

# *Reestablishing the Significance of “Family” in the Modern World*

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**Abstract:** There are several misunderstandings about “family” in today’s world: first, “individual” and “family” are viewed as two incompatible choices of values; second, the existential experience of “affection towards their relatives (qin qin)” is confused with the institutional expression of “family” in history; third, the asymmetric structure of “family” is wrongly taken as the root of a relationship between superiority and subordination; fourth, there is a false assumption that one’s role and responsibility within the family is incompatible with freedom as an individual in the modern world; fifth, “family” is merely viewed as a social organization, and its identity as a spiritual and cultural existence is largely neglected. In that sense, the inherent value of “family” is overlooked in the modern world. Reestablishing an idea of “family” surrounded by “individual consciousness” in the modern context can clarify the positive value of “family”, make “family” a solid guarantee for the achievements of “individuals”, and effectively relieve the negative consequences of the “individual standard”. Meanwhile, the modern world must also renew the relationship between “cultivating the moral self and regulating the family” and “running the state rightly and making the world peaceful”, and help “family” exert a more universal influence. “Family” must be reinterpreted as a basic pattern of human existence and the modern world must redefine the ontological meaning of “family” as a carrier of “relationships”, an “emotional encounter”, an “ethical principle”, a “way of understanding the world” and a “method to transcend spiritually”.

**Keywords:** misunderstandings about “family”, idea of “family” surrounded by “individual consciousness”, Confucian ideology, the ontological meaning of “family”

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“Family” is a basic pattern of human existence, and is also a basic approach that allows us to understand the world. However, in this modern world, as the marriage rates fall and the divorce rates increase, the number of single-parent families grows and all kinds of sexual orientations are legitimized, “family”, deplorably, is declining. Gone with it is the world that is understood through it. In the face of this slump, however, a philosophy about “family” is beginning to rise silently in contemporary China.<sup>①</sup> When referring to men, modern philosophy always seems to only mean “individuals”, above which are “community” and “nation”. “Family”, the most-frequently-seen unit of existence and values in traditional Chinese culture, never makes its way to the categories of modern philosophy. However, from the standpoint of traditional Chinese culture, “family” plays a crucial role for a mature society, whether it is in the formation of the ethical relationships between husbands and wives, between parents and offspring, and between siblings, or in the establishment of a standardized order, or in the cultivation of individual personality. What is more important, “family” is a miniature of the world around us and a basic tool for our understanding of the world. Family constitutes the ontology of traditional Chinese culture. “Family” and its derivatives shape traditional Chinese society the way Christianity influences Western societies. However, “family” is missing in the discourses of modern philosophy. It is also suffering from aphasia in modern social life. Why is that? What has made people lose confidence in “family” in modern society? The process of the loss of “family” is worth serious reflection. Modern society holds several misunderstandings about “family”, among which two play the most crucial roles: first, “family” and “individuals” are overly set against each other so that the narrative of “family” is elbowed out by individualism and finally disappears; second, the rigid differentiation between “public spheres” and “private spheres” in modern times restricts the social influence of “family”. Therefore, it is necessary to resume attempts to the Confucian ethics of “Self-Cultivation, family regulation, state governance and bringing peace and sound governance to all under heaven” and on that basis, to redefine the ontological meaning of “family”.

### Misunderstandings about “Family” by the Modern World

What dominates today’s modern world is undoubtedly an individual-based value system. Whether it was Thomas Hobbes, who in the early days of our modern times rewrote the logic of “family” with the concept of the contract between individuals, or the New Culture Movement, which lashed out at “familism” and advocated “individualism”, or *The Communist Manifesto*, which prophesied the disintegration of “family”, or the modern society which has established a gender theory that completely transcends the values of “family”—the theoretical world is somehow seeing “family”

<sup>①</sup> Though “family” is not a mainstream theme for discussions in philosophy, academics never give up pushing it forward. Their key achievements in recent years include: Zhang, Xianglong. (2017). *Home and filial piety: From Chinese and Western perspectives*. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company. Yang, Xiaosi. (2010). *Home philosophy: Blind spot of Westerners*. Beijing: The Commercial Press. In Wu, F. (Ed.). (2014). *Holy home: A comparative perspective between Chinese and Western civilizations*. Beijing: Religious Culture Press. Prior to this, in fact, a number of scholars such as Liang Shuming, had already acutely realized that “The family in the Chinese people’s minds is extremely special” [Liang, Shuming. (2005). *Outline of Chinese culture*. Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, p. 17], but the modern China never attempts to face up to “family” and establish a modern culture.

as something of little significance. However, a turn and a look at daily life will reveal that “family” is still a shelter for individual growth and something for individuals to depend on. The Chinese saying that “harmony in a family brings success to everything” is still a potent rule, and the way we look at the world is deeply rooted in “family”. Confucius said, “The path is not far from man. When men try to pursue a course, which is far from the common indications of consciousness, this course cannot be considered The Path.” This sentence in *Doctrine of the Mean* encourages people to treat seriously the authentic “truth” around us.

I believe that the awkward position of “family” mainly originates from several misunderstandings about it in the modern world.

First, individuals and the values of “family” are set against each other. From Hobbes to Locke and from Hume to Kant, all such philosophers, even when they began their individualized narrative of modern societies and politics, had clearly realized that “family”, as an ancient source of values, was violently destructive to their individualized narrative. In their own rational way, they doubted the traditional value of “family”, took its values apart link by link through their logic of “individuals”, and thus deconstructed “family” as an independent unit of values (Sun, 2014). Michael Oakeshott (2004), when he was evaluating the characteristics of modern rationalism, had seen that rationalism would readily doubt those ideas, customs and beliefs, no matter how deep-rooted or widely-accepted they were, and then criticized them with what he called “reason”. It was in such a process of being doubted that “family” finally crumbled. In China, the development of individualization, ever since the New Culture Movement, in some sense repeats the work of modern Western philosophy, and even antagonizes and criticizes traditional culture in a more extreme way. Traditional Chinese culture treasures the value and significance of “family”. However, it seems to be losing ground to modern individualism and personality liberation. Individual values are hostile to the values of family. Regrettably, as is seen, though traditions of “family” are declining under the impact of the New Culture Movement, “individuals”, however, have not risen as expected, which somehow leads to the confusion of values in modern China (Sun, 2015). Of all understandings about “family”, the one held by traditional Chinese culture is the most unique and has its own system. Many of the excellent values in traditional Chinese culture have been cultivated with “family” being the vehicle and the environment for their growth. “Family” in traditional Chinese culture is not only a social unit but also the “prototype” of a certain way of thinking and a certain type of values. According to Liang Shuming (2011), “Chinese culture stems from family life, rather than from occurrences within large groups. The parent-child relationship is the core of family life, and filial piety is a key virtue that Chinese culture advocates.” If people could relinquish the zero-sum thinking that “views one person’s gain as another’s loss”, and reorganize the relationships between “individuals” and “family”, then, while the value of “individuals” is established, there is still room for the extraction of the connotation of “family” in modern society. That would be a direction well worthy of attention and efforts.

Second, the existential experience of “affection towards the relatives (qin qin)” is confused with the institutional expression of “family” in history. In traditional Chinese culture, the value system

of “family” is closely linked with the existential experience of “affection towards the relatives”. In Greek culture, this basic love towards one’s kin focuses on “Eros”. It is an impulse of life and a kind of sensual love, which then inspires other kinds of love, such as the love towards wisdom. Christianity, however, advocates “agape”, a selfless, altruistic and holy love. For Chinese, “affection towards the relatives” is the most fundamental experience of love. The *Doctrine of the Mean*, for example, when talking about the “foundation for self-cultivation”, “great exercise of benevolence is in loving relatives.” Traditional Chinese culture started from the ontological presupposition that “life is continuing in cycles,” settled on the existential experience of “affection towards the relatives” and condensed into fundamental virtues such as “filial piety”, with such virtues unfolded in social organizations such as “family” (Sun, 2018). It was this very strict logic that enabled Chinese cultural traditions to last for thousands of years. If this logic of cultural structure is destroyed, so will the value system of Chinese culture. That is why the attack from the key figures of the New Culture Movement always proved fatal for Chinese cultural traditions. For example, Fu Sinian (2001) viewed “family” as “the root of evil”. Yet this extreme stance could be justified by the historical context. It was natural for the existential experience of “affection towards the relatives” to take on an institutional expression in history, which, after thousands of years of development, became the bulky “family-and-clan-based” culture. “Individual” consciousness and freedom were largely repressed. So was creativity, which is vital for modern society. Chen Duxiu, Hu Shi, Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren were all active supporters of the modern “free individual”. Wu Yu, Fu Sinian and Gu Chengwu, on the other hand, took it upon themselves to lash out at the old clan or family systems (Fu, 2001). Even in the 1990s, Sun Longji (2004) was still criticizing the incomplete individual personality of the Chinese people. If this extreme hostility has to be overcome, the existential experience of “affection towards the relatives” in Chinese cultural traditions and its institutional expressions in history must be clearly distinguished. The former is the core ingrained in traditional Chinese culture, and the internal foundation for the “cycles of continuation” of Chinese cultural traditions. There is a reason for its existence. However, of course, it is also an undeniable truth that all of its institutional expressions in history, especially the traditional family and clan systems, did severely repress “individual” growth, and the political model featuring “hereditary succession to the throne” developed from it is no longer suitable for a modern society. The job of philosophy is to clarify the logic of the two and prevent any possible confusion. Logically, if a sound modern “individuality” is established, the existential experience of “affection towards the relatives” still has the potential to thrive in the modern world. But the institutional expression for it in modern times has yet to be further explored and institutional rearrangements must also be made. Attempts such as having days off for some traditional holidays like Tomb-sweeping Day and Mid-Autumn Day, and reemphasizing customs and traditions for weddings and funerals, symbolize a good start.

Third, the asymmetric structure of “family” is wrongly taken as the root of a relationship between superiority and subordination. The reason why the “family” and “clan” systems empowered by history are criticized is that the “Three Cardinal Guides”, a core part of the Confucian thoughts, is very much

against the universally accepted ideas of “freedom and equality” in modern times. Wu Yu (2001) once clearly concluded that “‘Family and clan systems’ are the root of autocracy.” The “Three Cardinal Guides” (ruler guides subject, father guides son and husband guides wife), which is an institutional expression for family-centered culture adopted during the Han Dynasty, had permeated into every corner of society and led to the formation of a relationship between superiority and subordination in power, whereby it also became an institutional foundation that helped maintain the traditional society. According to modern theories, “family” is a private thing, while “the relationship between the king and the subjects” is a public issue. The natural power structure within the family, such as the father-son relationship, should never be made a model for the dynamic between the king and the subjects. There is a gap in between that can never be crossed. In some sense, traditional Chinese culture prioritized private virtues within “family” over public ones. However, from Confucius who first proposed that the king must do what is duly required of a king and the same is true for the subjects, fathers, sons, husbands and wives to Mencius who put forward the “Five Cardinal Relationships”, namely the “relationships between father and son (love), those between ruler and subjects (the relation of righteousness), husband and wife (chaste conduct), elder brother and younger brother (order), friend and friend (faithfulness).” Theoretically, what they advocated was not necessarily to evolve into “a relationship of superiority and subordination in power”. It was actually the “asymmetric structure” within families that was revealed in their thoughts. Such an asymmetric structure reflects the “mutual relationships” between different roles within “family”, and Confucian Theory could thus be interpreted as “each role must be fully committed to their due responsibilities”. In that sense, the “asymmetric structure” within “family” could also be understood and interpreted in a different manner in the modern context of equality of human rights. The new meaning of “family” lies in that it can cultivate a love for virtues in all the individuals within the “asymmetric structure”. That would be a universally beneficial thing. In the modern context, “cultivating the moral self and regulating the family” can find a new link to “running the state rightly and making the world peaceful”.

Fourth, the incompatibility between one’s role and responsibility and one’s freedom as an individual is overly stressed. That is why the New Culture Movement’s rebukes of “family” focused on its severe repression of “individual freedom”. Such repression was obviously seen in Gao Juexin, the protagonist of the novel *The Family* authored by Ba Jin, who was chained by his identity as the eldest grandson. The book presents a most vivid description of how “family” constrains “individual freedom”, and Ba Jin’s writing full of yearnings for freedom resonates with generations of people. However, the truth is, if the dignity of every member within the family is fully recognized, their respective “role” in “family” will then become easily acceptable. The tension between one’s role and responsibility and one’s freedom as an individual is not always irreconcilable. Ames (2017) expounded in a systematic way on the roles within the Confucian framework that “it (the Confucian theory) does not invoke the ‘abstract principles’ or ‘virtues’. Instead, it essentially helps us find ‘guidance’ from the social ‘roles’ we are familiar with. Those ‘roles,’ rather than the ‘abstract’ principles, should serve as a guiding power. It is through our daily life, in our ‘roles’ as a sibling, that we can gain a true, first-



hand experience.” It is in “family” that people feel and understand the “roles” most intensely. Once a person plays a “role”, he or she stops being an isolated, lone individual, and is in a “relationship” and assumes certain “responsibilities” within this “relationship”. “Family” is the very first origin of all those “roles” and “responsibilities”. Here there should not be any relationship between superiority and subordination, or any inequality. The “roles and responsibilities” in a relationship should never be set against “individual freedom” in the sense of human dignity, and the two should go in parallel. Just as Hegel argued, freedom is never a mere “subjective caprice”. Its fulfillment, in reality, is hampered by the “ethical life”; in that sense, the realization of freedom for everyone is in fact closely associated with his or her “role” in society.

Fifth, there is confusion between “family” as an organization and “family” as a kind of spirit and culture. When people talk about “family”, they generally focus on the internal structure of “family”. In that context, “family” is more like a social organization. But this organization, under the impact of the New Culture Movement, is crumbling. The truth is, in traditional Chinese culture, “family” is not just a social organization or phenomenon. Instead, it is a conclusive, cultural idea that conveys many kinds of spirits. Ames (2017) once insightfully pointed out that for Confucians, the meanings and values of relationships within families do not only lie in that they lay the essential foundation for the social order, but that they have cosmic and religious implications as well. This is a very important point that is worth further expounding in modern times. It was on the basis of “family” that traditional Chinese culture formulated a complete set of methods to understand the world, and a holistic rites-and-music-based culture, which marks the Chinese people’s spirit to transcend. “The superior man, going back to his ancient fathers, and returning to the authors of his being, does not forget those to whom he owes his life, and therefore he calls forth all his reverence, gives free vent to his feelings, and exhausts his strength in discharging the above service a tribute of gratitude to his parents he dares not but do his utmost” (“The Ways of Sacrifices,” *The Book of Rites*). In traditional Chinese culture, men are encouraged to “be careful about their parents to the end and continue to hold in reverence after their parents are long gone,” return to the origin of their life, place themselves at a certain point of the endless succession between generations, try their best to lead a good life and show their gratitude towards life. The decline of “family” in the modern world largely destabilizes family’s central position in the “values.” As the saying goes, “With the skin gone, to what can the hair attach itself?” “Family” is thus no longer likely to act as a ritual and music culture and spirit in the modern world. The rejuvenation of “family” should not be a mere return to an ethical organization. It must also be the restoration of a spirit.

If these misunderstandings about “family” could be dispelled, if people could rethink the universal meaning of “family” while upholding the basic principles of the modern society, then the traits of the traditional Chinese culture conveyed by the idea of “family” will likely be reestablished. In that case, traditional Chinese culture’s unique insight into concerns such as the cultivation of individual morality, morality of families, patriotism and awareness of the community with a shared future for mankind will be leveraged and go on contributing to an increasingly globalized world.

## **The Modern Idea of “Family” as Collecting “Individual Consciousness”**

Under the influence of the modern “individual-standard” values, the idea of “family” was noticeably losing ground in the modern Western theoretical world while in China, the traditional family and the code of etiquette it depended on became the target of criticism during the New Culture Movement, yet “family” is still the “core” of the existential theory of traditional Chinese culture, and a shared community that represents the continuity of life, where gratitude for and loyalty to life is reflected through exemplary virtues such as “devotion on the part of the father and filial piety on the part of the child.” Indeed, “family” is the source of the ethical mechanism that runs through traditional Chinese culture. To reestablish the position of “family” in modern society, it is necessary to truly handle the relationship between “family” and “individual,” and incorporate the “individual” consciousness in the idea of “family”.

In fact, “individuals” and “family” are not necessarily on opposite sides. Their incompatibility was never as irreconcilable as people claimed in the early modern times of the West or during the New Culture Movement. Whether it was in China or in the West, the reason why the idea of “family” is repressed in modern times is that it goes against the “individual” principles and hampers the implementation of those principles. The “individual” principles have their own value for the modern world, for humanity’s respect for its own value, and freedom is delivered in its respect for the freedom, rights and dignity of each individual. That is a step forward for human civilization. However, that does not mean that “family” has lost its independent value and position. Is there any possibility that we, while respecting “individuals,” could also save the place of “family” in the structure of modern values? Could there be an idea of “family” collecting “individual consciousness” in modern times, which respects each individual of the “family” while transcending the common understanding about an individualized life? The truth is, only when it accommodates “individual will” can “family” continue its work in modern society and go on contributing to modern society as a basic unit of the reproduction of life and value.

The idea of “family” in modern times, especially the modern idea of marriage that is based on romantic love, has, in fact, contained the meaning that there must be two different “individuals” who recognize and respect each other. The mutual love between the two “individuals” constitutes the foundation for the modern marriage. In that sense, it can be said that modern families stem from free individuals. That is quite different from the traditional marriages which were formed with the intention of making alliances or arranged by parents. In traditional society, the organization of a family was generally bound by concerns over interests and social ranks, and the operation of the family followed the patriarchy pattern. It was precisely the traditionally arranged marriages and the patriarchy within families that first bore the brunt of attacks at the beginning of the New Culture Movement. Activists thoroughly criticized traditional marriages and families and extolled the modern marriage and free modern families based on romantic love (Yu, Xu & Pan, 2001).

So, what does marriage or family mean to the “individuals?” Hegel (1995) pointed out in *Elements*

of the *Philosophy of Right* that mutual affection and admiration are the subjective origins of modern marriages. In a marriage, two individuals, who are emotionally attached to each other, wish to become united. They seem to be bound, while in fact, they gain a substantive self-awareness during this free interaction. In that sense, the realization of individual freedom in the emotional sense must be preceded by a union with the other person.

“Marriage” is meaningful for individuals not only because it is a union of two completely independent “individuals”, but also because this union itself is a necessary step for “individuals” to become complete. According to the description of “love” by Hegel (1995), “individuals” are neither self-sufficient nor complete. Therefore, “I” must seek a self in others, namely gaining others’ emotional recognition. In regard to this, Hegel argued insightfully that only when placed in a “family” could a couple’s “individual” personalities have a chance to fully grow. The incompleteness of “individuals” on the emotional level turns out to be the essential foundation for “family.” In that sense, “family,” rather than excluding individuals, always helps “individuals” grow.

What’s more, mutual benefit is a popular principle for the husband and wife of a family when they engage in each other’s growth. They are also complementary to each other with regard to labor division, thus forming a community of life, i.e., “family.” Meanwhile, a certain ethical relationship is established between them when they try to adapt to each other. Hegel stressed that marriage was not only an emotional and legalized recognition, but also an ethical relationship that would enable innocent “individuals” to find their deficiencies and develop a certain relationship with their spouse as they depend on each other. Where there is the “individual” deficiency, there is the birth of an “ethical” principle. In traditional society, as men and women’s duties differed, maternal and paternal responsibilities might be unequal; however, in modern society, gender-based inequality will gradually disappear and be replaced by an equal, mutually caring relationship, and the entire ethical relationship within the marriage will be further purified.

Marriage is only the foundation for “family” because strictly speaking, “family” as a vehicle for human reproduction must entail “a child”, who is the third “individual” in a “family.” The traditional society which “required the father and son to do what was duly required of them” seems to imply that there is a relationship of superiority and subordination in a “family.” Yet the truth is that the “asymmetric” relationship between father and son does not prevent people from understanding the growth of “children” in a “family.” It never hampers parents’ respect for the independent personality of their “children”. When the “children” grow in love and trust their parents, “family” as an ethical system is endeared to them through emotions. In this process, “children” break out of their primal naturalness and make the first step towards socialization in the “family.” Therefore, it is in the “family” that “children” deliver their first plan and pave the way for the ultimate independence of their personality. In this sense, a healthy “family” counts as a brooder of modern individuals. And moreover, as the “children” are growing as “individuals”, the parents, who play the role of educator, also have a chance to achieve growth. It is a process that witnesses the growth of both the children and the parents’ personalities.



In some theories of Western philosophy regarding “family”, the concept of “right” is frequently invoked to help understand the mutual relationships between family members. It concerns the relationship of rights between husband and wife, between parents and children, the rights the children are entitled to, and to what degree the public power can intervene in the relationships within the “family”. Those theories did accentuate the rights of “family members” as “individuals”, yet they were still backed by the “individualistic” logic of politics, and failed to reveal the unique value of “family” itself. The most prominent characteristic of “family” as a community is the intense emotional bond between “family members”, which is also the most necessary reassurance for the “individuals” when they engage with the world around them. The modern individualistic culture mostly ignores the emotional needs of “individuals”. This is also the reason for the frequent occurrence of the “modern disease” in modern society. In traditional Chinese society, the emotional bond between family members condensed into a raft of virtues within the family, such as “the devotion on the part of the father and the filial piety on the part of the son” and the “mutual respect held between brothers”. For ethical principles, the emotional link is very important. However, whether it was in the theories of Hobbes and Kant, or in the “family” philosophy in the modern West, such emotional links were missing. The intense emotional bonds within the “family” in turn verifies that “individuals” are lacking self-sufficiency. There is a large blind spot in the modern world’s understanding of “individuals” that the rational individual might be self-sufficient, but that is not true for the emotional individual. In that sense, “family” is indispensable from the modern world of individualism. Nowadays, in particular, as more and more functions of “family” are transferred to social organizations, the value of “family” as a place to cultivate intimate emotions is more noticeable.

It is absolutely possible that modern society’s respect for “individuals” will inspire equal personalities as well as equality-based intimacy within the family. Traditional Chinese culture, while stressing the values of “family”, tends to equate the virtue of filial piety with the requirement of the patriarchal clan system, and overemphasizes the importance of obedience and compliance. In modern society, however, it is necessary to extract more connotations, such as gratitude, reverence, kindness and the inclination to excel, from “filial piety”. Though there is a natural asymmetric relationship between “parents” and “children”, especially when the children are growing up, modern family members are now doing much better in cultivating awareness and an environment of equality and mutual respect. Therefore, they may easily understand the modern meaning of “filial piety” by relinquishing the hierarchical perspectives while respecting the “individuals”, and transform it into a method to communicate mutual “respect” between family members. Compared with its traditional equivalent, modern society is better equipped to deliver the “respect” required by family morality.

The “individual consciousness” within the modern idea of “family” does not simply mean respecting the “individual” value and rights of “family members”. What is more important, it also contains resistance against and dissolution of ego-centrism, value nihilism and moral relativism caused by the negative ramifications of the “individual standard”. While stressing the respect for “individual” freedom and rights, modern society must not turn a blind eye to the negative

consequences of the “individual standard”. It must use the mainstream values of traditional culture as an effective countercheck, or else the values of modern society will collapse. In traditional Western society, to let people live in a community is a prerequisite for the healthy and orderly operation of modern society. It was viewed by Tocqueville as the best method to resist the aggression of individualism. Living in a community, “individuals” can learn to somehow care about public affairs, cultivate in themselves a sense of responsibility and participation, adapt themselves to the goal of the community, compromise and cooperate, and establish a code of behavior that prioritizes public interests. Seen from the perspective of the traditional Chinese culture, “family” is precisely the smallest kind of community. Individualism is on the rise in modern society, and if the “individuals” cannot find a unifying power, it would be pointless for them to exist. “Family” is the first naturally made community “individuals” encounter. A “family” surrounded by “individual consciousness” will provide a prototype for how “individuals” should get along, and offer a natural, sound environment to “individuals,” protecting them from all kinds of harm from modern society and preventing the clashes that might be caused by rampant ego-centrism. An “individual” in a healthy family will also become a healthy member in all kinds of modern communities. In this sense, the rejuvenation of the idea of “family” in traditional Chinese culture will effectively relieve the negative consequences of the “individual standard” in modern society.

Reestablishing values around “family” in modern society based on “individual consciousness” is not only be a renewed, modern expression of the existential structure in traditional Chinese culture, it will also advance the construction of the standardized values of modern society. If understood in such manner, the modern idea of “family” will be fully capable of getting along with modern society which emphasizes “individuals”. It is inevitable that “family” in modern society will finally be reconciled with “individualization”.

### **“Cultivating the Moral Self and Regulating the Family” and “Running the State Rightly and Making the World Peaceful” in the Modern World**

This analysis of “family” indicates that “family,” as a Chinese cultural tradition, runs deep in the lives of Chinese people, and around it has been developed a unique cultural, orderly set of values, including the most commonly heard principles of “cultivating the moral self, regulating the family, running the state rightly and making the world peaceful.” “Cultivating the moral self” is the core and basis here, but even this is grounded in “family” ethics. Therefore, the key to “cultivating the moral self, regulating the family, running the state rightly and making the world peaceful” still lies in the establishment of “family”.

Seen from the perspective of modern society, “cultivating the moral self” and “regulating the family” are private things, while “running the state rightly” and “making the world peaceful” fall into the public sphere. There seems to be a gap in between them that cannot be crossed. “Cultivating the moral self” and “regulating the family” are completely cut off from “running the state rightly”

and “making the world peaceful” in the modern world. The reason why the narrative of “family” is ignored in the modern world is not only that “individual” independence is likely to be repressed in the logic of “family,” but also that “family,” which is revealed as a natural structure of power, is against the modern political idea of equality between individuals. Since all the modern countries are established on the basis of equality among citizens, it is difficult for modern people to build a nation that is modeled on the pattern of “family.” In those republican countries that observe “popular sovereignty,” the “family-structured” rule is no longer accepted. Earlier in modern times, Robert Filmer (1993) proposed the concept of “Patriarcha” in a systematic manner to defend the theory of “divine right of kings” and the “family-structured” rule, only to be harshly refuted by Locke (1993). Thenceforward the “family-structured” political framework lost momentum in the West.

From the perspective of traditional Chinese culture, “family” and “nation” intrinsically share a common values structure. There is an old Chinese saying which argued that the root of a nation is family and families can add up to a nation (Liang, 2011). *Great Learning* mentioned that “One’s filial piety towards one’s parents can extend to the king; respect for elder siblings can also extend to superiors.” As “filial piety” and “brotherly love” extend, “family” and “nation” are linked. “First the family must be well regulated, and then the nation could be run rightly” until finally the people are morally educated. Therefore, in traditional Chinese society, the “family” supported by “filial piety” and “brotherly love” is not only an existential core but also a social core in “cultivating the moral self, regulating the family, running the state rightly and making the world peaceful.” In this respect, however, modern society sees a gap between the “public sphere” and the “private sphere”: “family” seems to belong only to the private sphere and it seems difficult for it to step across the gap and land in the public sphere.

The similarity of “family” and “nation” in structure bears the brunt of criticism that is directed at traditional Chinese culture, as if implying that political autocracy has a lot to do with family ethics. In modern society, instead, “family” and “nation” are two independent spheres that are not accessible to each other. If that mutual inaccessibility is not changed, Chinese cultural traditions like “cultivating the moral self, regulating the family, running the state rightly and making the world peaceful” will find it hard to gain ground in modern society.

In fact, the role of “family” in modern society can be interpreted in a much more positive manner. Take the Reformation in the West for example. Protestantism, a new form of Christianity born out of the Reformation, according to Max Weber’s analysis of the relationship between Protestant ethics and the capitalist spirit, contributes a lot to modern society. It makes sure that family members in modern society treat each other with “respect”: children’s respect for parents, parents’ love and respect for children, and the mutual respect between children. In that manner, the relationships within the family are cultivated in a way that hugely benefits modern society. However, in modern culture, restrained by the ideas of individualism and liberalism, the role of “family” is overlooked during political and moral construction. Axel Honneth (2013), in his analysis of modern society, acutely realized that Liberalism only views the family as a simply defined structure without any further influence, thus overlooking

its potential contribution to the political and moral construction of society. It is a very insightful comment, profoundly revealing the blind spot in the Western understanding of social functions of “family”, which is caused by the liberalism rampant in Western society.

It is the social functions of “family” that should become the focus of the reestablishment of “family” in modern society. Only when “family” is given broader value and meaning in modern society, when the rigidly drawn distinction between “public sphere” and “private sphere” is transcended in the modern narrative and the idea of “family” is liberated from the chain of the “private sphere,” can there be a new link between “cultivating the moral self and regulating the family” and “running the state rightly and making the world peaceful” in modern society. Hegel was almost the only philosopher in modern times that realized the role of “family” in the modern world. According to him, though the modern world mostly follows the principle of “subjective freedom”, to deliver this “individual freedom” in reality depends on people’s “ethical life”, whose first link is “family”. “Family” is not only an ethical organization, but also represents an ethical principle which will permeate into every aspect of the social, public life. Therefore, the “citizen society” also requires a “trade association” to play the role of a “second family” and make up for the losses of the “individual” life that is governed by “needs”. Meanwhile, a nation is never built based on “individualized contracts”. “Family is the ethical root of a nation” (Hegel, 1995). Hegel, in the very first place, linked the “national spirit,” which is essential for a nation, with the “family spirit”, “family etiquette” with “political morality”, and “patriotic affection” with “love for the family”. In modern society, the father-child relationship in a “family” is no longer set as a model for the king-subject power structure of the “nation.” However, on the emotional level, the “political emotions” people feel towards their nation are very similar to “the sense of belonging to a unity” held by individuals in a “family” (Hegel, 1995). Hegel’s emphasis on “family” was even reflected in his view of the relationships between nations, for he wished that “finally all the European nations could follow the universal ideas about legislation, customs and culture, and combine into a single big family” (Hegel, 1995). Here, “family” is a “prototype” for ethical principles and still plays a key role in all the aspects of modern society. Hegel acutely felt that modern society could never rely on “individualized principles”, and life itself must be complemented by other principles, the so-called “ethical principles”. It is obvious that Hegel was never blinded by the modern narrative of individualism, but held firmly to the unique value of “family”.

Axel Honneth interpreted Hegel’s “ethical principles” in the modern context from the angle of society. In his book *Freedom’s Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, he conducted an in-depth study on modern “intimate relationships” and “relationships within the family”. Honneth (2013) pointed out that a democratic community which relies on its members’ ability to achieve a collaborative individualism will not deny the political and moral meaning of families for long because a person must have a certain mentality if he is asked to serve the entire society with his prior capability of taking responsibility for a small community. And this mentality can only be cultivated in a family full of harmony, trust and equality. Honneth’s view contains a very practical kind of wisdom. He clarified the political and moral significance of “family” in modern society and came up with what

can be called a modern version of the ancient aphorism “Family harmony brings wealth”. “Family” is no longer a patriarchal clan community, and the time of its being an autocracy breeding ground is long gone (Honneth, 2013). Modern families have developed to be an important mechanism for the cultivation of cooperation and mutual support. Indeed, in traditional Chinese culture, the worshiped “individuals” are not naturally born, but become virtuous only after being cultivated by “family”. Extending one’s love for his beloved to others, then to the universe is the very key lesson that “family” teaches. “Family” is a very important educational tool, and is the first and primary environment where “individuals” become socialized. In the modern world, it is precisely those cooperative “individuals” cultivated by “family” that constitute the foundation of a healthy society.

If a new link can be found between “cultivating the moral self and regulating the family” and “running the state rightly and making the world peaceful,” then the Chinese cultural tradition that stresses the role of “family” will play a larger role in modern society. The values around “family” are of significance for the traditional Chinese culture because they lay the foundation for other values. Without such a foundation, all other standards in the entire value system will crumble, and the society will plunge into disorder.

### **The Ontological Meaning of “Family”**

Though there are great differences between “individual” logic and the values of “family”, the two do not necessarily exclude one another. The reason why efforts have been made to re-establish the idea of “family” in the modern world is that “family” has an intrinsic value and ontological meaning. There is a systematic pattern of values in traditional Chinese culture that precisely follows the logic of “family” and “filial piety”. The abundant understanding of “family” in traditional Chinese culture constitutes the foundation for the continuation of the Chinese civilization. However, “family” has been increasingly marginalized during the changes in modern China, and people are increasingly nonchalant to the values of “family”, which endangers the position of traditional Chinese culture that is based on “family”. The decline of Chinese cultural traditions in the modern world seems inevitable. In terms of such a phenomenon, Zhang Xianglong (2007) held that the family’s position as a pillar must be upheld, or else the Chinese cultural traditions may not last long. Yu Yingshi (2014) also mentioned that Confucian morality must be realized within the ethical order, and “Of all the social agglomerations, ‘family’ is undoubtedly the most important and basic link.” Here “family” is not only a social organization but also a pattern of existence and a unique set of values. “Family” as a choice of values cannot be replaced by “individual” values. The “individual standard” stresses “individuals”, “rationality”, “rights”, “atoms” and “salvation”, while the basic values of “family” are associated with ideas such as “relationship”, “emotion”, “responsibility”, “wholeness”, and “life cycle”.

“Family” represents a “relationship-based” existence. The “relationship” here is not simply formed by managing a structure among “individuals”, and it is more primal in the existential sense. “Family” is an expression of “a primal relationship” and also an existence “where individuals stay”.



The modern world has created an illusion of independent “individuals”. The truth is, every “individual” is born in a “family”. It is an ontological fact. The individual “self” and the “self” in a family indicate two different understandings about the “self” and two different patterns of its existence. Only “family” is the truly complete pattern of existence. “Family”, as a “relationship-based” existence, does not include only a single kind of relationship, it features a diversified mix: first the yin-yang relationship between husband and wife; then the hereditary relationship between parent and child; then the equal relationships between siblings. It is a complex “of whole relationships”. It is in these relationships that the roles of husband, wife, father, mother, sons and daughters achieve self-fulfillment, define themselves and find their own value. It is not that single “atoms” make up the “family”, but that each individual’s role is fixed in the relationships within the “family”. No “individuals” can decide their role in the relationships by themselves, and that precisely indicates where exactly the “individuals” are deficient. All individuals must have themselves established in a whole of “relationship”.

“Family” embodies an “emotional” encounter. The modern world advocates “individual” rights, and what is related to it—“rationality”. Along with the emergence of individualism comes the rise of a rational worldview. However, it also indicates that the modern world’s understanding of “individuals” is partial. “Individuals” in the eyes of the rational are heading towards the ultimate goal of becoming, as was proposed by Kant, morally disciplined. But even pure rationalists like Kant could see that what drives people forward towards the moral principles is still an emotion called “awe”. That was against his stance as a pure rationalist, so he was forced to take “awe” as an emotion that was purely caused by rationality. The birthplace of “emotions” is in fact “family”, or the tradition of “affection towards one’s relatives”. Independent rationality-based “individuals” are not so emotionally self-sufficient. And every “individual” must have something to emotionally rely on. It is also a point that modern philosophy has overlooked as regards mankind. Without an “emotional” correlation, even the members within a certain “relationship” would be nothing more than a node of the web. Meanwhile, “family” is the emotional environment that nourishes “individuals.” The most straightforward love, never motivated by any interest and beginning with the existential experience of “affection towards one’s relatives”, begins to occur among family members. And for all the “individuals”—the growing “individuals”, the “individuals” in the husband-wife relationship, and the “individuals” in the sibling relationships—their emotional encounters are all supported by “family”. The emotional bond enables the “individuals” to get united into a whole, and the loss of such a bond today is a key signal of the modernity crisis, which is caused by the “individual standard”. A loving “family” would be an effective weapon to overcome modern emotional barrenness.

“Family” represents a certain ethical principle. The values of “family” are intensely marked by emotions, which lay the foundation for family “morality”: the “love and care” the seniors show towards the young, the “filial love” the young hold towards their parents and ancestors, and the “respect and love” between siblings all constitute the “family-based” moral system. Though the “kindness and love” born in the “family” is hierarchical in structure, the natural and strong emotion marks the moral origin of traditional Chinese culture. Not only has traditional Chinese culture witnessed the

ethical significance of “family”, but Hegel, in his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, also insisted on the role of “family” as an essential link in “ethical life” and embodying a certain “ethical principle”. As members of the “family”, “individuals” interact and grow together. In this process, “family” formulates a kind of “ethical principle” that is distinguished from individualization. The highlight of this ethical principle is that it conveys the fact that “individuals” must depend on others to achieve moral wholeness, and individual freedom must be preceded by the freedom of others. In this process of achieving moral wholeness and freedom, “individuals” will blend into a whole and contribute their share. “Emotion” plays a very important part in ethical relationships. It takes on the form of “affection” between family members in a “family”, the brotherly love between “trade associations” in the “citizen society”, and the “political enthusiasm” of citizens in a nation (Hegel, 1995). Such kinds of emotional bonds will then be presented in reality as a certain custom or system, which further proves that the bond is also ethical. The “ethical principle” first appears in “family”, and then extends to “society” and “nation”. Though the ethical principle that “family” represents, according to Hegel, remains straightforward and natural in form, its influence on all the aspects of social life never wanes.

“Family” is a way of understanding the world. The relationships, emotions and ethics of “family” constitute a miniature pattern of the world. It is also a feature of traditional Chinese culture that “family” is used to embody the relationships between people and things in the universe. What accompanies individualism is an atom-based worldview: first, the world is “broken down” into “particles”; then the “particles” are synthesized into a world. It is a mechanistic way of looking at the world, so is the modern theory about society and the nation, which insists that we can know this world “scientifically” by feeling and experiencing it as independent individuals. However, the other side of people’s relationships with the world is obscured here. “Family” as an independent pattern of values offers a unique way of understanding the world. “Family” creates a “paradise within the family” which indicates the relationship between “me” and the world around me. In this family world, there is no single “individual”, and the world itself is not a simple whole that combines individuals. The world is exactly the paradise where “I” exist. It can certainly be “scientifically” understood, but its primary identity is “my family”, where “I” grow, exist, and feel warmth, and towards which “I” bear a “responsibility” and a “sense of unity between man and heaven”. Only in such a paradise can the individuals find the world around them amiable.

“Family” also implies a way to transcend spiritually. If “paradise” provides a loving space to “me,” then “family”, as a carrier of “succession”, enables “me” to extend infinitely in time through generations of continuation. The everlastingly continuing “family” culture reveals human’s transcendent spirit to pursue immortality. Revolving around “family”, traditional Chinese culture has formulated a rites and music culture. So “family” is not only a tradition or custom, but also a method for the Chinese to spiritually transcend. “Individuals” are not to be “saved” by an intangible god. Instead, they are saved by the “everlasting continuity” of life and spiritual transcendence that are conveyed in the memorial tablets of ancestors. It is based on such power that traditional Chinese culture seeks spiritual comfort during generations of succession, and makes life reassuring. It conveys

the meaning of this simple sentence, “When they are careful (about their parents) to the end and continue in reverence after (their parents) are long gone, the virtue of the people will return to its natural depth.”

The reestablishment of “family” values does not mean that we must abandon “individuals” and the way of viewing the world as an object. In some sense, the individualized or atomized world in people’s minds can, rather, be re-synthesized through “family” values. “Family” is a primal existence that carries all individuals. In this way, the world can be understood through different perspectives. What really matters is that modern Chinese people must restore their faith in “family”.

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