

How The Chinese Think about the Family: The 'Family' in Chinese Family Firms*

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Introduction

This paper rests upon the anthropological proposition: it is not that all cultures have families but that all families have cultures. That is, the family as a social institution is symbolically constituted according to a cultural scheme, which is not the only possible one. Hence, families vary with cultures. It follows that the family in different cultural contexts cannot simply be considered as possessing a common cross-cultural structure, which is also to say that the family cannot be understood as an abstract, general, and culture-free concept. The major implication of this insight for the study of family businesses is that particular attention should be paid to the cultural specificity of the family because the cultural characteristics of the family specify the character, form, and nature of familial impacts on family firms.

Understanding the cultural specificity of family 'require[s] the submission of the analyst, the knowing scientific subject, to the arrangement of the culture's specific characteristics' (Sahlins 2000: 21). The analyst needs to locate other people's family practices in their own context and understand them 'as positional values in a field of their own cultural relationships, rather than appreciate [them] in terms of intellectual and moral judgement of our making' (Sahlins 2000: 21). This

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methodological position prescribes us to suspend our own judgements 'in order to situate the practices at issue in the historical and cultural order that [make] them possible' (Sahlins 2000: 21). I learn from Clifford Geertz (1974) and Sherry B. Ortner (1973) that the best way to avoid imposing our own intellectual and moral judgements on other people we study is to focus on the key symbols related to the cultural phenomena at issue because these symbols can help reveal the cultural specificity of the people. My examination of Chinese kinship therefore focuses on several key native kinship concepts.

I make all these points in this paper by examining the cultural specificity of the Chinese family through several key native terms pertinent to Chinese kinship: *zong*, *fang/jia-zu*, *qi*, and *jia* (terms which are defined below). I argue that Chinese kinship is characterised by four features. Firstly, Chinese kinship is defined as what Sahlins (2013) calls 'mutuality of being' in the sense that Chinese kinsmen (please feel free to read it as 'kinwomen') are mutually intrinsic to each other's existence, which further helps clarify not only why the honor a son achieves can also be shared by his father and all his ancestors, but also why a son is entitled to the family property of his father and all his ancestors. Secondly, Chinese kinship is constituted by procreation, filiation, and descent and thus is ascriptive. Thirdly, and as a result of the second feature, Chinese kinship—not like its counterpart in Japan where kinship can be made either genealogically or performatively—is difficult to make, postnatally and performatively. Finally, one major Chinese family value relevant to the discussion is identified: the continuity of *qi* is the most important imperative of the Chinese family, which is also to say that the interest of all other functional kin groups including *jia* is secondary to that of *qi*.

The cultural peculiarity of the Chinese family is crucial for the study of family businesses because it specifies the ways Chinese family firms are managed, passed on through succession, and divided. I show that since the Chinese consider their family firms as parts of the family's property, which is understood as a productive medium to generate wealth, they manage their family firms in the same ways they run their family. One of the major characteristics of the management of Chinese family firms is the monopoly of management power by the family head. The ascriptive nature of Chinese kinship is also shown to make the professionalisation of Chinese family firms difficult as professionalisation of family businesses, according to the paper by Chau and Wong in this special issue, is always understood as the replacement of family managers with professional managers from outside the family and the introduction of collective decision-making mechanisms. For in Chinese family firms, professional managers are invariably 'outsiders'; they can never be allowed to share power with the family head, or challenge his absolute authority. Thirdly, despite the absolute authority the family head enjoys in Chinese family firms, he cannot deny his sons the succession of the

family business, even if his sons have proven themselves to be incompetent managers of the family firm. Sons are *equally* entitled to their father's family property including his businesses. Fourthly, the equal entitlement of sons to their father's family property can easily give rise to conflict among the sons, which ultimately leads to the division of family property and the accompanying division of the family business. Finally, the major Chinese family value shapes the corporate goal of the Chinese family firm.

I am not arguing for the determination of Chinese family firms by the cultural specificity of the Chinese family. Nor do I suggest that owners of Chinese family firms are cultural robots who do not have historical agency. To say that the way Chinese family firms are managed, succeeded, and divided in everyday life of the corporate world unfolds a cultural logic of the Chinese family is not to say that the latter determines the former. I borrow Sahlins' famous metaphor to make the point:

To say that a given sentence is grammatical is not to say that the grammar determined what was said. No more than to say that a certain act was logical, made cultural sense, means that the logic determined it were done, or that other acts would not also have been logically adequate and socially empowered (Sahlins 2000: 27).

Regarding the relationship between socio-cultural order and historical agency, I take what John Comaroff and Simon Roberts suggest: 'the analytical problem in any ethnographic context is to demonstrate the relationship between the principles that constitute a sociocultural system, the ideological forms that are inscribed in them, and the modes of transaction and exchange that they potentiate' (Comaroff and Roberts 1981: 32). This suggestion implies that knowledge of the Chinese kinship order is a *prerequisite* for the understanding of the realities of Chinese family firms.

This suggestion I take as my position also helps to clarify at the outset what I do not aim to do in this paper. The paper is not intended to examine ethnographically how the specificity of the Chinese family shapes the management, succession, and division of a *particular* Chinese family firm in a particular context. The question has been tackled by the contributors of the other papers in this special issue who are more competent than I am. My goal is more moderate: I intend to explore the cultural specificity of the Chinese family and its impact on the corporate goal of the Chinese family business and the way the Chinese family firm is managed, professionalised, succeeded, and divided.

The paper is organised into four sections. In the first section, I analyze how several major native kinship concepts help clarify the Chinese kinship order. It is then followed by a synthesis of these native kinship concepts that describes what Chinese kinship is. In the third

section, I explore the ways the kinship order specifies the impacts on Chinese family firms. The concluding section briefly spells out some implications of the cultural specificity of family to the understanding of family firms.

The Chinese Kinship Order

In this section, I analyze the semantic and epistemological specificity embedded in several native terms related to Chinese kinship: *zong*, *fang/jia-zu*, *qi*, and *jia*, none of which is novel at all nor my own discovery but by putting these native terms together, we can grasp the native's point of view on kinship.¹

Zong

Zong includes all the male descendants and their wives issuing from a common male ancestor (Shiga 1967: 19). Five related features of *zong* must be stressed. First, *zong* represents primarily what Roger M. Keesing calls a 'social category,' which is '[a] category of human beings, grouped conceptually because of socially relevant features they share in common (like "men" or "warriors" or "descendants of ancestors X")' (Keesing 1975: 10; italic ours). Social categories do not refer to a particular group of people, rather, social categories 'exist in people's conceptual worlds;, they are sets we draw mental lines around in particular contexts' (Keesing 1975: 10; italic original). Hence, *zong* refers to a social category that includes the current and deceased members, as well as those yet to be born who may or may not share the same residence. It follows that *zong* knows no generational limit, and theoretically it can expand continuously as long as male descendants are produced in each generation (Shiga 1967: 20).

Second, members of a *zong* are obligated to worship their common ancestor (Shiga 1967: 21). As Shan Ting points out, *zong* literally means 'worship at an ancestral shrine' (Ting 1934: 403 cited in Chun 1996: 433). Chun suggests that 'the transmission of *tsung* [*zong*] is really

¹ We have to emphasize that most native Chinese speakers cannot fully articulate the systematic meaning of these native kinship terms when they are asked to do so because these terms appear to them as common sense. But if researchers integrate all fragmented information they collect from their field research, the kinship order embedded in these native terms can be delineated. As Chen (1986) reflects on his fieldwork experience on examining the concept of *fang* and *jia-zu*, 'when I tried to interrogate my best informants about the usages of fang and chia-tsu, their replies were always disappointingly simple and fragmented. It seems that the use of such terms is so commonplace that they need no further explanation and hide nothing deeper than common sense.....But, once shreds and patches of information are related, a coherent picture of a kinship paradigm emerges' (Chen 1986: 63; underline original).

the transmission of certain ritual obligations which provide the basis for the institution as a whole' (Chun 1996: 433).

Third, *zong* is a major label that the Chinese use to distinguish their 'own people' (Shiga 1967: 20; 34). Members of the same *zong* are called '*ben zong*' (our *zong*), they are of 'one kind' or their 'own people', while all the affinal relatives are named '*wai yin*' (affinal relatives outside our *zong*) and are regarded generally as 'different people' (Shiga 1967: 21-22). Since the identity of all members of a *zong* is signified by the same surname in Chinese societies, people of the same surname are not allowed to marry each other (*tongxiang buhun*) as the Chinese practice exogamy at the *zong* level (Shiga 1967: 28-34). The distinction between one's 'own people' and 'different people' is further maintained by '*yi xiang bu yang*' ('Men with different surnames cannot be adopted'). Banning the adoption of 'different people' implies the exclusiveness of *zong* membership. The exclusiveness of *zong* membership can also be seen in the institution of ancestor worship. While *zong* members are obligated to worship their ancestors, ancestors cannot receive worship from non-*zong* members (Shiga 1967: 34). As van der Sprenkel (1962: 152) points out, '[p]eople do not sacrifice to those who are not of the same *tsu* [*zong*], and the gods do not savor the fragrance of sacrifices from those who are not of the same nature'.

Fourth, *zong* implies a patrilineal membership. Daughters are not able to inherit a *zong* status from their father; they can only acquire their *zong* membership through marriage. It follows that an unmarried daughter does not have any *zong* status (Shiga 1967: 20). Finally, the continuity of one's *zong* has overriding importance among Chinese men. Every Chinese man is under tremendous pressure to produce a son so that his *zong* can be passed on to the next generation (*chuanzong jiedai*). Because of this pressure, producing a son to continue the *zong* can also give meaning to and generate happiness for the life of Chinese men (Shiga 1967: 37).

Fang and Jia-zu

Fang and *jia-zu* are another two native terms that can shed light on how the Chinese understand kinship. Literally, *fang* refers to the bedroom of 'a married son and his wife' (Chen 1986: 55-6); it also metaphorically means 'the son himself, the son and his wife as a unit, or all his male descendants and their wives as a kin set' (Chen 1986: 64). *Jia-zu* is a combination of *jia* and *zu*. *Jia* has the same meaning as *zong*, but it also refers to a particular group of people who participate in the same household economy. I will return to the discussion of *jia* in a moment. *Zu* is a categorical notion referring to the sets of agnates and their wives (Chen 1986: 64). Taking together, *jia-zu* refers to a social category including all the male descendants and their wives of a common male

ancestor.

Underlying *fang* and *jia-zu* is the father-son relation. A son has a *fang* status within his father's *jia-zu*. The father's *jia-zu* is made up of all of his sons' *fangs*. Chen (1990: 129-139) identifies several principles from the *fang* and *jia-zu* relation. First, *fang* is a subordinate concept to *jia-zu*. That is, the *jia-zu* and *fang* relation is a relation between a whole and its part; *jia-zu* is a whole consisting of *fangs*, while *fangs* are parts of a *jia-zu*. The second is the generational principle. A man cannot have a *fang* status within his grandfather's *jia-zu*. We can only say that he has a *fang* status within his father's *jia-zu*. A hypothetical case (figure 1) can help make the point. Figure 1 shows that A's *jia-zu* includes B *fang* and C *fang*, each of which is also a *jia-zu* in relation to the sons: B is a *jia-zu* in relation to E and F, but itself (including E and F) constitutes a *fang* of A's *jia-zu*. Likewise, C is a *jia-zu* of H's *fang*, but itself (including H) forms a *fang* of A's *jia-zu*. The actual referent of *fang* and *jia-zu* depends on who is the reference point. In any case, E, F, and H cannot be considered as constituting three *fangs* of A's *jia-zu*.

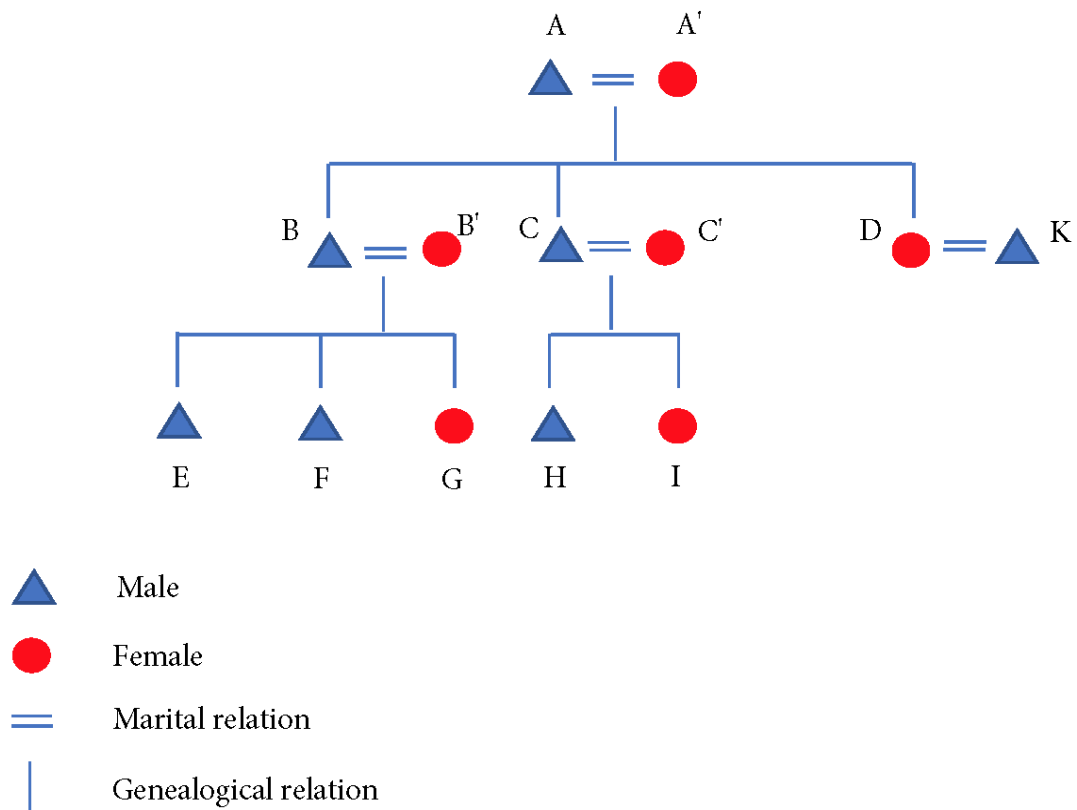


Figure 1.

Thirdly, and related to the second principle, there is no generational limit for *fang* or *jia-zu*. A *jia-zu* can include a minimum of two generations (for example, B's *jia-zu*) but, depending on which ancestor is chosen as a reference point, it can also expand to cover many generations. If we take A as the reference point, his *jia-zu* consists of three

generations; if B is rendered the reference point, his is a two generation *jia-zu*. *Fangs*, however, cannot exist by themselves as their existence automatically implies that there is a *jia-zu* above them.

The fourth principle is the differentiation among brothers. Each son automatically has a *fang* status within his father's *jia-zu* and hence the number of *fangs* within a *jia-zu* depends on the number of sons the father produces. For example, B has two sons so his *jia-zu* includes two *fangs* (E and F *fangs*), while C's *jia-zu* has only one *fang* (H *fang*). Each son however maintains a unique filiation with his father and the son-father filiation of each son cannot be subsumed under a collective father-son relation. It follows that each *fang* is equal within the father's *jia-zu* but independent from each other. E and F, for example, constitute two equal *fangs* within B's *jia-zu* but the two *fangs* are independent from each other. The equality among brothers and their independence from each other are reflected in the equal division of their father's *jia-zu* property. This principle is also applicable to those who are born from different mothers.

The fifth principle is the transmission of *fang/jia-zu* membership through patrilineal lines. A daughter has no *fang* status within her father's *jia-zu* so in our hypothetical case above, G and I do not constitute a *fang* within their father's *jia-zu*. But daughters can become a member of their husband's *fang/jia-zu* through marriages. D, for example, has no *fang* status within A's *jia-zu*. She can only become a member of her husband's (K) *jia-zu* upon marriage. Finally, the continuity of a man's *fang* line is given supreme importance which levies great pressure on a Chinese man to produce a son.

Underlying *zong* and *fang/jia-zu* is the same patrilineal principle: members of a *jia-zu* or *fang* belong to the same *zong*. For example, in figure 1, A and his wife (A'), B and his wife (B'), C and his wife (C'), E, F, and H belong to A's *zong*, while they are also members of A's *jia-zu*. Daughters can only acquire their *fang/jia-zu* or *zong* membership by marriages. More importantly, all of these terms reveal the overriding importance to the continuity of the patrilineal line (*zong* and *fang*). But if we compare *zong* with *fang/jia-zu*, we can see the different emphasis of these concepts: *zong* emphasizes the *sameness* of its members while *fang/jia-zu* stress the father-son *hierarchy* and the differentiation and equality among sons of the same father.

Qi

Kinship relations and categories embedded in the above native terms are reproduced in the way Chinese understand birth. Human beings are perceived in Chinese societies as consisting of two major parts: *qi*²

² There are variations in the transliteration of this native Chinese term 'qi'. I use the Standard Chinese pinyin here. Scholars whom I quote in this paper such as

(breath) and *xing* (corporeal form). While both parts are essential to the formation of a human being, it is *qi* that determines the nature and character of the new life. *Qi* literally means 'breath', which 'refers to the formless life itself, which is extended through the male reproductive function to sons and grandsons.' (Shiga 1978: 123). If sons inherit *qi* from their fathers, they should share the same *qi* with their fathers. Shiga (1967: 35) cited a phrase, '*fu-zhi zhi qin, fen xiang tong qi*' from a Chinese classical text, *Nan Shih Chuan*—which Allen Chun (1985: 97) translated as 'with respect to the relation of father to son, there is a distinction of (corporeal) form but a commonality of ch'i'—to characterize the father-son relation. The father and the son are two distinct corporeal forms sharing the same *qi* (*tong qi*) which Shiga called '*fu tsu t'ung ch'i*' ('share the same vital life essence between father and son') (Shiga 1967: 37; 1978:123). It follows that all of a man's brothers, as long as they are born from the same father, are also *tong qi*. This can be expanded to others with whom the father is known to share the same *qi* including the father's brothers, the father's brothers' sons, and all other patrilineal-related relatives.

A married woman obtains *qi* from her husband; her relationship with the husband is also *tong qi* and by extension she shares the same *qi* with all other patrilineal-related relatives of her husband. Hence, all the male descendants and their wives issuing from a common ancestor are *tong qi*, which is also to say that all the members of a *zong* share the same *qi*. Since the members of a *zong*, as mentioned above, are also those of the same *jia-zu*, members of the same *jia-zu* are also *tong qi*. Members of A's *jia-zu* in figure 1, for example, can be seen as *tong qi*. Shiga argued that *tong qi* between the father and the son, the husband and the wife, and among sons from the same father defines the membership of *tsung-tsu* (*zong-zu*) as a *genus* of persons who share the same *qi* (Shiga 1967: 37). Shiga's *tsung-tsu* is equivalent to Chen's *jia-zu*, referring to the focal ancestor and all his male descendants and their wives.

Jia

The last native term that I am going to discuss here is *jia*. As mentioned above, *jia* can refer to a group of people who participate in the same household economy. Shiga argues that the household economy of Chinese *jia* is characterised by 'common living, common budget' (*t'ung chü kung ts'ai*³), which can be understood as equivalent to a 'joint account' (Shiga

Chen (1986), Chun (1985) and Shiga (1978) used another pinyin system, and the term becomes 'ch'i'. I will follow their transliteration of the term when I quote them. However, in my own discussion, I will use the term 'qi'.

³ Shiga (1978) used another pinyin system to transliterate the phrase '*tongju gongcai*' as '*t'ung chü kung ts'ai*.' I will follow their transliteration of the phrase when we quote them. However, in my own discussion, I will use the phrase

1978: 113). As Shiga points out, 'the fruits of the labor of the several members go into a common account serving all of the members without exceptions' (Shiga 1978: 112). Each *jia* member is required to submit all his or her income to *jiazhang* (head of the *jia*, usually the senior male member of *fang/jia-zu*) who then allocates money to *jia* members to cover the daily expenses regardless of their financial contributions to the *jia*.

Underlying *jia* is the idea of *tong qi*. A typical *jia* usually includes the father, the mother, the son, and others who are known to share the same *qi* with their father. Since *jia* members obtain their *qi* from the father (*jiazhang*), their incomes should also go to the father first who will then allocate portions of the financial resources to them. *Jia* could also include those who are not *tong qi* with, but dependent on, the father such as unmarried female descendants (including daughters and sisters), their uxorial husbands, or even servants. Thus, *jia* consist of members who are *tong qi* and the dependent members. The latter can have a share of the *jia's* incomes because of their relationship with the *jiazhang*.

The accumulated surplus generated from the *jia* budget becomes family property (*jia chan*) (Shiga 1978: 113). Not all *jia* members, however, are entitled to family property as the transmission of family property is governed by the concept of succession (*jicheng*). *Jicheng* is a complex concept; it includes three different elements: *jisi*, *chengji*, and *chengye*. *Jisi* refers to the succession of the father's *qi* by his sons. In return, sons are required to take care of their father when he is old. They also take over their father's obligations to worship the ancestors after their father's death (*chengji*) (Shiga 1967: 113). As a result of *jisi* and *chengji*, only sons are entitled to the family property managed by their father (*chengye*) (Shiga 1967: 117).

Chengji and *chengye* in fact are the two consequences of what Shiga calls '*fu tsu t'ung ch'i*'. Since the son succeeds his father's *qi* (*jisi*), he is also entitled to manage the *jia* and its property and to take on the obligations of ancestor worship (Shiga 1967: 113). In other words, *jisi*, *chengji*, and *chengye* are three inter-related elements of *jicheng*, none of which alone can be taken to mean succession in Chinese societies (Shiga 1967: 119) as the concept of *jicheng* presupposes *jisi*, *chengji*, and *chengye* (Shiga 1967: 118). Among these three elements, *jisi* is the most fundamental one as it is the sufficient and necessary condition of *chengji* and *chengye*: in order to *chengji* and *chengye*, one has first to succeed his father's *qi*.

'*tongju gongcai*'

What Chinese Kinship Is?

Taking *zong*, *fang/jia-zu*, *qi*, and *jia* together, we can see how the Chinese understand kinship.⁴ Since a son inherits *qi* from his father, the father is the origin of his son's life, which is also to say that a son is the extension of his father's life (Shiga 1967: 35). All his brothers, who are the sons from the same father, should also be seen as the extension of their father's life. In other words, the father and all his sons are, albeit in distinctive forms, inhabiting the same 'self'. Thus, the Chinese idea of kinship is what Sahlins (2013) identifies as part of the 'mutuality of being.' The term refers to 'people who are intrinsic to one another's existence—thus "mutual person (s)," "life itself," "intersubjective belong," "transbodily being," and the like' (Sahlins 2013: 2). In Chinese societies, the father and the son are considered as being part of each other: '[f]or whatever the one is, the other is; and whatever the one has, the other has' (Hsu 1971: 63). As Sahlins quoted Carsten as saying, they 'are people who live each other's lives and die each other's deaths. To the extent they lead common lives, they partake of each other's suffering and joys, sharing one another's experiences even as they take responsibility for and feel the effects of each other's acts' (Sahlins 2013: 28). A father can partake of his sons' honor in Chinese societies as evidenced in the idea of '*guangzong yaozu*' (brighten and shine the ancestors). In order to *guangzong yaozu*, Chinese sons have to *churen toudi* (stand out above others) which can best be realized by one's success in academic pursuit. The honor generated from academic success however is not merely the son's personal achievement; it can also be transferred back not only to his father but also to all of his ancestors. Inasmuch as the latter can share the former's honor, the personal success of a son in Chinese societies can brighten and shine upon his ancestors. Understanding Chinese kinship as 'mutuality of being' also makes intelligible the way that family property, especially the landed estates of the founding ancestor of a *jia-zu*, descends to sons, grandsons, great grandsons, and the male descendants who are yet to be born.

Secondly, and more importantly, if Chinese kinship is constituted by the substance: *qi*, we can say that Chinese kinship is constituted by relations of procreation, filiation, and descent. We however are not arguing for a biological understanding of kinship in Chinese societies. Nor are we suggesting that 'the genitor and genetrix of a given Ego and their other offspring' (Sahlins 2013: 65) embedded in *qi* are primary. The notion of *qi* is symbolically constituted and thus cultural as it 'involves a differential valuation of the contributions of the genitor and genetrix' (Sahlins 2013: 3) so that the Chinese man plays a decisive role in

⁴ I am fully aware that the Chinese kinship order embedded in these native terms is formulated in particular historical, ideological, and socio-political contexts. For a more detailed discussion, please refer to Allen Chun (1996).

determining the character of his sons and, in this respect, women are irrelevant. Such a differentiated valuation of the father and the mother in determining the nature and character of the son is itself arbitrary and thus symbolic, which testifies to the fact that the Chinese idea of procreation, not unlike its counterparts in other societies, is a thoroughly cultural phenomenon. Given the fact that the principles embedded in the substance of *qi* are consistent with those underlying the notions of *zong* and *fang/jia-zu*, we argue that Chinese kinship relations and categories—*zong* and *fang/jia-zu*—are reproduced in procreation. Rather than being the biological base of kinship relations, birth, to paraphrase Sahlins (2012), is the metaphor for Chinese kinship.

Despite the fact that Chinese kinship is a thoroughly symbolic-cum-cultural phenomenon, genealogical relations are utilized culturally to define Chinese kinship, which makes kinship relations ascriptive. This is the third characteristic of Chinese kinship: the ascriptive nature of Chinese kinship renders the postnatal performative kinship difficult in Chinese societies. As mentioned above, non-*tung qi* people can become a member of *jia*. For example, a daughter, as a dependent member of her father's *jia*, is entitled to the allocation of the *jia*'s financial resource to cover her expenses, while at the same time she is required to contribute her incomes to the joint account. She may also receive a dowery from her father when she gets married. But such a dowery cannot be understood as evidence of *chengye* because the daughter does not share the same *qi* with her father. She therefore does not have the right to her father's family property; her dowery is at her father's behest (Shiga 1967: 124-5). In other words, participating in the same domestic life does not qualify the daughter as a member of her father's *zong* or *fang/jia-zu*.

The ascriptive nature of Chinese kinship will become more obvious if we compare it with Japanese kinship. One of the major characteristics of Japanese *ie* (which literally means family) is that non-genealogically related persons can be incorporated into Japanese *ie* as formal members. This feature of *ie* has been noted by sociologists and anthropologists researching Japanese kinship. As Zenkei Hasegawa (1991) points out, Kizaemon Ariga argues that rather than a pure kinship organization, Japanese *ie* should be understood as a corporate group defined by co-residence and a common *ie* economy. The corporateness of Japanese *ie*, in turn, explains why non-kin persons such as servants can be incorporated into Japanese *ie*. This is because they reside in the *ie* and fully participate in the domestic life of the *ie*. Seiichi Kitano disagrees with Ariga, arguing that *ie* by definition should be seen as a kinship group. Non-kin persons are able to become full members of *ie* because they are subjected to the same authority of the head of *ie* as other kin-related members are (Hasegawa 1991: 55- 67). Other scholars suggest that Japanese *ie* be understood as a unit of rights and duties. For example, Zenkei Hasegawa (1991) argues that Japanese *ie* cannot be defined either

as a kinship group or an economic household. Instead, it should be conceived as a unit of a bundle of rights and duties. Hence, Japanese *ie* is like a *kabu* (share). In fact, people in some parts of rural Japan in the premodern period adopted the term '*ie kabu*' to refer to *ie* (Hasegawa 1991: 72).

Understood as such, the succession of Japanese *ie* did not necessarily take place among kin. In fact, when a successor within the *ie* could not be found, outsiders were frequently incorporated into the *ie* for succession purposes. Sons might even be passed over to succeed the *ie* in favor of an outsider who was not blood-related but more competent. This practice was neither rare nor considered improper as long as the new successor was able to ensure the prosperity and continuity of the *ie*.

Due to the fact that in Japan outsiders may be incorporated and considered as kin by being adopted into the *ie* either as 'sons', 'daughters' or in the case of adopted sons-in-law as 'adopted sons' who marry their daughter, we can say that in Japan '[w]hatever is construed genealogically may also be constructed socially' (Sahlins 2013: 2). I take the risk: in Japanese society the active participation in the domestic life of *ie* is more likely the means of kin relationships, but kinship is notably built into the genealogical relations in Chinese societies.

Chinese Family Values

The constitution of Chinese kinship by procreation gives rise to one major Chinese family value: the continuity of *qi* is the most important imperative of the Chinese family. *Qi* flows from the father to his son who, once he becomes a father, passes the same *qi* on to his sons who will then relay the same *qi* to his male descendants. It is through this successive father-son filiation that a Chinese attains his eternity because if there is at least one single son born in every generation, the *qi* of the focal ancestor can last forever. That is why producing a son is vital to Chinese men as failing to do so means that not only his own life but also the life of his ancestors will be terminated.

Given the overriding importance of the continuity of *qi*, the interest of all other functional kin groups including *jia* is secondary to that of *qi* as we can see in *kuo-fang* (agnatic adoption) practice. As mentioned above, *zong* membership is exclusive and when adoption is necessary, the adoptee should be chosen from the same *zong* otherwise he cannot succeed his adopted father's *qi*. According to Chen (1986: 174; 1990: 183-184), *kuo-fang* practice is to rearrange genealogically the adoptee's filiation from his original *fang* to the adopted father's *fang* within the same *jia-zu* (Chen 1986: 174; 1990: 183), which is also to say that *kuo-fang* practice may not require the change of the adoptee's *jia* membership as *kuo-fang* practice is just a rearrangement of genealogical affiliation of the adoptee concerned. Figure 2 is taken from Chen's chapter (Chen 1990:

183) to help exemplify *kuo-fang* practice. A is not able to produce a son and his brother B has two sons, C and D. B agrees to arrange his son C to become A's adopted son, in the course of which C's *fang* affiliation is changed from B's *fang* to A's *fang*. Chen emphasizes that B will not need A's consent as the *kuo-fang* arrangement usually is carried out after A's death. Chen argues that B's decision to arrange *kuo-fang* for his brother A is motivated by the pressing desire of continuing his brother's *fang* line. It is of interest to notice that the adopted son C does not need to change his *jia* membership – he can still live in his original father B's *jia* because the arrangement of *kuo-fang* is genealogical, which does not necessarily require the change of *jia* membership (Chen 1990: 182-4). In fact, A's *jia* had vanished when A passed away. Obviously, *kuo-fang* is to continue the deceased brother A's *fang* rather than his *jia*, which highlights the Chinese preference of the continuity of *fang/jia-zu* over that of *jia* (Chen 1986: 174-191).

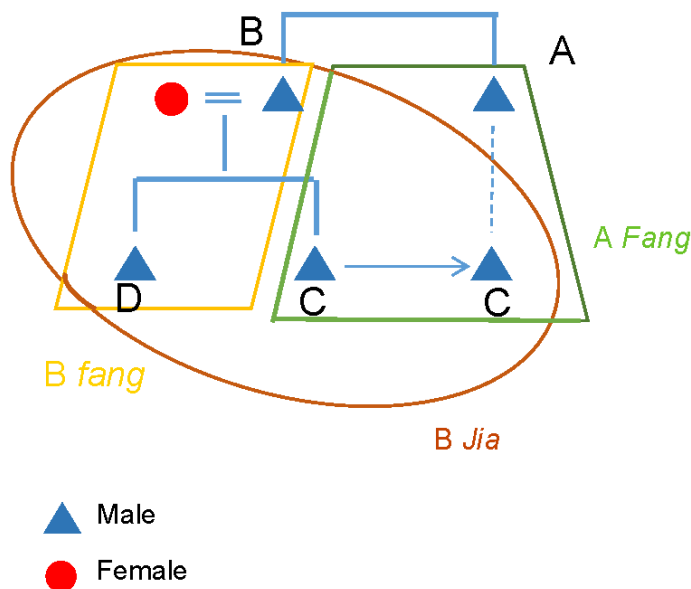


Figure 2. A Case of Kuo-Fang Practice

Some Implications of the Cultural Specificity of Chinese Family to the Chinese Family Business

In the section that follows, I will demonstrate how the Chinese kinship order *specifically* affects Chinese family businesses. Schurmann (1956: 509) observes that the Chinese understand property not as wealth but as a productive medium to acquire wealth. As *jia* is a 'joint account' through which the Chinese make their living and generate their wealth, *jia* are parts of family property. Thus, the succession of the management of *jia* follows the principles embedded in the concept of *jicheng*. In the process of *jicheng*, only sons or someone who shares the same *qi* with the father

are qualified to take over the management of the *jia* from the father. One of the sons is usually selected to succeed the father's *jiazhang* position to manage the *jia* if the sons decide not to divide their *jia*.

The *jiazhang* is given the absolute power to oversee the operation of *jia*. Theoretically, and also in practice, his authority cannot be challenged. He assigns duties to members of the *jia* according to the extent of trust he has with them, which is determined by the *jiazhang's* perception of their 'closeness' to him because in the Chinese context 'closeness' is considered as positively relating to trustworthiness and loyalty. 'Closeness', to a large extent, is determined by *tong qi*. The closest set of *jia* members are people of *ben zong* because they are an extension of the *jiazhang's qi*; they must logically follow the *jiazhang's* orders because the former, as distinct forms of the *jiazhang's qi*, execute the orders *on behalf of* the latter. The second set consists of members of the *wai yin* such as daughters, sons-in-law, and other affinal relatives – for in spite of their outsider status, they are still kinwomen. It is then followed by those who have personal relationships with the *jiazhang* such as friends, classmates, and people from the same original home town as the *jiazhang*. The final set may include long-standing servants who have no relation with, but have demonstrated their loyalties to the *jiazhang* during the long stay in the *jia*. Of course, the actual members of each set and the number of sets can vary according to the circumstances, but the general rule is that people with closer relationships with the *jiazhang* will be trusted more remains firm.⁵

The differentiated ordering of social relations between the *jiazhang* and other members of *jia* reveals that the Chinese typically give primacy to people of *tong qi* that serves as a marker of 'we' and 'they'. The *jiazhang* considers people of *ben zong* as being closest to him and thus trust them the most. It is, then, followed by the 'outsider' who in turn is ranked according to the extent of 'closeness' in which *wai yin* are always considered as closer to the *jiazhang* than those who are related to the *jiazhang* by some non-kinship factors and derive their relative positions with reference to the extent of 'closeness' to the *jiazhang*. In short, an 'outsider' can never be allowed to become an 'insider' no matter how deeply he or she participates in the management of the *jia* as the status of the 'insider' is defined by procreation (*tong qi*).

The ascriptive definition of the 'insider' in the management of *jia* makes the professionalisation of Chinese family firms very difficult. Recall that a *jia* is a 'joint account' through which the Chinese make their living and generate their wealth. Likewise, since businesses or their modern version, firms, are the means to generate wealth, the Chinese not only

⁵ For a detailed description of *jia* management, please refer to *Tradition and Transformation in a Chinese Family Business* by Heung Wah Wong and Karin Ling-fung Chau (Routledge 2020).

understand but also manage firms as their *jia*. As Faure observes,

While the lineage (*tsu* or *fang*) was, from at least the sixteenth century, an instrument that was employed in land development and businesses associated with it, trading was conducted by the family (*chia*) [*jia*]. The ancestral trust might, indeed, hold shares in or lend money to the family enterprise, but the enterprise remained family-, that is, *chia*-[*jia*-]based. In a society where company law was practically non-existent, the application of kinship-related instruments to the enforcement of economic cooperation, investment and the holding of property must have been of paramount importance (Faure 1989: 348).

The paper by Wong and Chau in this issue ethnographically exemplifies Faure's observation that the *jia*zhang of the Chinese family firm they studied managed his family company as his *jia*. As the person who has absolute power in his *jia*, and also his family firm, the *jia*zhang could not tolerate his decision-making power being shared by professional managers. Nor could he accept any institutional constraints of his power according to any 'modern' organizational flow. As Wong and Chau concluded, these cultural factors undermined the attempt at professionalisation of the Chinese family firm.

Succession in Chinese Family Firms

Another feature of Chinese family businesses is that the *jia*zhang, despite his absolute power over his *jia* members, cannot deny his sons the succession rights of his family property and *jia* management. Given the idea that sons are the extension of their father's *qi*, sons are entitled to their father's family property. Likewise, the father is required to follow the principles embedded in the concept of *jicheng* when he transfers family property. Thus he cannot dispense family property to anyone who is not known as *tong qi* (Chen 1990: 156-157). In other words, the father is not allowed to dispose of his family property according to his own preferences. Property rights in Chinese families do not rest on the father because he has no absolute right to dispose of the family property based upon his own preferences (Chen 1990: 155-156). The father is only entrusted to manage the family property and allocate the income generated from the property but is not allowed to distribute the property according to his own will. It is the principle of differentiation among brothers, rather than a particular individual, that governs the division of *jia*-*zu* property (Chen 1986: 112-175).

The fact that the father cannot be considered as an individual owner of family property can also be made intelligible by understanding Chinese kinship as 'mutuality of being.' The notion of "being" in the context of kinship does not have the connotation of independent entities. As Sahlins explained,

For as argued here, “being” in a kinship sense denies the necessary independence of the entities so related, as well as the necessary substantiality and physicality of the relationship. To the contrary, the being ness of humans is not confined to singular persons. Moreover, the most famous determination of the reality of the human being—*the cogito ergo sum*—precisely by virtue of (symbolic) thinking, is radically opposed to merely material substance (*res extensa*). The same symbolic capacity is pregnant with the possibility of the mutuality of being: as, for instance, in the interchangeability of persons and standpoints in the pronouns “I” and “you” as well as other shifters (Sahlins 2013: 32; italic original).

Likewise, father and son in Chinese societies are not connected as two independent entities; they instead are the same *qi* in distinct corporeal forms. I argue that the *qi* shared between the father and the son is the genuine owner of *jia-zu* property and that the father and his sons as distinct corporeal forms of the same *qi* are entitled to the property owned by *qi*. The reason that sons cannot intervene in how their father manages the *jia-zu* property and allocates the income generated from the property before the division of *jia-zu* property is the encompassment of the son by his father. Although the father and the son share the same *qi*, they are hierarchical in the sense that sons are subordinated to their father as we can see from the abovementioned principle of the subordination of *fang* to *jia-zu*. But once the family property is passed to the son, the father no longer has the right over the property. Chinese family property lies either in the hands of the father or those of his sons (Chen 1990: 153).

The father, however, cannot deny his sons the right of managing his *jia* and, by extension, his family firm because family firms, not unlike *jia*, are considered as family property. Thus even if the son is proved incompetent in the management of his father’s family firm, the father still cannot bypass him and transfer the company to those such as the sons-in-law or professional managers who might be far more competent. Given the inevitability of some sons lacking the requisite skills, or even interest, to be good managers, failure is endemic to Chinese family firms. Thus the old Chinese saying: ‘family wealth cannot go beyond three generations’ (*fubuguo sandai*).

Sibling Conflicts and Fen-jia

Despite the fact that sons of the same father share the same *qi* and in principle their relationship is equal, conflicts among brothers, however, are not only possible but also frequent in Chinese families. As mentioned above, each son maintains a unique filiation with the father and thus in relation to their father, they are independent from each other. Wherever the family owns property, or the father holds corporate offices, a slight

discriminatory distribution of material and/or social values among brothers will easily trigger conflicts precisely because brothers are equal. Such conflicts inevitably lead to division of family property (*fen jiachan*). *Fen jiachan* usually is followed by the division of *jia* (*fen-jia*). *Fen-jia* necessarily means the father's *jia* is divided into several *jia*, each of them is headed by the son who becomes the *jiazhang* of his new *jia* where the 'common living, common budget' relationship prevails. In this event, the father's *jia* vanishes. The point I want to make here is that *fen jiachan* and *fen-jia* are built into the Chinese kinship order because these two practices are the result of the principle of differentiation among brothers embedded in the concept of *fang/jia-zu*. That is why *fen-jia* tends to be prevalent in Chinese societies.

Chinese family firms also tend to break down into several companies headed by each of the father's sons when the *fen-jia* occurs in the father's *jia*. We have to emphasize that the corporate realities of Chinese family firms are far more complex and hence they cannot simply be understood by the principle of differentiation among brothers *as if* the reality of every Chinese family firm is prescribed by the Chinese kinship order. As we can see from Lai's paper in this special issue, the owner of the restaurant Lai studied was able to maintain his *jia* even though one of his sons decided to leave the restaurant. The son even agreed later to return to his father's restaurant when his brother requested him to do so. But without the knowledge of the Chinese kinship order, we cannot explain the realities of Chinese family firms as the explanation itself requires us to locate the realities within the logic of the Chinese kinship system as 'the manner in which we comprehend everyday social activity and patterns of relationship depends on it' (Comaroff and Robert 1981: 33).

The Corporate Goal of the Chinese Family Firm

The major value of the Chinese business family also shapes the corporate goals of the Chinese family business. As mentioned above, the Chinese attach the overriding importance to the continuity of their *qi* and the prosperity of their *fang/jia-zu*. They do not hesitate to sacrifice the interest and continuity of their *jia* for the sake of their *fang/jia-zu*. In fact, *jia* is destined to vanish as we can see from the event of *fen-jia*. In this event, the father's *jia* as a joint account will become extinct after the father decides to divide his *jia* and his sons establish their own *jia*. However, what is divided in *fen-jia* is the father's *jia* not his *fang/jia-zu*. The father's *fang/jia-zu* will remain intact in the sense that the father is still considered as the father and the sons still his sons after *fen-jia* (Chen 1990: 153).

Likewise, the *jiazhang* of the Chinese family firm would choose to sacrifice the interest and continuity of his family firm (*jia*) for the sake of

his *fang/jia-zu* if necessary. We therefore cannot assume *a priori* that maximisation of financial return is the only and most important corporate goal of the Chinese family firm. I of course am not arguing that financial return is not important to the owner of the Chinese family firm but if there is a conflict between the interest of the *jiazhang's fang/jia-zu* and that of his family firm (*jia*), he tends to prefer the interest of the former to that of the latter.

Concluding Remark

This paper argues that the family as a social institution is symbolically constituted according to a cultural scheme which is not the only possible one. It follows that different cultures possess different familial cultures. Thus families cannot be treated as the same cross-culturally. Nor is the family an abstract, ahistorical, or acultural social institution. The implications of this simple insight to the study of family businesses are not trivial. Management scientists tend to understand family firms as a social arena where the family system shapes the business system. The crucial task for them therefore should be to explore *how* the former shapes the latter and *vice versa*. As the character, form, and nature of the impact the family system has on the business system are *specified* by the cultural idea of 'the family', culturally different family practices can result in very different configurations of family business. In short, the cultural specificity of family is the *prerequisite* for the understanding of the corporate reality of family businesses and therefore we cannot afford ignoring the question: what does the family in a particular cultural context mean?

The opposite is also true: the idea of firms varies with cultures. The character and form of the effect of family businesses on business families is also specified by the cultural idea of firms, which is not the only one possible. In short, the categories of business families and family businesses are culturally heterogenous and their cultural specificity requires anthropological scrutiny, but this topic will require a separate paper.

The major methodological implication of this paper is that we cannot group the families in different cultural contexts into one general, abstract, and ahistorical Family concept because there is no such general concept. Inasmuch as '[t]here is a logical conflict between asserting that, say, "religion," "marriage," or "property" are empirical universals and giving them very much in the way of specific content, for to say that they are empirical universals is to say that they have the same content, and to say that they have the same content is to fly in the face of the undeniable fact that they do not' (Geertz 1973: 39). The same goes for 'family'. The cultural specificity of family testifies that 'family', if we define it by specific content, is not empirically universal unless we are prepared to

define 'family' in the most general and abstract terms which can only be 'empty or near-empty categories' (Geertz 1973: 39). Hence, the 'family' in family businesses is always relative to its cultural context it and should be studied as such. We therefore cannot ignore the cultural context and treat culturally different families the same and make generalisations. By the same token, family businesses can only be studied in a specific family culture!

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* This paper is a substantial expansion of my previous work (Wong 2015; 2017; 2020). Parts of this paper are adopted from this work for different purposes and in different contexts. I apologize for the repetitions.

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