

Chinese Family Religion and World Religion

Yeo Yew Hock

Abstract

This article examines the practice of filial piety and ancestor worship as practised by the traditional Chinese people. It tries to understand and enunciate the main principles that underlie this family oriented religion. The careful maintenance of genealogies and moral instruction of children with traditions of their forbears, help to keep the religious sentiments alive, reinforce the lineage and family solidarity. The ancestral cult is basic to Chinese religion, it is the one universal institution which has moulded Chinese society into its traditional form. Its interests, responsibilities, and loyalties tended to be focused inwards to the family and lineage rather than outward to the public realm. Although the Chinese people have never denied that there is an afterlife, they have always viewed it in the context of ancestral lineage.

The major strength of the family religion lies in its strong family unity wherever it is practised. Some Chinese philosophers have stated that to love thy neighbour, one should start with the love of one's parents. But it seems that the Chinese religion throughout the ages has developed into a very elaborate inwardly focused family religion with deification of the ancestors.

The family as an institution occupies a high place in Bahá'í beliefs. However, in contrast to the Chinese religion, the Bahá'í Faith is non-hierarchical and more consultative in its approach towards family relationships. The subservient role of women in the traditional Chinese family is also contrary to the Bahá'í principle of the equality of men and women. This paper will critically examine the points of agreement and divergence between the Chinese religion and the Bahá'í Faith, with the purpose of discovering how the two might be brought closer together.

Introduction

The family has been the most dominant and resilient social institution throughout the history of the Chinese people. The family is of course important in other cultures and closely connected with religion, with its sacrament of marriage, its commandment to honour parents, and its duty to raise children in moral instruction. But the religious character of the Chinese family goes far beyond these aspects. This character, developing out of so-called "ancestor worship," makes religion among the Chinese, more a family matter, rather than one based on individual choice. The family is the primary concern, while the individual and communal matters are secondary. The family may be likened to a kinship corporation. In order to understand the Chinese people's psyche, it is imperative to study the principles underlying this particular ancient form of religion.

The Chinese people referred to throughout this paper are the traditional people of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore and other parts of Asia. Although many of the original customs and religious rites and rituals of the family religion have been modified or have even disappeared because of Western influences, the basic practices and philosophy are still well known and ever present in the psyche of the Chinese people. It is significant that the Chinese civilisation is the oldest extant and most continuous of those civilisations still remaining. The practice of the family religion is a contributing factor to the enduring nature of the Chinese civilisation.

By comparing and contrasting the practices of the Chinese family religion to the Bahá'í Faith, we hope to foster a better understanding of the strengths, weaknesses, feelings, values and ethos of the Chinese people. Unlike the Bahá'í Faith which is a revealed religion, the Chinese family religion does not have a Prophet Founder. The main proponent is Confucius (551-479 BC) who is considered more a distinguished Teacher and Philosopher, and who stated explicitly in his writings that he was not a Prophet. "As to being a divine sage or even a Good Man, far be it for me to make any such claim"¹. He added, "A Divine Sage I cannot hope

¹ *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. Arthur Waley, New York: Vintage Books, 1971, 7:37

ever to meet, the most I can hope for is to meet a true gentleman."² However, the family religion was in existence long before the 6th Century BC when Confucius lived.

The Family and God

For the Chinese, the hierarchy of the members of the family is clearly delineated, and on which is based social protocol, customs and religious rites. At the head of the household lineage is the ancestor, then comes the grandfather, then the father, followed by the eldest son. They are placed in descending order of reverence, respect and authority.

In the Bahá'í Faith, the individual's recognition of the "Oneness of the Lord" precedes the family in spiritual significance. The family is also a very important institution in the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'u'lláh said:

The fruits of the tree of existence are trustworthiness, loyalty, truthfulness and purity. After the recognition of the Oneness of the Lord, exalted be He, the most important of all duties is to have due regard for the rights of one's parents. This matter has been mentioned in all the Books of God.³

For the Bahá'í, there cannot be a choice between the Family and the Bahá'í Faith, choosing the family is equivalent to choosing the Bahá'í Faith. Family relationships, like all other relationships, must be ultimately founded in spiritual ties. Shoghi Effendi wrote:

"Deep as are Family ties, we must always remember that the spiritual ties are far deeper; they are everlasting and survive death, whereas physical ties, unless supported by spiritual bonds, are confined to this life."⁴

² *The Analects of Confucius*, 7:26

³ *Family Life*, compiled by Research Dept. of the Universal House of Justice. Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Oakham, England, 1982, p 1

⁴ *Family Life*, p 21

Ancestor Worship

Ancestor worship is usually a practice associated with more primitive cultures, and often a background element to more sophisticated ones. However, for the Chinese it has been the very basis of their "high culture" throughout history. There is evidence of the central role of the family religion in Chinese culture since 1,000 BC, during the Shang or Yin dynasty. The study of the early practice of oracle bones shows us clearly how the religious system of the most ancient age in China was based on ancestor worship.

The oracle bones were used as instruments of divination. The diviner smoothed off the surface of a tortoise-shell or cattle scapula and bore into this surface a series of concave depressions. He then scratched into the reverse surface a question the king wished to put to the supernatural powers. Touching a red-hot poker to the cavity beside the inscribed question, the diviner produced cracks in the bone, which he then interpreted as the response. The answer was noted down, and the confirmation that the answer had been correct was often added to maintain the credibility of the oracle. From a detailed study of such questions and answers, according to Tung Tso-pin, a leading authority on the subject, he concluded that despite their other religious beliefs "it was still ancestor worship that held the most important position in the religious life of the Yin people."⁵

However, ancestor worship is not just the ritual observances of individuals, it is also the root from which the main trunk of the family lineage tree with its many family branches grow.

Confined to Kinship Group

The first point to note about ancestor worship is that it is narrowly confined to the kinship group (also called the *tsu* or family tree). According to Confucius "Sacrifice to spirits which are not those of one's

⁵ Tung Tso-pin, *An Interpretation of the Ancient Chinese Civilisation*, Chinese Association for the United Nations, Taipei, 1952 p 19.

own dead is [mere] flattery."⁶ Ancestor worship is therefore instrumental in reinforcing family cohesion and lineage. In such a family cult, the dead ancestor's personality continues to have an influence on the family and on the eldest son long after he is dead. The assumption is also that there is the possibility of contact between dead and living family members. The original relationships remain in full force despite the death of a senior. The love and fear of the son for the father is increased by the son's belief in the father's continuing presence in spiritual form. In this way, many of the ancestors are deified.

In contrast, the Bahá'í Faith extends allegiance from the family to the service of the human family. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said:

"When you love a member of your family or a compatriot, let it be with a ray of the Infinite Love! Let it be in God, and for God! Wherever you find the attributes of God love that person, whether he be of your family or of another."⁷

Family Lineage System and the Role of Women

The Chinese word for family lineage is *Tsu* (or tree). It refers to the male descendants of a common ancestor, bearing the same surname, and includes their wives and children. As the *Tsu* is patrilineal, the families of wives are excluded. A woman marries into her husband's lineage and her relationship with her father's lineage becomes minimal. The term for the women's lineage is "outside-*tsu*" or "outside relatives."

For the traditional Chinese, the role of the woman is inferior to that of the man as the attention of the Chinese family is focused on the male heir. Marriage is looked upon as a means of perpetuating this all-important end. If she cannot fulfil this duty then the husband is allowed by his parents to take a concubine to try and procreate the male heir. The

⁶ *The Confucian Analects*, trans. James Legge, 2d ed., Oxford, 1892, I.24.1.

⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, 11th ed. Bahá'í Publishing Trust, London, England, 1969, p 38

women's rights are few. Priority of education is also given to the males in the family and often women are not accorded an education.

In the Bahá'í Faith, men and women have equal rights⁸. They are likened to the two wings of a bird, where mankind represents the bird. Just as the bird cannot fly without its two wings being balanced, so the equality of men and women is necessary for humanity to make progress. Also in the Bahá'í Faith, the education of daughters takes precedence over the sons, as the woman is considered to be the first teacher of the child in the family.⁹

Status of Ancestors

During the Chou dynasty, the ancestors of the ruling house are pictured as dwelling "on high" in some sort of close association with, and subordinate to, the Supreme Ruler in Heaven (*T'ien*). From this position they derive their power over their descendants. It is believed that they could intercede with *T'ien* to send down blessings or calamities:

"It is not that our former kings will not assist us, their descendants. It is just that Your Majesty is dissolute and cruel, and is thereby bringing about his own ruin. Therefore Heaven rejects us."¹⁰

"The recorder then [wrote] the prayer on wooden strips. It said, your first grandson So-and-So has met with a severe illness. If you three Kings are in fact obligated [to

⁸ see 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p 160

⁹ *The Kitab-I-Aqdas*, Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa 1992, note 76, p199-200

¹⁰ Hsi Pai K'an Li, chapter entitled "The Earl of the West Slays [the Prince of] Li", *Shu Ching (The Book of Documents)*, trans. Bernhard Karlgren, Stockholm, 1950, 55/5-10; Scripture of Archaic Historical Documents. These are documents purporting to record words and deeds of ancient rulers and ministers from the legendary Sage King Yao to the early Chou dynasty.

present] a royal son to Heaven, let *T'ien* be substituted for the person of So-and-So."¹¹

In some respects the practice of praying to and offering assistance to the souls of dead relatives is similar to the Bahá'í belief in the power of prayer. It is believed that the prayers of the Concourse on High (that is, those pure souls that are traditionally believed to go to Heaven) can answer our prayers and bless us in this world.

"It is seemly that the servant should, after each prayer, supplicate God to bestow mercy and forgiveness upon his parents. Thereupon God's call will be raised; 'Thousands upon thousands of what thou hast asked for thy parents shall be thy recompense!' Blessed is he who remembereth his parents when communing with God. There is, verily, no God but Him, the Mighty, the Well-Beloved."¹²

"There are certain sacred duties on children toward parents, which duties are written in the Book of God, as belonging to God. The (children's) prosperity in this world and the Kingdom depends upon the good pleasure of parents, and without this they will be in manifest loss."¹³

Role of Lineage

A major difference between Chinese and Western families is the vital role of lineage in the Chinese system. In the West, the family nucleus typically splits off from the patrilineal stem. The ancestors precede us biologically,

¹¹ Chin Teng, chapter entitled, "The Metal-Strapped Depository", *Shu Ching (The Book of Documents)*, trans. Bernhard Karlgren, Stockholm, 1950, 27/6; Scripture of Archaic Historical Documents.

¹² *Selections from the Writings of the Bab*, compiled by Research Dept. of the Universal House of Justice, Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa, 1976, p 94

¹³ *Tablets of Abdu'l-Bahá Abbas*, Bahá'í Publishing Committee, New York 1930, p 262-3

but not socially. Among the Chinese, families typically remain attached to their lineage and are organically parts of a larger functioning whole. The lineage with its families might be more or less cohesive, depending on various economic and social factors. The family lineage system is rooted in a single founding ancestor. From this individual, down through the eldest son of each generation, a family line is perpetuated for many generations. This lineage system may last for several hundred years.

The lineage structure is a powerful tool in determining hierarchy and enshrining order in the extended family. It places each individual in a specified position with regards to all other relatives, according to generation and collateral distance. These relative positions are not only indicated by kinship terms but are strikingly exemplified in the degrees of mourning during the funeral of the father. The closer the relationship, the more elaborate the ceremonial grief required. Thus, according to the funeral rites, the eldest son has to wear the coarsest sackcloth for the longest time (three years) in mourning for his parents, whereas a more usual style of dress can be worn by the male cousin for only nine months. The elaborate mourning rites and wearing of mourning garments for long periods of time served to renew the lineage ties, especially in ancient times when life expectancy was short and deaths in an average *tsu* were frequent. Although these elaborate customs and rituals are no longer closely followed by most contemporary Chinese families in Singapore, the respect and reverence underlying all these family religious rites are still present during funerals, weddings, births and other anniversaries.

Lineage solidarity was also strengthened by family offerings made in the ancestral temple. This temple contains the tablets believed to be inhabited by the spirits of all the lineage's deceased members. Here the souls of the ancestors were visibly displayed in many rows of wooden tablets, standing in order of their seniority of relationships and generations on shelves under the tablet of the High Ancestor of the lineage. Periodically, all available members of the lineage would assemble in the temple to offer their communal sacrifices to their forefathers. Genealogical records, often kept for many centuries, as well as "family instructions" written by leading personalities, were also used to stress and maintain the unity of the family lineage.

The Chinese State in ancient times always operated through the Family system. It reinforced the institution of the *tsu* and its constituent families by leaving in the hands of village elders, all governmental authority, except that which was unavoidably the State's responsibility, like for example defence matters. The State also backed up the family lineage prescriptions for proper conduct (*li*) with criminal law (*fa*). At the same time, the prayerful and spiritual attitudes of the Chinese family members towards their ancestors played an important role in ancient times for the education, discipline and the moral code of the next generation of Chinese people.

In the Bahá'í Faith, ancestors are respected, but not deified. There are no rituals and rites attached to the funerals of the father and relatives or anniversaries held for their deaths. Commemoration is done via prayer and reading of the holy Bahá'í writings. The use of lineage positions, funeral rites and rituals to establish order and hierarchy are absent in the family.

Functions of *Li*

To understand further the religious character of the Chinese family we now take a look at the *li* system of proper conduct. The functions of *li* extend from the most important religious ceremonies to the trivialities of daily etiquette. *Li* serves primarily to demarcate the senior from the junior, the superior from the inferior. It means proper deportment for all social circumstances. In our age of exceptional freedom of thought and behaviour, the elaborate functions of *li* may appear to involve unnecessary hair-splitting. It serves, however, to provide an anthology, allowing us to understand the society of the ancients. Confucius himself was an authority on *li*, and the school that developed to spread his teachings laid great stress on the subject. To understand the background and meaning of the codes of *li* we refer to this passage by Confucius:

"They are the rules of propriety [*li*] that furnish the means of determining (the observances towards) relatives, as near and remote; of settling points which may cause suspicion or doubt; of distinguishing where there should

be agreement, and where difference; and of making clear what is right and what is wrong... To cultivate one's person and fulfil one's words is called good conduct. When the conduct is (thus) ordered, and the words are accordant with the (right) course, we have the substance of the rules of propriety...

The parrot can speak and yet is nothing more than a bird; the ape can speak, and yet is nothing more than a beast. Here now is a man who observes no rules of propriety; is not his heart that of a beast... Therefore, when the sages arose, they framed the rules of propriety in order to teach men, and cause them, by their possession of them, to make a distinction between themselves and brutes."¹⁴

The profound influence of *li* is also seen in this passage:

"In the right government of a state, the Rules of Propriety serve the same purpose as the steelyard in determining what is light and what is heavy; or as the carpenter's line in determining what is crooked and what is straight...When a superior man (conducts the government of his state) with a determining attention to these rules, he cannot be imposed by traitors and impostors. Hence he who has an exalted idea of the rules, and guides his conduct by them, is called by us a mannerly gentleman, and he who has no such exalted idea, and does not guide his conduct by the rules, is called by us one of the unmannerly people. These rules (set forth) the way of reverence and courtesy; and therefore when the services of the ancestral temple are performed according to them, there is reverence; when they are observed in the court, the noble and the mean have their proper positions; when the family is regulated by them, there is affection between father and son, and harmony among brothers; and when

¹⁴ *Li Ki* [Chi], translated by James Legge, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1885, book one, I, 1, pp. 62ff

they are honoured in the country districts and villages, there is the proper order between old and young.”¹⁵

Thus the *li* system serves mainly to establish hierarchy. Whether it refers to an individual's place at the social level or to the *tsu* (family), the underlying principle is hierarchical. Similarly, whether it is discussing secular or religious issues:

“The son of Heaven [the king] sacrifices (or presents oblations) to Heaven and Earth; to the (spirits presiding over the) four quarters; to (the spirits of) the hills and rivers; and offers the five sacrifices of the house---all in the course of the year. The feudal princes present oblations, each to (the spirit presiding over) his own quarter; to (the spirits of) its hills and rivers; and offer the five sacrifices of the house---all in the course of the year. Great officers present the oblations of the five sacrifices of the house---all in the course of the year. (Other) officers present oblations to their ancestors.”¹⁶

Based on *li*, the hierarchy of the Chinese traditional family is defined and related to male lineage in the family. In contrast, the Bahá'í Faith is more consultative and democratic and not hierarchical in nature.

“Regarding thy question about consultation of a father with his son, or a son with his father, in matters of trade and commerce, consultation is one of the fundamental elements of the foundation of the Law of God. Such consultation is assuredly acceptable, whether between father and son, or with others. There is nothing better than this. Man must consult in all things for this will lead him to the depths of each problem and enable him to find the right solution.”¹⁷

¹⁵ *Li Ki*, book twenty-three, 5-7, pp. 257f

¹⁶ *Li Ki*, book one, II, 3, p 116

¹⁷ *Family Life*, p 9

There are also certain duties and mutual obligations amongst family members in the Bahá'í Faith, but unlike the Chinese Family, they are not part of a hierarchical system. There is no ranking based upon male family members, and there is no over-riding need to produce a male heir. From the Bahá'í perspective, the unity of the family is the prime concern, wherein each family member plays a complementary role.

“According to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, the family being a human unit must be educated according to the rules of sanctity. All the virtues must be taught the family. The integrity of the family bond must be constantly considered and the rights of the individual members must not be transgressed. The rights of the son, the father, the mother, none of them must be transgressed, none of them must be arbitrary. Just as the son has certain obligations to his father, the father likewise has certain obligations to his son. The mother, the sister and other members of the household have certain prerogatives. All these rights and prerogatives must be conserved, yet the unity of the family must be sustained. The injury of one shall be considered the injury of all; the comfort of each the comfort of all; the honour of one the honour of all.”¹⁸

Filial Piety

The effectiveness of the *li* code of behaviour throughout the centuries can be attributed to the age-old doctrine in China called “*hsiao*”, or “filial piety.” It means variously, obedience to authority, obedience to the older generation, respect, reverence and gratitude to parents and senior relatives.

For millennia, Chinese social values have been dominated by the ethical concept of filial piety. The prevailing influence of this concept has

¹⁸ *Family Life*, p 12

permeated every aspect and activity of Chinese life and society. In reply to a question about what *hsiao* is, Confucius said,

“While [the parents] are living, serve them with *li*; when they die, bury them with *li*; sacrifice to them with *li*.”¹⁹

From Mencius, the authority second only to Confucius:

“Which is the greatest duty? Duty to parents is the greatest... Among our many duties, the duty of serving the parents is fundamental...”²⁰

From the *Hsiao Ching*, a work that attributes sayings from Confucius, is this famous passage:

“Filiality is the root of virtue, and that from which civilisation derives... The body is, the hair and skin are received from our parents, and we dare not injure them: this is the beginning of filiality. [We should] establish ourselves in the practice of the true Way, making a name for ourselves for future generations, and thereby bringing glory to our parents: this is the end of filiality. Filiality begins with the serving of our parents, continues with the serving of our prince, and is completed with the establishing of our own character.”²¹

Again, from the same work:

“In serving his parents the filial son is as reverent as possible to them while they are living. In taking care of them he does so with all possible joy; when they are sick he is extremely anxious about them; when he buries them he is stricken with grief; when he sacrifices to them he

¹⁹ *The Confucian Analects*, II. 5.3.

²⁰ *The Works of Mencius*, translated by James Legge, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1892) IV. 19.1.2.

²¹ *The Hsiao Ching*, translated by James Legge, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1899); Scripture of Filiality, I.

does so with the utmost solemnity. These five [duties] being discharged in full measure, then he has been able [truly] to serve his parents."²²

"There are three thousand [offences] meriting the five punishments, but there is no crime greater than unfiliality"²³

In ancient China, unfilial conduct was a serious crime under the law of the family religion. It was the right of parents to put an unfilial child to death, or at least to denounce him or her to the authorities for punishment, as prescribed in clearly defined criminal statutes. Cursing one's parents was a capital offence. The following behaviour were indictable:

The grounds for such an accusation were the prosecution or cursing of one's grandparents or parents; not living with grandparents or parents and separating one's property from theirs; failure to support one's grandparents or parents; marrying, entertaining, or ceasing to observe mourning before the end of the required mourning period; concealing a parent's death; and falsely announcing a grandparent's or parent's death... However, if a parent prosecuted a child as unfilial on other grounds, the authorities would not reject the case for this reason.²⁴

Filial piety is thus the basis of family relationships, the cardinal virtue of the good person, and the most powerful force operating to maintain the orderliness and structure of society required by the Chinese State in ancient times.

In the Bahá'í Faith, filial piety is also very important for the family. Bahá'u'lláh states: "Verily, We have enjoined on every son to serve his

²² *The Hsiao Ching*, Scripture of Filiality X.

²³ *The Hsiao Ching*, Scripture of Filiality XI.

²⁴ Ch'u T'ung-tsu, *Law and Society in Traditional China*, The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1961, pp. 25f.

father”²⁵. This duty for the son to obey his father is similar to Chinese filial piety.

Marriage

Marriage is often closely associated with the preservation of the future generation. But the traditional Chinese family tends to think of it as the most important requirement for the support of the older generation and the generation that had already passed away. The duty of Chinese children was defined in terms of devoting themselves without reservation to the welfare of their parents. The duty of a son's wife was to share in her husband's complete devotion to his parents. The personal feelings of the son and his wife were secondary to their responsibility towards safeguarding the interests of the son's parents. The codes of the *li* contained clear instructions about it:

“[Sons and sons' wives] should go to their parents and parents-in-law [on the first crowing of the cock]. On getting to where they are, with bated breath and gentle voice, they should ask if their clothes are (too) warm or (too) cold, whether they are ill or pained, or uncomfortable in any part; and if so, they should proceed reverently to stroke and scratch the place. They should in the same way, going before or following after, help and support their parents in quitting or entering (the apartment). In bringing in the basin for them to wash, the younger will carry the stand and the elder the water; they will beg to be allowed to pour out the water, and when the washing is concluded, they will hand out the towel. They will ask whether they want anything, and then respectfully bring it. All this they will do with an appearance of pleasure to make their parents feel at ease...While the parents are both alive, at their regular meals, morning and evening, the (oldest) son and his wife

²⁵ *Kitáb-I-Aqdas*, verse 104 in “Questions and Answers”, p 138

will encourage them to eat everything, and what is left after all, they will themselves eat...

No daughter-in-law, without being told to go to her own apartment, should venture to withdraw from that (of her parent-in-law). Whatever she is about to do, she should ask leave from them. A son and his wife should have no private goods, nor animals, nor vessels; they should not presume to borrow from, or give anything to, another person. If any one give the wife an article of food or dress, a piece of cloth or silk, a handkerchief for her girdle, an iris or orchid, she should receive and offer it to her parents-in-law. If they accept it, she will be glad as if she were receiving it afresh. If they return it to her, she should decline it, and if they do not allow her to do so, she will take it as if it were a second gift, and lay it by to wait till they may want it.²⁶

No doubt nowadays, such archaic practices are rare. The son and his wife were required to live with his parents, owed absolute obedience to them, and had no independent property rights. Chinese literature is full of edifying stories about filial sons and daughters and daughters-in-law who were reputed to have sacrificed everything for the comfort and wellbeing of their parents.

Marriage, far from being a union between a man and a woman to satisfy personal desires, was primarily a family matter. The bride was chosen by the son's parents and usually, the couple would never have met before the wedding. Everything about the betrothal and wedding, including the religious sanctions, was calculated to reinforce the subordination of the young couple to the bridegroom's family, especially his parents.

The expensive gifts given to the bride's family emphasised that she was in fact being purchased by the boy's parents for their son. The matching of the horoscopes and the traditional belief that marriages were "made in heaven" gave an air of inevitability to decisions that actually were made

²⁶ *Li Ki*, book ten, pp 450f, 453, and 458

on hard-headed business or "political" considerations by parents and "go-betweens". Formal worship of the bridegroom's ancestors brought the bride under the supernatural authority of her husband's forefathers and reminded her that her membership in her natal lineage was terminated. She was now a probationer among the relatives of her husband, and both she and her husband were economically dependent on his parents. Only by earning the respect and tolerance of the parents could the new wife gain security in her role; thus filial conduct towards her parents-in-law was literally a matter of life and death. The institution of marriage is therefore used as a means to an end; the main purpose being to produce the male heir to perpetuate the family lineage.

In contrast, the Bahá'í view on marriage is more democratic, where love should dominate the marriage. It is also a spiritual union between the couple and believed to be a bond that lasts forever,

"Marriage, among the mass of the people, is a physical bond, and this union can only be temporary, since it is foredoomed to a physical separation at the close. Among the people of Bahá, however, marriage must be a union of the body and of the spirit as well, for here both the husband and wife are aglow with the same wine, both are enamoured of the same matchless Face, both live and move through the same spirit, both are illumined by the same glory. This connection between them is a spiritual one, hence it is a bond that will abide forever. Likewise do they enjoy strong and lasting ties in the physical world as well, for if the marriage is based both on the spirit and the body, that union is a true one, hence it will endure. If, however, the bond is physical and nothing more, it is sure to be only temporary, and must inexorably end in separation. When therefore, the people of Bahá undertake to marry, the union must be a true relationship, a spiritual coming together as well as a physical one, so that throughout every phase of life, and in all the worlds of

God, their union will endure; for this real oneness is a gleaming out of the love of God."²⁷

Moreover, Bahá'u'lláh declares the purpose of marriage should be to produce a new generation who will recognise Him, "enter into wedlock, O people, that ye may bring forth one who will make mention of Me and My servants"²⁸.

The Key Role of the Eldest Son

In the family religion, bearing children was regarded as essential to a couple's filial responsibilities, as said by Mencius, "There are three ways in which one may be unfilial, of which the worst is to have no heir."²⁹ Not to have an heir was a major offence to the family because without an heir the ancestral sacrifices would have to be discontinued. In cases where the wife cannot produce a son and a concubine does not bear a son, often a son from a close relative would be adopted as an heir. If there is more than one son, then the eldest would have to take over the responsibilities to the ancestors.

The eldest son has a special position. He is destined to replace the father as the head of the family. He is the principal sacrificiant to the ancestors. All the younger siblings have to pay him the same obedience and respect that they owed to the father. Thus the male descendant of the lineage has special status in the family tree as indicated in this passage:

"Eldest [male] cousins in the legitimate line of descent and their brothers should do reverent service to the son, who is the representative chief of the family and his wife. Though they may be richer and higher in official rank than he, they should not presume to enter his house with (the demonstrations of) their wealth and dignity... A

²⁷ *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p 117

²⁸ *Kitáb-I-Aqdas*, p 41

²⁹ *The Works of Mencius*, IVA.26.1.

wealthy cousin should prepare two victims, and present the better of them to his chief. He and his wife should together, after self-purification, reverently assist at his sacrifice in the ancestral temple. When the business of that is over, they may venture to offer their own private sacrifice."³⁰

Thus it is very important for the Chinese to have a male heir, as this is the means that the *tsu* will be perpetuated and the family name will be immortal and have continuity. It is commonly said that the father who has healthy sons and grandsons is quite satisfied and will die graciously at his deathbed. Understood in this way, the culminating acts of *li* are those of ancestor worship.

The Bahá'í Faith however, does not believe in progeniture. There are no elaborate rituals and customs specifically for showing respect to the eldest son and the ancestors. Social order for Bahá'ís comes from spiritual qualities and adherence to the divine laws as laid down by Bahá'u'lláh. However, in the Bahá'í writings, special mention is made of the role and responsibilities of the eldest son:

"In all the Divine Dispensations the eldest son hath been given extraordinary distinctions. Even the station of prophet hath been his birthright. With the distinctions given to the eldest son, however, go concomitant duties. For example, he has the moral responsibility, for the sake of God, to care for his mother and also to consider the needs of the other heirs."³¹

The Bahá'í writings indicate the importance of educating the children to know God early. If this is done, then respect and love of parents will follow. The responsibilities of children towards their parents derive from the appreciation of what their parents have done for them. Significantly,

³⁰ *Li Ki*, book ten, I.20, pp. 458f

³¹ *Kitab-I-Aqdas*, Note 44, p 186

the gratitude of the children towards their parents is a point of agreement between the Bahá'í Faith and Chinese tradition.

“The parents must exert every effort to rear their offspring to be religious, for should the children not attain this greatest of adornments, they will not obey their parents, which in a certain sense means that they will not obey God. Indeed, such children will show no consideration to anyone, and will do exactly as they please.”³²

“Also a father and mother endure the greatest troubles and hardships for their children; and often when the children have reached the age of maturity, the parents pass on to the next world. Rarely does it happen that a father and mother in this world see the reward of the care and trouble they have undergone for their children. Therefore, children, in return for this care and trouble, must show forth charity and beneficence, and must implore pardon and forgiveness for their parents.”³³

The Mutual Dependence of Dead and Living

The relationship of mutual dependence, with its expectation of tangible blessings in exchange for filial nourishment, may be said to describe the common attitude of the Chinese to the present. It involves a proper ceremonial funeral, burial in a grave auspiciously located according to the principles of *Feng-Shui*³⁴, a tablet reverently set up and regularly given

³² *Family Life*, p1

³³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette (USA), 1974, p 231

³⁴ This is usually called “geomancy” in Western writings and its literal meaning is “wind and water.” *Feng-Shui* constitutes a system of divination for determining the auspicious siting of human dwellings - for the living or for the dead. See E J Eitel, *Feng-Shui: Principles of the Natural Science of the Chinese*, Trubner, Hong Kong and London, 1873, pp. 22f.

homage. There are also more formal rites and observances on special occasions. For all these demonstrations of the continuing love and remembrance of their descendants, the ancestors are believed to provide them with the sorts of things any parents would wish for their children: good luck, health, happiness, official position, wealth, sons, love of virtue, long life, and a peaceful death. The educated Chinese elite (the literati) has a less literal and more rationalistic belief:

“He sacrificed as if [the deceased] were present; he sacrificed [to the spirits] as if those spirits were present.”³⁵

“The Master did not discuss strange phenomena, feats of strength, disorders, or spirits.”³⁶

Chi Lu asked about serving the souls of the dead. The Master said, “Not being able [adequately] to serve [living] men, how can we serve the souls of the dead?” [The disciple then said,] “I venture to ask about death.” [The Master] said, “Not yet knowing about life, how can we know about death?”³⁷

These passages did not mean that Confucius did not believe in the supernatural. Confucius gave us many statements referring to Heaven, to the power of Heaven, and even to Heaven's protection and sponsorship of Confucius himself. He was regarded by later generations as the final authority on *li*, and the *Analects*³⁸ show that he took the ancestral rites very seriously.

However, the most explicit explanations of the ancestral rites are given by the philosopher, Master Hsun (c. 340 - 245). He said:

³⁵ *The Confucian Analects*, III.12.1.

³⁶ *The Confucian Analects*, VII.20.

³⁷ *The Confucian Analects*, XI.11.

³⁸ *The Confucian Analects*, XI.11.

“Within the sacrificiant there is an accumulation of thought about, and affectionate longing for, [the deceased]. Upon him come, all untimely, feelings of calamity, and gaspings for breath. Thus, while others are happy and harmonious, to the loyal subject and the filial son there come feelings of calamity. Those feelings which come upon him are deeply moving and, if they find no release, the accumulation of thoughts makes him feel frustrated and inadequate, and he is conscious that ritual has been deficient and incomplete. Therefore the Former Kings devised for this situation [sacrificial] texts expressing to the utmost veneration for the venerable and love for the parent. Hence I say the accumulation of thoughts about, and affectionate longing for, [the deceased] is the utmost degree of loyalty and faithfulness, of love and respect, and the full bloom of ritual and culture. Were it not for the Saints (i.e., those Former Kings) there could be no understanding of this. The Saints clearly understood them (i.e., the meaning and purposes of the sacrifices); military aristocrats and nobles carry them out serenely; officials consider they must be observed; while among the hundred surnames (i.e., the aristocratic families) they have become customary. To the noble man (i.e., the ideal man of Master K’ung’s philosophy) they are a human way, while among the hundred surnames they are thought to be serving the souls of the dead.”³⁹

Bahá'ís believe that first and foremost, one needs to look after one's own soul and develop spiritual qualities while still living in this world. There are no rites and no material sacrifices or offerings to be performed when Bahá'ís pray to the souls of the dead. Our prayers can assist the souls of our loved ones and our friends in the next world. But the effectiveness of the prayers depends on our sincerity. The Bahá'í concept of after-life includes the soul's journey towards God:

³⁹ see “Li Lun” by Hsun Tzu in Li Ki, Master Hsun, “*On Ritual*”, translation by James Legge, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, 1885.

“And now concerning thy question regarding the soul of man and its survival after death. Know thou of a truth that the soul, after its separation from the body, will continue to progress until it attaineth the presence of God, in a state and condition which neither the revolution of ages and centuries, nor the changes and chances of this world, can alter. It will endure as long as the Kingdom of God, His sovereignty, His dominion and power will endure. It will manifest the signs of God and His attributes, and will reveal His loving-kindness and bounty. The movement of My Pen is stilled when it attempteth to befittingly describe the loftiness and glory of so exalted a station. The honour with which the Hand of Mercy will invest the soul is such as no tongue can adequately reveal, nor any other earthly agency describe. Blessed is the soul which, at the hour of its separation from the body, is sanctified from the vain imaginings of the peoples of the world. Such a soul liveth and moveth in accordance with the will of its Creator, and entereth the all-highest Paradise. The Maids of Heaven, inmates of the loftiest mansions, will circle around it, and the Prophets of God and His chosen ones will seek its companionship. With them that soul will freely converse, and will recount unto them that which it hath been made to endure in the path of God, the Lord of all worlds. If any man be told that which hath been ordained for such a soul in the worlds of God, the Lord of the throne on high and of earth below, his whole being will instantly blaze out in his great longing to attain that most exalted, that sanctified and resplendent station...”⁴⁰

“The mysteries of which man is heedless in the earthly world, those will he discover in the heavenly world, and there will he be informed of the secrets of the truth; how much more will he recognise or discover persons with

⁴⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, London, 1978, p 155-56

whom he has been associated. Undoubtedly, the holy souls who find a pure eye and are favoured with insight will, in the kingdom of lights, be acquainted with all mysteries, and will seek the bounty of witnessing the reality of every great soul. They will even manifestly behold the beauty of God in that world. Likewise, will they find all the friends of God, both those of the former and recent times, present in the heavenly assemblage. The difference and distinction between men will naturally become realised after their departure from this mortal world. But this distinction is not in respect to place, but in respect to the soul and conscience. For the Kingdom of God is sanctified (or free) from time and place; it is another world and another universe. And know thou for a certainty that in the divine worlds the spiritual beloved ones will recognise one another, and will seek union with each other, but a spiritual union. Likewise, a love that one may have entertained for anyone will not be forgotten in the world of the Kingdom, nor wilt thou forget there the life that thou hadst in this material world."⁴¹

Family Bonds

The main characteristic and social contribution of the Family religion lies in its powerful unifying force. The family throughout 2,500 years of history has provided the moral and ethical basis to Chinese society. Mencius believed the family to be the fundamental unit of society. He said: "The root of the empire is in the state, and the root of the state is in the family."⁴² In his book called, *The Great Learning*, Mencius advocated that:

"In order rightly to govern the state, it is necessary first to regulate the family; in order to put the empire in peace

⁴¹ J. E Esslemont, *Baha'u'llah and the New Era*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Illinois, 1980, p 190

⁴² *The Book of Mencius*, IVA.5.

and prosperity, it is necessary first to regulate the state."⁴³

The orderly structure of the Chinese Family, uniform and homogeneous throughout China, is probably the major factor contributing to the long lasting nature of Chinese civilisation, the world's oldest continuous civilisation.

The Bahá'í Faith also comes to renew belief in the sacredness of family bonds and reaffirms the family institution. From the Bahá'í perspective, family bonds are essentially religious in nature. Family commitments are not separated from service to the Bahá'í Faith, or humanity as a whole. In fact, service to the family is considered to be a means by which a Bahá'í can contribute to the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'u'lláh, addressing children, states:

"Beware lest ye commit that which would sadden the hearts of your fathers and mothers. Follow ye the path of Truth which indeed is a straight path. Should anyone give you a choice between the opportunity to render a service to Me and a service to them, choose ye to serve them, and let such service be a path leading you to Me. This is my exhortation and command to thee."⁴⁴

About Posterity and Immortality

The Chinese people's idea of posterity is based on the propagation of the family name. For them it is critical to continue the lineage passed down from the ancestors. The eldest son must at all costs have a healthy male heir to perpetuate the family surname, and the latter should carry on in the same tradition. If all this happens, then the father is satisfied that he has done his duty for family lineage continuity, immortality and posterity and he can grow old and die gracefully. In a sense he feels that he has fulfilled his earthly life mission of his forefathers. His soul will also be looked

⁴³ *The Great Learning*, translated by James Legge, 2d ed (Oxford, 1892), I.4.

⁴⁴ *Family Life*, p 2.

after. His children will continue praying and sacrificing to his family's dead souls, including his soul when he is dead.

The Bahá'í concept of posterity and immortality is based on looking after one's soul in this world and in the next world. In this earthly life, Bahá'ís must recognise the Station of Bahá'u'lláh and obey His laws. What we do in this life will affect our souls in the spiritual world.

“As to the soul of man after death, it remains in the degree of purity to which it has evolved during life in the physical body, and after it is freed from the body it remains plunged in the ocean of God's mercy.”⁴⁵

Social Life

Regarding social life, the Chinese people essentially expanded or extended family life into a larger arena. This was an expansion of the practice of filial piety. In the Chinese community, kinship was formed through the marriage relationship, clans were established through blood relationship. The same respect demanded of children for their elders within the family was extended to apply to teachers, and other figures of social authority. The family hierarchy was translated into social ranking. Based on this traditional model alone, it is difficult for the Chinese people to assimilate and inter-penetrate other cultures, and vice-versa.

Bahá'í communities are less bound by kinship ties and social hierarchy. Instead, Bahá'ís are concerned with forging spiritual ties and the Bahá'í Faith is democratic in its system of administration. As a result, the Bahá'í Faith is able to attract and assimilate people from a wide range of different religious and racial backgrounds, and is not restricted to a particular family or ancestor. The wider loyalty inherent in the Bahá'í Faith may help to integrate the practitioners of the Chinese Family Religion to other cultures.

⁴⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p 66

Conclusion

The Family religion's practices of filial piety and ancestor worship have made the Chinese people a very family oriented type of society. Its practitioners are generally focused on their families and are parochial in their outlook towards the world at large. The Family is all-important to them, and the principle that "blood is thicker than water" is very pervasive. For the Chinese people, the prosperity and immortality of a male individual meant the continuity of his family lineage and "surname". Women are treated less than equal and are valued only as the means to obtaining the male heir.

In a world that is becoming smaller and more integrated, the practices of the family religion are not easily understood or accepted outside Chinese communities. However, the reverence, respect and prayerful attitude shown by the Chinese people for their deceased has similarities to Bahá'í belief. The strong spiritual connection with the dead ancestors, albeit expressed through material and earthly sacrifices at appropriate anniversaries, is essentially in accord with the same sentiment expressed in many Bahá'í prayers. Also the gratitude which children are called upon to show their parents is common to both religions.

Ironically, in many parts of the world today, the family as an institution is under siege and breaking down, largely because of the influence of materialism and consumerism. Key aspects of the Chinese Family religion, such as respect, reverence and gratitude to elders, obedience of children to their elders, are still values which are required today.

The Bahá'í Faith extends the unity and bonds of the family religion to the human family. The role of the family is still vital to the stability and unity of society as a whole, but in the Bahá'í Faith it becomes an integral part of the global community. The survival of the Family religion depends on how much it can universalise its faith. This goal is poetically described by Bahá'u'lláh in the following way:

"We desire but the good of the world and happiness of the nations, yet they deem us a stirrer up of strife and sedition worthy of bondage and banishment...That all nations should become as one in faith

and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity of religion should cease, and differences of race be annulled... what harm is there in this?... These strifes and this bloodshed and discord must cease, and all men be as one kindred and one family... Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country; but let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind."⁴⁶

⁴⁶ J.E. Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, Bahá'u'lláh's words to E.G. Brown, p 40

