaving home (only temporarily as it turned out). To add to the problem soon after Robert left, David was arrested and detained at Juvenile Hall for some of the actions which had previously angered his father. (Robert, however, had nothing to do with this arrest).

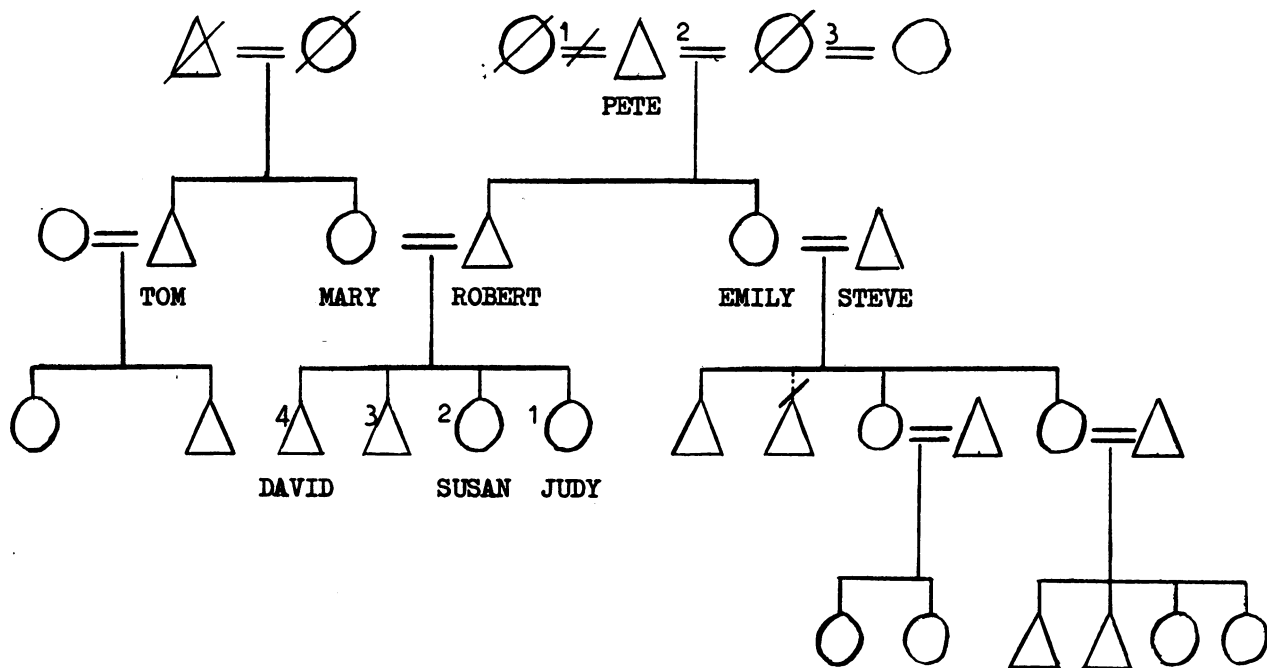
This departure of Robert and the arrest of his son set off a number of encounters with relatives that were unusual in their family. Due to arguments between Robert, his sister Emily, and his father, that side of the family had rarely been visited by Robert and Mary's family. Mary's parents had both died, and her brother Tom had not been close to Mary and her family. In addition, Robert did not particularly like visiting, and Mary was unable to visit relatives without him because they all lived over one hundred miles away and she did not drive.

It was through a series of communications between relatives concerning the events outlined above that Mary and her two daughters ended up visiting both sets of relatives for the first time in years and the first time ever without Mary's husband. Mary's daughter Susan, who had been close to Emily and her family since spending a few summers at their house, phoned her Aunt Emily to relay news of

the recent events. Emily phoned her father, Pete, who then phoned his daughter-in-law, Mary. Pete offered moral support to his daughter-in-law in the absence of her husband as head of the nuclear family. This support was probably not too extensive because he, himself, had previously undergone a separation from a former wife. This support for Mary consisted mainly of a short pep-talk on the "virtues" of her son David, who, as the youngest of Pete's grandchildren, was special to him.

The next communication was from Emily to Mary. She invited Mary and her daughters to her house for a few days. Emily, being Mary's sister-in-law (Robert's sister), was able to sympathize with Mary at her inability to understand the actions of Robert.

Upon arrival in Sacramento, the family first visited Emily. After discussion of what had been happening, Emily and her husband,



Steve, offered to let their nephew David stay at their home and work with Steve on his job in city hall.

After visiting awhile, Mary decided to visit her brother's family, who lived in the same town. Here, as at Emily's house, they were invited to dinner. This produced a dilemma for Mary, who felt she should accept her own brother's offer first, since her family expected her to treat these blood ties as stronger than her ties by marriage to Emily. (This problem had also come up at the outset of the visit when Mary had to decide which family to visit first). Mary decided that she and her family were going to eat dinner with Emily and Steve. This decision was looked down upon by Tom because of a rivalry between the two uncles (relatives only by marriage) resulting from the fact that Steve did hiring for the city and was rather wealthy while Tom was frequently in need of work and often prone to excessive drinking.

It is interesting to note that while one uncle offered to take in his nephew, the other did not. This is partly a result of economic factors. Perhaps more important, as one can see from the genealogy, certain other factors may have been involved in Steve and Emily's willingness to take in David. Steve and Emily had had a son who had died. They next took in, by an informal agreement, a little boy whose mother did not want him. This arrangement lasted only a few years because the mother later reclaimed her son. Also, both of their daughters were married and had children of their own. Part

of the reason why Tom did not offer to take in his nephew may have been because he had his own son, a year older than David and susceptible to David's influence. He felt that he had his own family to watch over and care for.

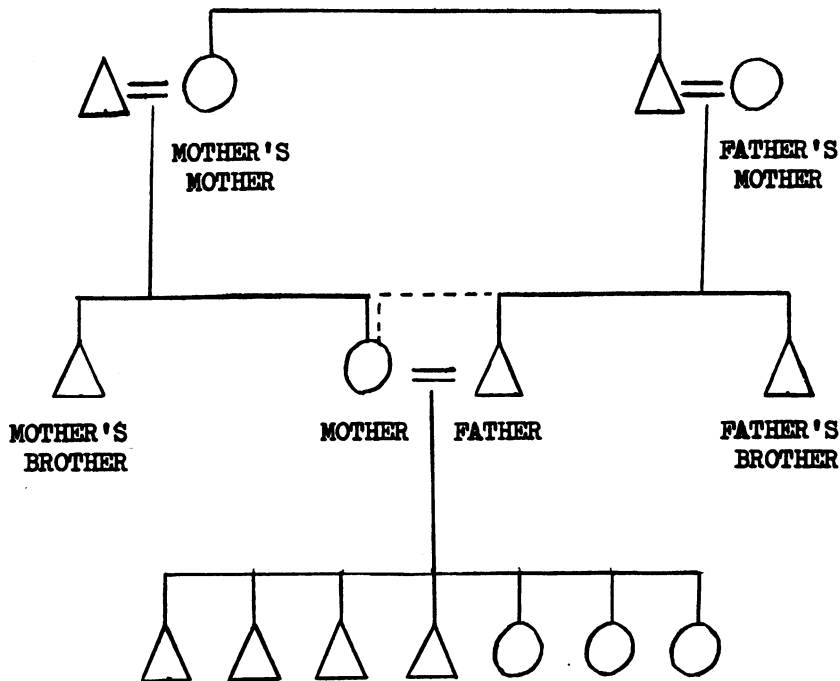
The next day, Mary and her daughters returned home. After a couple of weeks, Robert returned home and assumed "fatherly" responsibilities. With Robert back home as a source of security for his family, his daughter Judy moved back out of her mother's house where she had temporarily been living, and the relatives quickly returned to the background in the workings of Robert's nuclear family. Later, when David was released, his father obtained a job for him which superceded Steve's offer. (The head of the family is normally given the responsibility of helping his children find jobs. In this case, Robert's leaving was construed as a non-acceptance of this role, which was then temporarily assumed by his sister's husband).

Relatives who knew of the situation were informed by phone or letter that circumstances had improved. Other relatives who for different reasons had never been informed of the situation (those living a great distance away or with whom ties were kept up infrequently) were left uninformed. This "A-OK" to the relatives was a signal that they could withdraw their previous offers of help. To Mary's family it was a signal of restored stability with Robert at the core of the restabilized family and a signal for all the family to return to their usual autonomy.

MOTHER-IN-LAW DAUGHTER-IN-LAW CONFLICT IN A CHINESE-AMERICAN FAMILY

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As long as I can remember, my paternal grandmother and my mother have been arguing over the raising of my brothers and sisters. Whenever one of us did something wrong, my mother was to blame, whereas our "good" behavior was attributed to my grandmother. This confused me for my mother was usually the strict one and grandmother tended to spoil us. The controversy concerning the governing of our behavior was intensified by my father; he tended to agree with grandmother. The explanation of this precarious situation can be found by examining the roles of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in the





Chinese family in which status and authority are determined by sex and age.

The traditional Chinese family, a male-dominated unit by nature of its being patrilineal and patrilocal, involved the subordination of female members. Our household consisted of my parents, their children, and my paternal grandparents. To insure harmony in our patriarchal "big family" and settle numerous family disputes, my grandparents were the heads of the family, a position insured by their decisive role in the establishment of the household for they had been the dominant force in my parents' marriage.

In contrast with American society, the Chinese institution of marriage does not reduce the family unit by the departure of the married son but instead expands it and provides the parents the assurance of protection and security in their old age.

To fulfill this purpose, marriage could not be allowed to transfer the center of affection, loyalty, and authority from the parents to the new couple. Hence the traditional discouragement of open affection between husband and wife, particularly when they were newly wed. Marriage and its ensuing relationships remained subordinated to the welfare and happiness of the parents and the continuity of the family organization (Yang 1959:23).

In addition, my mother was "adopted" into the Lim family as a child and raised alongside my father prior to their marriage. This institution of "adopted daughter-in-law", sampua, subjected the child bride to early subordination to her future in-laws, especially her future mother-in-law, since as her foster parents they were responsible

for her upbringing and care. As a result, the conjugal pair could not feel that their marriage was a consequence of their mutual love but a union arranged by their parents.

Once married, the daughter-in-law underwent the most trying period of her life; she was still considered a half-qualified member of the family, for she was expected to give birth to a son in fulfillment of her duty to perpetuate the ancestral lineage. Once this duty was fulfilled, family discrimination against her was lessened and her family status finally established.

My mother gave birth to four sons and three daughters, firmly establishing her status in the family. Since she had entered the family as a child and a stranger, unprotected by her own parents and constantly under the tyrannical rule of my grandparents, her identity in the world, both biologically and psychologically, was in her children. Naturally, she felt responsible for the behavior and rearing of the children. When my grandmother tried to infringe upon this responsibility, she was also infringing upon my mother's identity, hence the feud existing between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.

Two years ago, my mother began arranging for the immigration of her mother and brother from Communist China to the United States to reside in our patriarchal "big family". There ensued massive opposition from my paternal grandmother and eventually, through her persuasion and influence, from my father. At first I could not

comprehend this opposition except as an extension of the feud existing between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. But further analysis of this situation revealed grandmother's opposition was a result of her jealousy and fear of the threat to her status and authority that mother's relatives would present upon their entrance into the family.

Traditional Chinese rules of kinship dictate that "ego's relation to a patrilineal relative was closer than to a corresponding matrilineal relative" (Yang 1959:37) but my paternal grandfather and maternal grandmother are brother and sister, (father and mother are cross-cousins) thus providing mother's mother with equal status and authority to father's mother. Naturally my paternal grandmother opposed their (mother's relatives) entrance on the grounds that 1) this would limit and endanger her influence within the family, especially her subordination of my mother who would then be protected from further abuse by her mother and 2) maternal grandmother's appearance into the family might shift and/or lessen the allegiance of her grandchildren from her to their maternal grandmother.

In contrast to American society in which males once married become independent of parental control, the Chinese hierarchy of status and authority imposes the mores of filial piety which "demanded absolute obedience and complete devotion to the parents, thus establishing the generational subordination of the children . . . an atmosphere which compelled the observation of filial piety" (Yang 1959:89),

hence the explanation of my father's continual compliance to his mother's every wish.

My paternal uncle on the other hand came to America at a very early age and became increasingly fascinated with the freedom and independence American males possessed. His acculturation into American society convinced him not only to disassociate himself from the practice of sampua marriage, but also to disclaim the absolute mores of filial piety. This recalcitrant behavior led eventually to his departure from the patriarchal "big family". Had he remained and submitted to a sampua marriage, his wife would have been subjected to the same degree of subordination to her mother-in-law that my mother had experienced.

The effect of the assimilation of American ideals and lifestyles upon first-generation Chinese families in America is an increasingly individualistic development of the children. This trend tends to dilute the once strong parent-child interdependence as the children come to regard filial piety as a feudalistic system for the exploitation of the young. Nevertheless, the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law feud still serves as a focal point of the web of status and authority roles explicitly defined in the traditional Chinese kinship system.

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