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Barbalet, Jack

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## **Greater Self, Lesser Self: Dimensions of Self-Interest in Chinese Filial Piety**

Jack Barbalet

### *Abstract*

While self-interest is depreciated in Confucian ethics the processes of family relations in traditional China are animated by the self-interested actions of family members. The paper outlines the Confucian ideology of filial piety which is commensurate with the governance of family life organized hierarchically and through the senior male's management of the joint-family's collective property. The structure, operations and principles of membership in traditional Chinese families are indicated, highlighting the tensions within them between consanguinity and conjugality and their material bases. The differential operation of self-interested actions by husbands and wives is also presented. A non-Confucian model of the relational-self is outlined in which both the collective context of Chinese families and the self-interested actions of individual family members within them is explicated.

### *Key words*

Confucianism, filial piety, self-interested action, relational-self, greater- and lesser-self.

### *Introduction*

The concept of self-interest is complex in its details but simple in its broad application. An action can be understood to be self-interested when it arises through the actor's own assessment of what is appropriate for their own purposes and well-being. Without depreciating the numerous and serious issues generated by this statement of self-interest ([Barbalet, 2012](#); Barbalet, 2013) the robustness of its common-sense meaning arises in its distinction from those actions, which through role obligation or direction to the purposes and well-being of others, can broadly be described as self-abnegating. Such a distinction between self-interest and self-abnegation tends to appear in comparisons of the quite different social relational patterns of Europe and China:

... in Western society legitimate domination is seen as the intentional, directional, and consequential acts of individuals acting within the boundaries of their jurisdictions. In China, on the other hand, it is seen as an aspect of specific sets of social roles, and hence as impersonal, non-intentional, and harmony-seeking (Hamilton, 1990, p. 77).

While not taking issue with the characterization of traditional Chinese society in this passage and its distinction from western European societies, the present discussion shall show that self-interested action is not absent from even those social process that involve domination through the imperatives of ascribed role expectations.

The conception of the self which is commonplace in what might loosely be described as western social contexts assumes clear boundaries between the self and others. Thus the sense that an individual has of their own personal space, their private domain, their exclusive proprietorial rights over objects of their possession, and their self-selected and self-directed purposes, goals or aspirations are quite distinct and separate from those of others. It is frequently noted that such clear-cut boundaries between individual persons simply does not obtain in Chinese cultural areas. Whereas western notions of the self may assume social distance between individuals, the Chinese notion assumes social intimacy; and, whereas western individuals ideally relate to each other on an assumption of horizontal equivalence, if not equality, Chinese relations assume hierarchy based on role differentiation of the type implicit in parent-child, teacher-student, ruler-

ruled relationships. Indeed, it is arguable that such hierarchical role relations imply a dependency of one on the other and therefore a particular sensitivity of one to the needs and purposes of the other.

The qualities of the Chinese conception of the self that is summarized here are captured in the notion of a relational-self, in which each individual person stands at the centre of a number of relationships with others, and while the boundaries between persons in such relationships are permeable in terms of the qualifications indicated above each person can more or less determine the boundary of the relationships themselves in which they are implicated (Fei, 1992; Fung, 1998; [Hwang, 2000](#); King, 1985). While the relational-self that is located in Chinese thought and practice may be egocentric it is nevertheless without the insularity and self-sufficiency associated with the western ideal of individualism (Fei, 1992, pp. 65-70). To put this proposition another way, the idea of a relational-self may be seen as involving the subordination of an individual person's 'lesser self' (*xiao wo*) to a 'greater self' (*da wo*) constituted in the relationships in which they participate, especially family relationships. This notion, that the relationships in which an individual participates is the constitutive formation of not only their social being but their self-identity indicates that the boundaries of self in this Chinese form extend to incorporate (relations with) significant others and, as a consequence, that the behaviour and interests of the individual self are determined in and through the relationships in which they participate. The ideas set out here correspond to various statements in key Confucian texts, which shall be described below. They are also seen as the basis of an indigenous Chinese social psychology ([Bedford and Hwang, 2003](#); Ho, 1998; [Ho and Chiu, 1998](#); King, 1991).

While acknowledging the significance of the concept of the relational-self and the associated idea of a distinction between a greater self and a lesser self for an understanding of social relationships in Chinese cultural areas this paper argues that it is erroneous to assume that the interests of the single individual as a *xiao wo* are not in fact directive of the behaviour of participants in Chinese family relationships and in other types of relationships. The argument to be developed below is that even assuming a notion of self as an aggregation of role compliance the interests related to advantage for discrete individual persons can be identified which explain their direction of action and how they interpret the roles they perform. Subordination to a 'greater self' does not negate or nullify situated interests of individuals, as the traditional rationale for Chinese familism maintains, but constitutes an arena in which it is exercised. Any imputation, on the basis of a conception of the relational-self, that interests determinative of individual behaviour are more or less exclusively those of the greater self therefore confuses context and opportunity structure on the one hand with the actions that occur within that framework, on the other. This is not to say that individuals are incapable of acting on behalf of collective or corporate entities. Nor is it to say that individuals do not act in a self-denying manner. Of course they may.

The claim to be developed below is directed against the assertion, that is widely seen to derive from the practice of Confucian ethics, namely that self-interested action is absent from the organization of traditional Chinese society; it will be shown, on the contrary, that self-interested action is not only to be found in traditional Chinese families but that the processes internal to such families are animated by this type of action. After briefly setting out the ideological and political basis of the notion of a greater self and the subordination of a lesser self to it the discussion shall consider the structure of the traditional Chinese family and demonstrate the operations of narrow self-interest within it in terms of the context of structural constraints and opportunities provided by the relations of filial piety (*xiao*). Finally, it will be shown that the

concept of the distinction between a ‘greater’ and ‘lesser’ self is not confined to the Chinese cultural area, where it is most developed and operates in a particular ideological or doctrinal framework and social relational form. The articulation of collective and individual imperatives is conceptualized in William James’ treatment of the self-complex (James, 1931, chapter 10) in an account that avoids the limitations of Confucian formulations in mapping the interests of individuals to collective phenomena.

### *Confucian selves*

The notion of the relational-self in Chinese philosophy and sociology is derived from the Confucian ideal of familial role relations (parent-child, husband-wife, elder-younger sibling) and those relationships which are seen as morphologically similar to them in the political (ruler-ruled) and civic (patron-client) spheres of activity. The classical statement of this notion is the brief characterization of five human relationships (*wu lun*) set out in the *Mencius* in which it is contended that there should be: ‘love between father and son, duty between ruler and subject, [role] distinction between husband and wife, precedence of the old over the young, and faith [or trust] between friends’ (Mencius, 2004, p. 60). It is less frequently noticed that the *Mencius* also indicates that it is a proper function of state authority to inculcate these relationships (Mencius, 2004, p. 60). The summary distillation of human relationships into five affectively distinctive binary role sets is located in other Confucian classics, including the *Zhongyong* (Johnson & Wang, 2012, p. 447), known in English as *The Doctrine of the Mean* but more accurately translated as *Maintaining Perfect Balance* (Gardner, 2007, pp. 108-9; see also Johnson & Wang, 2012, pp. 181-85).

At the core of the five human relationships is the concept of filial piety (*xiao*). According to the *Zhongyong* the quality of humanness (*ren*) is principally realized in ‘devotion to one’s family members’, and in such devotion ‘there is a hierarchy’ (Johnson & Wang, 2012, p. 447). Here are the joint elements of the relational-self mentioned above, namely a combination of intimacy (rather than distance) and hierarchy. The fundamental idea, that one realizes one’s being as a self through subordination in family relations, is expressed in the *Zhongyong* in a number of different ways. In Chapter 17 it is noted that filial piety leads to the attainment of more general social values: Shun’s great filial piety ‘inevitably gained his position ... his prosperity ... his reputation, and [his] longevity’ (Johnson & Wang, 2012, p. 439). While Shun’s accomplishments seem to accrue to him in his own right they are achieved by and reflect his filial piety through which a greater self is expressed. This idea, of the subordination if not submergence of the lesser self into a more dominant and causally prior greater self, through filial piety, is reinforced in a statement in Chapter 19 in which it is claimed that ‘being filial was to skillfully perpetuate the purposes of others (i.e. their ancestors) and to skillfully carry on their undertakings’ (Johnson & Wang, 2012, p. 443). In Chapter 20, where the five human relationships are referred to, is the notion that self-cultivation counter-intuitively requires subordination to family role requirements: ‘... the noble man cannot do otherwise than cultivate himself. If he intends to cultivate himself, he cannot do otherwise than serve his family members’ (Johnson & Wang, 2012, p. 447).

The subordination of the actions and interests of a single individual to the needs and imperatives of a family collective, which gives content to the distinction between the forms of self, the lesser and the greater, come out of a particular conception of the relation between the individual and their family. In western societies the family is predominantly seen as an institution within which the off-spring of parents is nurtured and socialized in order for it to

attain an independent existence, which is the hallmark of adulthood. In this sense the family exists to support the individual for the limited period required to attain the capacities which would permit independence from it. In traditional Chinese society the relation between the individual and the family is the reverse of the one described here. The individual exists to serve the family and ensure its continuance. The traditional Chinese family functions in terms of a notion of a 'continuum of descent' in which any single living individual personifies all of his forebears or ancestors and also all of his descendants both born and unborn. Indeed, the individual in a traditional Chinese family 'exists by virtue of his ancestors, and his descendants exist only through him' (Baker, 1979, pp. 26-27). This difference of family types is associated with another difference, in the conception of marriage. Marriage in traditional Chinese society is not a union of two individuals, as in western society, but a union between two families; and the purpose of the union is not individual happiness but the procreation of male descendants to ensure that ancestors might continue to receive sacrifices (Liu, 1999, pp. 6-7). The traditional Chinese understanding of family is primarily in terms of the vertical consanguine and inter-generational relationship which is served by the horizontal conjugal relationship, the latter being subordinate to and in service of the former.

The characterization of the Chinese family in terms of a 'continuum of descent' indicates the burden of responsibility which falls on every living male person to both honour and support his predecessors, not only his living parents but also his dead ancestors, and to father sons through whom the family shall continue at least for the next generation, on to whom the responsibilities of the continuum of descent shall again assert themselves. In this sense the Chinese family does not produce offspring who shall on maturity be independent of it, but rather produces offspring who on maturity are more firmly tied to the requirements of the maintenance of the family as a continuing entity. The institutional context in which this ideational formation operates is a family structure in which a number of functions are located, including a religious function, through which ancestors are worshiped, and also a social function, which carries responsibilities of both caring for elderly parents and marrying in order to produce heirs. The economic function of the family is discharged by its member's activities which contribute not to self-aggrandizement but to collective family fortunes. By custom and law the traditional Chinese family is the locus of the control of property. This is not to say that property could not be held by individuals but that the traditional Chinese family owns property as a joint person (Freedman, 1979, pp. 257-58). More shall be said of this in the following section. The point to be made here, though, is that in discharging the economic function of the family an individual person's productive activity is necessarily directed toward maintaining and augmenting a collective family property. For an adult son this means contributing to the property of a family unit controlled by its head (*jia zhang*), who may be his father or grand-father and possibly his great-grand-father. This relationship, set out in Confucian principles, comprising a person's contribution to a collective wealth, is the material basis of a clear distinction between a lesser and a greater self, and of the subordination of one to the other.

The benefits to an individual of membership in a family formed by joint ownership of property controlled by a senior head are significant. As landed property is the dominant form of wealth in traditional China a family in which the Confucian principle of filial piety is exercised and that encompasses more than two generations, possibly up to five, including senior parents, adult sons and their wives, their children and so on, would enjoy a number of obvious economic advantages. First, the available family-based work force would be large enough to obviate the need to expend resources on the employment of outside labour. Second, an extended-family

estate would provide savings in so far as a need for multiple dwellings and duplicate farming equipment is removed. Third, the surplus generated by an extended family is likely to provide opportunities for investment in additional land and possibly in vertical enterprise integration through establishment of a factory or a retail outlet. Fourthly, an extended surplus can also be deployed for investment in human capital, providing education to sons who through success in the imperial examination may join the civil service and thus link the family with political power.

There are also obvious political advantages that derive from large and extended families. These benefits accrue to both the individual and also to the political state. From the individual viewpoint, in addition to the indirect possibility of linking with political power through educational advancement and state employment, mentioned above, the benefit of simply being a member of a large family group is important in a society in which state regulation is pervasive, in which law offers little direct protection to business and in which power is exercised particularistically at best and frequently corruptly. From the point of view of the state the extended family is a major source of social stability. Individuals subjected to the discipline of filial piety are not only rigorously regulated, but the means of regulation operate at no direct cost to the state as it is family members who police each other and have at their disposal the compelling ultimate sanction of expulsion from the family that provides to the individual person the economic and political security described above. It is little wonder, then, that the traditional Chinese state promoted Confucianism and through it filial piety. As the Confucian classic the *Daxue (The Great Learning)* indicates, in 'wishing to bring good order to their states [the ancients] first regulated their households' (Johnson & Wang, 2012, p. 135).

### *The traditional Chinese family*

In the preceding discussion of the Confucian notion of filial piety and its expression in the extended or joint family (*jiating*) it has been shown that the well-being or interests of an individual person may be satisfied through their participation in the mutual responsibilities associated with collective family enterprise in terms of the principles of generational hierarchy and the subordination of individual self-interest that accompanies it. Confucian doctrine and cultural precepts understand the resulting arrangement to include the assimilation of the interests of the individual, characterized as the lesser self, into the interests of the collective entity arising from family relationships and the obligations that they entail, which can be seen to exist as a greater self. Indeed, through legal enforcement the traditional Chinese state, from the Han dynasty (206-220) to the end of the Qing (1644-1911), treated the family as a mutual responsibility group, so that the crime of one member may lead to punishment of all members. The state also gave force to the authority of the family head both through his subjection to state-inflicted punishment for transgressions against filial piety and also legal impunity in his exertion of force in maintaining filiality on behalf of the family (Baker, 1979, pp. 113-15; Freedman, 1979, p. 242). These threads come together in a state practice that is unyielding in defending filial piety:

In October 1865, Cheng Han-cheng's wife had the insolence to beat her mother-in-law. This was regarded as such a heinous crime that the following punishment was meted out. Cheng and his wife were both skinned alive, in front of the mother, their skin was displayed at city gates in various towns and their bones burned to ashes. Cheng's granduncle, the eldest of his close relatives, was beheaded; his uncle and two brothers, and the head of the Cheng clan, were hanged. The wife's mother, her face tattooed with the words 'neglecting the daughter's education', was paraded through seven provinces.

Her father was beaten 80 strokes and banished to a distance of 3000 *li*. The heads of family in the houses to the right and the left of the Cheng's were beaten 80 strokes and banished to Heilung-kiang. The educational officer in town was beaten 60 strokes and banished to a distance of 1000 *li*. Cheng's nine-month-old boy was given a new name and put in the county magistrate's care. Cheng's land was to be left in waste 'forever'. All this was recorded on a stone stele and rubbings of the inscriptions were distributed throughout the empire (Hsu, 1970-71, p. 31 quoted in Hamilton, 1984, p. 417).

Against this background it is difficult to conceive that persons living under traditional Chinese conditions could be anything but self-abnegating, other-interested and generally defined by the collective imperatives generated through the compelling relationships in which they were entwined and to which they were subordinated. Through an examination of the structure and processes of the traditional Chinese family it emerges, however, that self-interest is nevertheless central to the behavior of individuals in their negotiation of relationships with family members. The background and substance of an individual's social existence is indeed the family in which they have membership. This is the context in which is set the actions and strategies of individuals shaped by the constraints and opportunities of that context and which at pivotal moments is animated by an interest in realizing a self-directed purpose connected with those constraints and opportunities.

The social form of family that emerges in traditional China, often described in terms of Confucian principles outlined above and summarized in the folk saying 'five generations under one roof', is an ideal seldom realized. It is estimated that at any one time no more than 7 percent of Chinese families attained this ideal (Eastman, 1988, p. 16). Indeed, the conjugal family form is the most common in traditional China, comprising at most two generations consisting of two parents and their unmarried children typically comprising between three and six persons. Field studies conducted in the 1920s and 1930s found that the 'average size of the Chinese family is about five' (Hsu, 1943, p. 555; Freedman, 1979, p. 235). It is estimated that approximately 60 percent of families were of this type (Eastman, 1988, p. 16). The prevalence of the conjugal family form derives from economic necessity resulting from the incapacity of family estates to support all of their members. Writing in the late 1930s of a village in the Yangtze Valley Fei (1962, p. 192) found that approximately 90% of the population in the village owned less than 10 *mow* or 1.5 acres, insufficient to support a family. In a slightly later study of a Yunnan village Fei and Chang (1948, p. 54) found that 'a minority of the population holds most of the land, and the majority is landless or has insufficient land for its support'. In both cases tenancy and wage labour are required to support the majority of families. When a family plot is too modest to sustain more than one adult son and his parents then the other sons are compelled to leave the household. If the departed son is married then he, with his wife and children, will subsist as a conjugal family. The family that he leaves, in which the eldest adult son, possibly with a wife and children, remain with his parents, is a stem of the (potentially) extended family through which the Confucian ideal of extended joint-family is achieved. The Confucian ethical norm which holds that adult sons are subordinate to and care for their parents within a single household can be achieved only on the basis of material sufficiency. As Freedman (1979, p. 247) says, for the 'greater part of the population ... the unwieldy family suppressing individualism was ruled out by poverty and lack of power'. The interests of individuals facing the threat of poverty, if not poverty itself and hunger, will lead them to adopt relations with kin, including separation, which are the effective obverse of Confucian filiality.



The formation of conjugal families through the movement of adult sons out of joint-families through self-interest arising from necessity, because of the limited economic capacities of the extended family unit, acknowledges declining family fortunes. Family fortunes may also rise. A feature of family life in traditional China is the possibility of changing fortune in either direction and the corresponding possibility of changing family size over the course of several generations (Baker, 1979, p. 133; Eastman, 1988, p. 16). A rhythmic historic pattern of wealth acquisition and loss and a parallel movement in family size of increase or decline, contributed to the political stability of imperial China through the absence of a system of inherited class formations capable of challenging established political power (Baker, 1979, pp. 134-35). The mechanisms through which the possible augmentation or reduction of family size and subsequent changes in its form include the self-interested actions of individual family members.

### *Men and their interests*

It has been noted above that the traditional Chinese family owns property jointly. While the collective family estate is managed by the family head (*jia zhang*), the eldest male of the most senior generation within the family, each male member of the family has a claim on it. The benefits to the individual family members of collective property were mentioned above. While the family property remains intact then it is in the interests of each family member to maintain and augment the family estate. In doing so there shall always be different capacities and inclinations between family members. Such differences, relating to the energy, foresightedness and willingness of brothers to contribute to their collective property will be of relatively little importance while the eldest senior family member continues to live and oversee the estate. On his death, however, these latent differences are likely to become manifest, giving rise to disagreements and even conflicts about the management of and contribution to the joint family property to which the sons of the now deceased father each have a clearly visible individual claim. As the Confucian system is primarily generationally hierarchical there is no compelling means of authoritatively resolving disagreements between sons or brothers in the absence of their parents. It is at this time that the joint family is likely to divide (*fenjia*) into its stem components, each adult son taking his share of the family property and establishing a separate family unit.

It can be seen from the above that the self-interest of married sons in an extended family shall change with changes in the order of family supervision and that manifestations of their self-interest shall have different consequences during different phases of family circumstance. While the dominance continues of the senior father over both a joint family property and of the sons who have a share in it, then it is in the interest of each son to contribute to the family's composite wealth and suppress their rivalry. The father's management of the joint property and supervision of his son's behaviour ideally contributes to the growth of the family estate which benefits all. Even at this stage of the cycle of the extended family the different interests of the adult sons are expressed, however, through the procreation of each of their wives and their wife's putative advocacy on her husband's behalf against the wives of his brothers (Freedman, 1979, p. 272). Exposed against this background are the two opposing forces that structure traditional Chinese families, on the one hand father-son relations underlying a consanguine form legitimated through Confucian norms, and on the other hand husband-wife relations on which is based the conjugal family form (Hsu, 1943, p. 556).

It is in the interests of married sons in successful and wealthy joint-families to suppress their differences and maintain consanguinity in order to better preserve and contribute to the family estate. On their father's death, however, and through disagreements about the best ways

to manage their aggregated estate, adult sons at this time find it in their interest to follow the consequences of their manifest rivalry (Cohen, 1976, pp. 142-44, 195-96) and divide between them 'the partible estate ... [with] the family segmenting into new units which are residentially ... economically, and ritually distinct' (Freedman, 1979, p. 304). Under a unifying managerial regime of the eldest senior male the self-interest of each son is to contribute to, augment and enjoy the benefits of a collective property. When the means of a unified family management are no longer available, and when the distinct and unequal contributions of each stem of the joint family are exposed with the absence of a hierarchical line of patrimonial command, then the self-interest of each adult son is to take his portion of the joint estate and establish his own independent family.

Up to this point family members have been described in terms of blood relations and marriage. But the traditional Chinese household has a membership not confined to kin and spouses; it may also include non-kin members who provide labour of various kinds. Within this latter category are concubines (*qie*). In Chinese cultural areas concubinage is so thoroughly understood to be an elemental aspect of traditional social arrangements that even though it ceased to exist in the People's Republic in 1949 it continued to enjoy legal status in British administered Singapore until 1965 (Freedman, 1979, p. 142) and in Hong Kong until 1971 (Liu, 1999, p. 3). The ostensive customary reason to purchase a concubine is to provide reproductive services to a family in the provision of an heir. The sons of concubines are legitimate as their 'official' mother is the concubine's consort's wife (Freedman, 1979, p. 260), but unlike wives concubines themselves have no ritual relationship with their consort's ancestors and no independent property. However, concubines may be purchased not simply to produce heirs but to reflect the status of the household into which they are brought.

While the ideological legitimation of concubinage represents it as a means of overcoming the problem of a wife who fails to produce a son, as 'an institution to insure against the extinction of the male line of descent' (Freedman, 1979, p. 99), in practice it is just as likely to symbolize the consort's social status. The incidence of households with concubines varies between regions and the wealth of the households in question, including the possibility of households in poor communities having a concubine, although concubines are most frequently found in households linked with wealth and power (Watson, 2004, pp. 176-77). In that sense concubines may be purchased more out of self-interest than to serve the interests of the family as a unit through production of an heir. This possibility is emphasized further by the fact that a concubine will provide sexual intimacy to her consort. The social significance of this last point gains gravity when it is appreciated that in traditional Chinese society a man's wife is always chosen for him by his parents while he chooses his concubine himself, without regard to family connection or preference (Freedman, 1979, p. 100). Not only are marriages arranged in traditional Chinese society, without consideration of the preferences of the individuals involved, but the organization of activities in traditional Chinese households generates not only an intense sexual division of labour but also ensures a clear 'psychological' separation between spouses in which there is an 'obvious indifference between husband and wife' (Fei, 1992, pp. 85-86) and effectively social discouragement of sexual affection between them (Hsu, 1943, p. 556). In this context concubinage is an institution in which a man's self-interest is manifest: he could have 'as many concubines as he could afford, desire or tolerate, and he could choose them himself' (Baker, 1979, p. 35). It is important not only to acknowledge the clearly self-interested aspect of a man's purchasing a concubine but to contextualize it beyond the relationship a husband has

with his wife, in which this expression of self-interest stands against the interest of conjugal union.

It was noted above that there are cross-cutting forces in traditional Chinese families, one being the consanguine relations in the Confucian ideal of a family as a continuously iterated inter-generational father-son connection and the other being a lateral conjugal relationship between husband and wife. Concubinage obviously provides opportunity for a man's self-interest in relation to his wife and his conjugal relationship with her. But any reduction of a man's interest in his wife, and therefore the conjugal axis of the traditional family, effectively provides support to the axis of consanguine relations: a man who finds 'other pleasures than his interest in his formal wife ... is much less likely to side with [her] against his mother' (Hsu, 1943, p. 561). In this sense, then, concubinage is functionally congruent with the joint-family form. Indeed, as indicated above, in wealthy households ably managed by a family head it is in an adult son's self-interests to support the joint-family and contribute productively to its wealth.

The self-interest of an adult son in poor families is different than that of a rich family's son and it leads to different concerns and behaviour. A wealthy family has no difficulty securing and replacing wives for its sons. This is not true for poor families. The loss of a wife and daughter-in-law is much more greatly felt in a poor family than in a wealthy family, and especially for a husband: 'It is therefore in the interest especially of the husband that he should side with his wife' (Hsu, 1943, p. 561). There is another element to the difference between sons in rich and poor families. In the former 'married brothers ... [stood] together, refusing to listen to their wives' complaints, ... because they were posed against their father ... whose power rested on the economic resources he controlled' (Freedman, 1979, p. 246). In wealthy families there is both encouragement of consanguinity and therefore interest formation, both positive and negative, on a father-son axis; there is a corresponding reduction of a husband's interest in conjugal relations and heightened interest in sibling relations. In poor families, Freedman (1979, p. 246) adds, the 'father's control was weak and the brothers highly individualized among themselves [with each] brother [standing] close to his wife'. This does not necessarily mean that there is greater affection between spouses in poorer families than in wealthier, but it does mean that it is in the interests of a husband not to alienate his wife in their relationship.

### *Women and their interests*

The position of family members changes over time through maturation, reproduction and aging, and over time such changes are reflected in structural realignments within the family. In the Confucian scheme and traditional Chinese family the position of women, as both daughter and wife, is secondary to that of male family members. Daughters are temporary members of the family into which they are born. Through marriage a woman enters another family in which her membership is consolidated by producing a son and heir. While a wife has ritual rights in relation to her husband's ancestors her interests are not with this family and its male members as a whole but are only aligned with her husband's interests and his portion of the joint family wealth which shall eventually become available to her sons. Indeed, because the traditional Chinese family owns property as a joint person, 'the family is composed only of males', according to Freedman (1979, p. 258), and that 'by being born or adopted into a family a man is immediately endowed with a claim to its property'. A woman can have no direct claim to the property either of the family into which she was born or of the family into which she marries. A woman can only enjoy the material benefits of family indirectly through marriage and by producing a male heir. This does not mean, however, that women as wives are without property.

On marriage a woman is given a dowry and cash gifts that she alone possess and controls, which constitutes her 'private money' [*sifang qian*] (Baker, 1979, pp. 19-20; Cohen, 1976, pp. 164-91; Freedman, 1979, p. 258; Watson, 2004, p. 186). A wife may augment her *sifang qian* through paid employment or business. It follows, then, that 'since men are always in principle members of property-holding units, their earnings being absorbed into these groups, women are the only individual property owners in [traditional] Chinese society' (Freedman, 1979, p. 259). As wives alone have private and personal means in the form of *sifang qian*, more directly than men they are attributed with the material basis of self-interest.

The highly constrained dependent status of women in traditional Chinese households means that a wife's interests are aligned with her husband's. While it is in their interests for brothers to suppress their rivalry while the household flourishes and its fortunes rise wives interests are competitively expressed against other wives in possibly quarrelsome advocacy of their husband's claims and in procreative activity. In this context a wife is most likely to deploy her *sifang qian* in a manner that advantages her husband, and therefore her own future situation. This is best achieved at the time of break-up of the joint-family through the death of the *jia zhang* and when the collective property is shared among his sons. Subsequently each son and his wife will form their own family unit and 'the wife is encouraged to part with her "private" wealth by the domestic climate preceding partition, which ... [is] characterized by the unity of husband and wife as they fight for their interests, and those of their children' (Baker, 1979, p. 20). Apart from such pivotal events a woman may continue to deploy her *sifang qian* independently of her husband in providing 'decided advantages for her children' (Watson, 2004, p. 186), including the provision of education to a son, a dowry and therefore marriage to a daughter, and in other ways providing means to safeguard the economic interests of a son after his father's death. A wife's self-interests are refracted through and expressed in terms of her interest in her husband and children, especially as she deploys her *sifang qian*. But this is not the only way in which a married woman may express self-interest in traditional Chinese society.

The domestic sphere in traditional Chinese society is an exclusively female domain including not only wives and their children and older yet-to-be married daughters but possibly also concubines (*qie*) and 'little maids' or 'menial women' (*ya huan*) who enter the household through purchase, debt or wage employment. This sphere is subject to the authority of the oldest female member of the most senior generation. A newly-arrived daughter-in-law is an outsider in the household and until she has given birth to a son and thus provide the family with an heir she will remain an un-integrated member of her husband's family. A newly-arrived daughter-in-law must learn new routines and the expectations of unfamiliar others. She will cook and perform other domestic tasks under the typically harsh discipline of her mother-in-law, who will see her as a rival in the cross-cutting loyalties of consanguinity and conjugality that characterize the traditional Chinese family structure. At this stage of her life it will be most apparent to her that a woman is simply an item of property transferred from one family to another (Cheung, 2005). It is in her interest to contribute to her husband's well-being by having a son as quickly as possible and otherwise engage in a strategy of long-term investment in their conjugal relations. But this is not the only formation of self-interest to which a newly married woman may commit; in a significant minority of cases she may feel that her hardships, which cannot be over-exaggerated (Eastman, 1988, pp. 24-29; Fei, 1962, pp. 45-50), mean that her best interest is to exit the family of her marriage.

A relatively significant number of wives in traditional China depart their husband's families by means of suicide. A wife who feels that it is in her interest to remove herself from her

mother-in-law's or husband's authority has few options. After marriage her natal family becomes a 'foreign home' (Cheung, 2005, pp. 395-96) and returning to it is seldom possible. Relevant demographic data does not exist for imperial China, but the sociocultural significance of suicide as an expressive form of protest or resistance is well documented (Ropp, Zamperini & Zurndorfer, 2001; Lee & Kleinman, 2000). As well as being remarkably high Chinese suicide rates in recent years manifest a comparatively atypical pattern in which rural females of 15-25 years are approximately 2.5 times more likely to commit suicide than rural males and over 4 times more likely than urban males and females (Phillips, Liu & Zhang 1999). This pattern, of high suicide rates among young rural women, has been demonstrated for early twentieth century (1905) Taiwan, a society in which traditional mores operated, against much lower contemporary international comparisons (Wolf, 1975). In this context it is possible to understand suicide as a form of self-interested action. In Chinese society suicide is an act of ultimate rebellion and possibly motivated by revenge against ill-treatment. After surveying a number of cases and considering the conditions leading to suicide in rural China Wu (2011, p. 234) concludes that the majority of them 'are a form of resistance to family politics and domestic injustice'. Indeed, the cultural narrative in China of death by suicide is that it 'brings power' to the deceased as 'the means to punish her tormentors' (Wolf, 1975, p. 114; see also Ji, Kleinman & Becker 2001).

The power of the suicide is achieved through the agency of others as well as the actor's own culturally accepted 'capacities'. The suicide of a young wife is understood as a 'damning public accusation [a woman makes] of her mother-in-law, husband' and other family members (Wolf, 1975, p. 112). In this way suicide as protest necessarily implicates others. The parents and especially the brothers of the suicide will seek redress from her husband's family, in law and through direct action, including possibly by 'destroying part' of their dwelling (Fei, 1962, p. 49). A wife's kinship links are maintained through her brothers, who have a special role as 'protectors of their sisters and of the sons of their sisters' (Freedman, 1979, p. 270; Watson, 2004, p. 185). Indeed, maltreatment of a wife is taken by her brothers as an assault on their own honour. In the event of a wife's death her brothers are required to visit their in-laws household not only 'to ensure that the obsequies are conducted on a scale commensurate with their own standing' but especially 'to see that death has not been the result of foul play or suicide' (Freedman, 1979, pp. 270-71). Other agents of the suicide's power include neighbours, who through gossip and ridicule shall cause the mother-in-law to suffer significant loss of face. The agency of the suicide herself is manifest in her continuing presence as 'a spirit' who is 'able to [take] revenge' against her mother-in-law and possibly other family members (Fei, 1962, p. 49).

The power of the suicide to cause dissension within and disruption of the well-being of her husband's family and the self-interested motive of the suicide against the filial relations of the extended family she joined cannot be readily assimilated into the Durkheimian framework of suicide familiar to mainstream sociology. Durkheim's brief discussion of fatalistic suicide acknowledges it to be the opposite of anomic suicide, by which he means that it results from high rather than low social regulation. But it is opposite in another sense he did not appreciate; whereas anomic suicide is seen to be structurally produced by the conditions with which it associated and is therefore functionally emergent in them, as are egoistic and altruistic suicide, fatalistic suicide is described in a manner that suggests that it is a volitional reaction to 'excessive moral despotism' (Durkheim, 1970, p. 276 note 25). This is to say that the agency of the persons who kill themselves under conditions of fatalistic suicide is a factor in the explanation in addition to the social structural conditions to which persons are subjected. This is certainly a feature of the suicide of a Chinese wife.

The majority of women who join families through marriage do not kill themselves. It is in their interests to contribute to the family they have joined and become a confirmed member of it by giving birth to a son and thereby contribute to her husband's engagement in the 'continuum of descent'. Through the birth of a son a woman's status in the family changes: as a mother her relationship with both her mother-in-law and husband will benefit from the provision to their family of an heir. In time, through her son's eventual marriage, she shall exercise over her son's bride the authority she was subjected to as a young wife. If she should outlive her in-laws she may exercise effective control over an extended family, its members and their joint property. Thus changes in the relational position and status of an individual during the course of their life career will affect their interests and reflect changes in formal patterns of family structure and their changing position within it.

### *Discussion*

In consideration of the traditional Chinese family it has been shown that the self-interest of its individual members is significant at pivotal times in determining the course and direction of family change. The extended family is a context in which the self-interested actions of its individual members are directed to engagements with diverse others. As an individual's position in their family changes, through maturation, role change in marriage, death of the head of the family, childbirth and so on, so their interests also change. What does not change is the interaction between context and action through which the fortunes of both individuals and the family they inhabit lead to outcomes that affect the future direction and opportunities of both. The Confucian distinction between a greater self and a lesser self acknowledges this complex interplay of context and agent. At the same time, however, the doctrine of filial piety within Confucian thought denies the possibility that the self-interested actions of individual family members may routinely contribute to if not generate the dynamism of relations within a traditional household, within the parameters of the collective entity itself.

A Confucian social psychology, which assumes a relational-self, cannot incorporate an appreciation of the routine role of self-interested action. This is because it assumes the necessary subordination of the individual 'lesser self' to the familial 'greater self'. This is not simply through acceptance of the ethical principle of filiality but through a socio-psychological premise that persons are constituted in the roles they inhabit and the obligatory imperatives of those roles. The challenge, then, is to outline a notion of a relational-self in which this relation may be interactive and in which self-interested action is not only possible but has a constructive role. A non-Confucian account of the relational-self must accept both the morally-infused obligations internal to the roles encountered in traditional Chinese families, which in the Confucian framework denies the legitimacy if not the possibility of self-interested action, with the necessity of both self-preservation and self-seeking in the action of individual persons. In summarizing such a notion of a relational-self it is necessary to draw on the self-complex developed by William James.

In conceptualizing 'self' James first distinguishes between the 'I' and the 'Me'. The I, who knows, is the subject of self, and the Me, which can be known, is the object of self or the empirical self. The notion of a self that is interested in the roles it performs and how it performs them indicates an interest in the agent's awareness of her own identity, summarized as the Jamesian 'I'; this is a quality of the Chinese self for which there is literary evidence from at least the sixth century BC (Elvin, 1985, p. 159). The 'empirical self', according to James (1931, pp. 292-6), comprises three distinct elemental selves. First, the 'material self' is located in the body

and the things with which a person identifies, including bodily adornments and extensions, especially immediate family and close friends. Second, the 'social self' forms through the recognition self gets from others and therefore responds to the perceived or assumed expectations of others. Third, what James calls the 'spiritual self' but best described as the 'subjective self' comprises concrete manifestations of a person's subjective faculties and disposition, including how a person regards herself, her moral sensibility, conscience and will. James takes it as axiomatic that the actions engaged by a self, in its 'material', 'social' or 'subjective' forms, must include what he calls 'self-seeking' and 'self-preservation' (James, 1931, p. 292).

The substance of the 'subjective-self', to begin with the last element of the Jamesian Me mentioned above, is the self in which values predominate. The subjective-self, as the domain of values in self-appraisal, has an interest in value consistency that unites belief and action. The social-self, which is formed through the recognition and appraisal of others, accounts for a quite different type of self-interest; it is interested in how it is regarded by others or socially perceived. The material-self, which is neither subjective nor social in the senses indicated here, is described by James as embodied. This means that it is interested in those things that maintain the body, certainly, but because embodiment has extensions, this is the self that is interested in significant others. Indeed, extension results from a person's sense that another occupies the same position that they do. Family members in particular are thus extensions of a person and constitute inclusion in their material-self. But under certain conditions the material-self's extensions may include not only immediate family members, with whom the self identifies, but also strangers as friends. These are typically regarded in the Chinese context as fictive kin (Baker, 1979, pp. 162-67; Fei, 1962, pp. 87-94).

It can be seen that James' three distinct forms of self are relational, but more complex and multi-layered than in the Confucian form. The subjective-self is formed through a person's relationship with their own self-appraisal. This underpins the Confucian notion of self-cultivation. The social-self is formed through relations with others through their appraisal of self. The social-self, commonly known in sociology as the looking-glass self, is elemental in face relations (*mianzi*) (Qi, 2011) which are characteristic in Chinese social structure (Hwang, 1987). Finally, the material-self includes relations with all of those things and especially persons with which the self identifies, including self-extensions and especially immediate family and close friends. The interests generated in all of these relational possibilities are not necessarily consistent with each other and indeed are unlikely to be so. What must be added to the Jamesian model outlined here is recognition that at particular contextual junctures these inconsistencies become resolved in practice by imperative vectors in which particular self-interests dominate as the source of determinative action, as indicated in preceding sections of this paper. On the death of the family head and the absence of effective management of relations between adult sons the dissolution of the joint-family into its component stems is precipitated by self-interested action based on a narrowing of the extensions of the material-self, and a re-alignment from the consanguinal to the conjugal axis of family relations. The subjective-self-interest of a new wife, who values her independence against her dependence on an oppressive mother-in-law or husband, leads to her departure from the family by means of suicide. Other examples are also presented in the discussion above. The approach to the notion of 'self' outlined here is therefore consistent with the idea in Fei (1992, p. 65) that '[s]ocial relationships in China possess a self-centered quality'. While it is true, as Fei (1992, p. 66) goes on to say, that the social structure 'rests ... on hierarchical differentiations', these are not only constraining of individual will,

‘one’s inner self’, but also operate as the context in which the individual-self engages others in self-seeking and self-preservation.

Having argued for the importance of self-interested action in understanding the mechanisms of the traditional Chinese family structure it is important to reiterate that self-interest, in this case, operates within the context of the traditional family and does not undermine it or function to replace the associated kinship structure and the relations internal to it. In the opening paragraph of the present paper a quotation from Hamilton (1990) is used to draw attention to the contrasting cases of European and Chinese social structures. European social structure is based on non-kin cooperation and impersonal exchanges driven by the self-interest of the actors involved. In contrast, Chinese kinship solidarity and intra-clan enforcement of civic and commercial exchanges predominate (Grief & Tabellini 2010). The argument of the present paper is that the predominance of kinship in traditional Chinese social organization and the associated role expectations internal to the patriarchal relations embodied in Confucian ethical precepts operate in terms of the agency of the individual actors who interpret their roles and animate them through an understanding of the advantages available to them in the circumstances in which they find themselves. The greater self of family develops through the actions of the lesser self of its individual members, directed to satisfaction of their interests within the situated relationships in which they are involved.

### *Conclusion*

The idea of the subordination of individual selves and their interests through their immersion in broader relations with others, principally other family members through filial piety (*xiao*) but also in relations with others through enduring reciprocal exchanges of mutual favour (*guanxi*), is central to two connected formations. First, this notion is a core element of Confucian ethical thought and secondly it is given expression in a sociology and social psychology based on a Chinese ‘relational-self’. Through examination of a major institution of traditional Chinese society, namely the traditional joint-family, it has been shown that it is not contradictory to acknowledge both the operation of collective social forces to which individuals are subjected and to also accept that the mechanisms through which these forces lead to an unfolding and development of family life includes the self-interested actions of particular family members. The examination above of the joint-family in these terms is not comprehensive but indicative; the role of self-interest in determining the actions of the family head, extensively discussed by [Greenhalgh \(1994\)](#), is not treated in the present account; other omissions can no doubt be identified. It has also been shown in the paper that the distinction between a ‘greater self’ and a ‘lesser self’ can be accommodated in a non-Confucian relational sociology of self, outlined by [James \(1931\)](#), in which a constructive role is given to self-interested action.

The self in traditional Chinese society is typically portrayed in terms of its subjection to collective imperatives, manifest in hierarchically structured binary role obligations within joint-families, legitimated through Confucian filial piety. The tensions within such families, which arise from the contrasting axes of consanguinity on the one hand and its means of reproduction, conjugality, on the other, generate competing attachments and loyalties. The outcome of these tensions includes not only scope for but a necessity of self-interested action in directing the continuing relations of joint-family life. The emergence of various particular manifestations of self-interested action in terms of the distinct phase of an individual’s life cycle within sequential changes in the structural arrangement of family relationships means that the self in traditional Chinese society is both subject to intimate collective forces and at the same time self-consciously



aware not only of its role obligations but also the choices available in managing them to the satisfaction of its personal individually-defined purposes. The traditional Chinese self is therefore both alter-centrally role-obligated and also interested in realizing egocentric purposes. The traditional Chinese person's capacity to achieve the latter is significant in performance of the former.

Jack Barbalet  
Department of Sociology  
Hong Kong Baptist University  
Kowloon Tong  
Hong Kong SAR China

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