

Evolution of Marital and Family Systems and Family Relations from the Perspective of the “Fertility System”

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ABSTRACT

Fei Xiaotong pointed out that, from the observable perspective of human society, the fertility system manifests as a series of institutions within marriage and family. “In order to fulfill the function of social reproduction, a series of social institutions such as marriage, family, and kinship emerged, collectively referred to as the ‘fertility system,’ which encompasses the two aspects of reproduction and nurturing, essential activities for maintaining the existence of the group.” Marriage, family, kinship, and other institutional frameworks ensure the completion of reproduction, guaranteeing the continuity of the human species, constituting fundamental and universal systems within human society. When discussing the functions of the reproductive system, Fei Xiaotong adopts the fundamental concept of his mentor Malinowski, that social institutions originate from human needs. However, regarding whether the marital and family system satisfies human biological needs or social needs, he puts forward a viewpoint different from Malinowski’s. This article also discusses the changes in Chinese marriage and family from the perspectives of the evolving social institutions of marriage and family, and the dynamics within family relationships.

KEYWORDS

Marriage; Family; Fertility System.

1. TRANSITION OF MARITAL, FAMILY AND SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

By sorting out the reforms in our country’s marriage and family institutions, gaining insight into the relationship between our country’s marriage and family social institutions and social transformations through this process of change, showcasing the changes in marriage and family as well as people’s ideological values in the context of societal change, demonstrating how the reforms in marriage and family institutions reflect the profound changes brought about by modern societal transformations [2]. However, maintaining the relative stability of family structure to ensure the effective functioning of families, promoting social integration and extension, remains the essence of marriage and family, and the thoughts and theories of Fei Xiaotong in family sociology have not changed.

1.1. The Content of Evolution

1.1.1. Traditional Marital and Family System

China’s traditional marital and family system has two forms, namely arranged marriages and mercenary marriage, along with monogamy and polygamy. “A wedding represents the merging of two lineages, with the aim of upholding family rituals and ensuring the continuation of future generations. [3]” Marriage takes family and parents at its core. “The instructions of parents, the words of matchmakers.” Marriage for two families, it is the interests of the family that play a decisive role, not the will of the individual. Increased involvement of kinship ties can to some extent strengthen the

ties of interests between two families, expanding individual responsibilities to collective responsibilities. Various connections act as stabilizers for couples, making the cost of relationship breakdown high. The practice of polygyny also aligns with Fei Xiaotong's concept of "dual-lineage nurturing." In monogamy, identifying the dual-lineage nurturing within marital relations is straightforward. Even in polygamous settings, society ensures the clarity of dual-lineage nurturing through various means. The roles of father and mother are reserved for one husband and one wife only to ensure that society's new members receive the necessary socialization for full development.

1.1.2. Contemporary Marital and Family Institutions

Looking back the past sixty years, from the promulgation of the Marriage Law in 1950 to its revision in 1980, subsequent updates in 2001, and the introduction of new judicial interpretations in 2010, one can vividly perceive the changes in the country's socioeconomic landscape [4]. For example, the provision in the 2001 Marriage Law stating that "husband and wife shall be faithful to each other" articulates the necessity for spouses to focus on love, remain loyal to emotions, and emphasizes the shared responsibility of marital entities in upholding the order of marriage and family in our nation. Furthermore, the judicial interpretations of the Marriage Law enacted in 2001, 2003, and 2008 respectively underscore the principles of monogamy, marital freedom, gender equality, and highlight the protection of individual property rights, thus aiding in achieving harmonious stability within marriage and family through contractual means.

1.2. Evolution of Marriage and Family Institutions from the Perspective of the "Fertility System"

Tradition and modernity are inseparable aspects of China's traditional marriage and family system, which has continued for thousands of years. We should pay attention to drawing reasonable elements from the traditional marriage system. China's traditional marriage system is based on a small-scale agricultural economy and encompasses various aspects such as customs, laws, and more. Originating from folk customs, the traditional marriage system was later regulated by rituals and eventually affirmed by law, with an exceptionally close combination of ethics and law. Combining China's traditional exemplary family culture and ethical morality with modern advanced legal culture is essential to maintaining family harmony and stability, ensuring the completion of nurturing tasks efficiently, facilitating the turnover of social members, ultimately safeguarding the integrity of social structure and the continuity of the race, and accomplishing the task of social succession.

2. CHANGE OF FAMILY RELATIONS

In the changing social context, the couples' relationship transitions from task cooperation to emotional harmony. However, on the other hand, it still retains Chinese cultural characteristics. Throughout the process of social change, the "feedback model" has not shifted towards Western models due to its unique cultural, economic, legal, and other foundations, remaining a distinctive feature of Chinese society. As the significance of marital relationships within the family increases, the importance of parent-child relationships has not been completely replaced but rather has undergone a certain degree of top-down shift.

2.1. Evolution of Marital Relationships

To ensure the successful fulfillment of reproductive and nurturing responsibilities, the reproductive system has employed certain methods to reconcile marital relationships. In traditional Chinese marital dynamics, emphasis was placed on economic and material cooperation, with gendered roles delineating behaviors strictly governed by established rules, fostering collaboration in economic and reproductive endeavors while relegating emotional congruence between partners to a secondary concern. Through deliberate limitations on emotional expression between genders, anchored in

principles of gender differentiation, marital relationships were predominantly oriented towards economic and reproductive domains, thereby securing family stability for the completion of nurturing tasks. In modern times, advancements in production technologies and the socialization of household labor have alleviated marital responsibilities in child-rearing and economic labor, warranting a focus on emotional fulfillment. Shifting from materialistic and economic cooperation, contemporary marital relations emphasize emotional harmony and relational dynamics. Yan Yunxiang, through ethnographic research in rural Heilongjiang province, elucidated the evolving emotional dynamics among family members post-revolution, with spousal relationships at the forefront, signaling a growing emphasis on individual happiness and interpersonal emotional connections.

2.2. Evolution of Parent-Child Relations

In one aspect of parent-child relations, the nurturing obligations of parents towards their offspring are determined and structured by the enduring needs of humans, exhibiting a cultural universality shared by both Eastern and Western societies. However, in another facet of parent-child relations, disparities exist between Eastern and Western cultures regarding the filial responsibility of offspring towards their parents. Western parent-child relations follow a relay model, where providing for parents is not an obligatory duty for children. In contrast, in China, the feedback model emphasizes filial piety as an indisputable duty of children towards their parents, backed by ethical and legal frameworks. Despite empirical evidence and the findings of numerous scholars, the feedback model remains a predominant characteristic of Chinese society [5].

3. MARITAL AND FAMILY CHANGES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE “FERTILITY SYSTEM”

Fei Xiaotong’s exploration of the essence of marriage and family, considering reproduction as the fundamental principle to satisfy the societal structural needs and anticipating the forms of its realization, not only accurately elucidates the phenomena of marriage and family in traditional societies but also provides significant insights into understanding the diversification observed in contemporary marital and familial domains. Consequently, his theories on marriage and family retain considerable explanatory power in contemporary society.

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