Continuity or Change? Family Structure and Its Consequences in Transitional China

Juhua Yang

Center for Population and Development Studies,
Renmin University of China
Beijing 100872, P.R.China

Abstract: With industrialization, urbanization, modernization and globalization, the family institution has inevitably undergone changes. Changing demographic, socioeconomic and cultural forces have jointly brought about profound changes to the family organization. This paper traces the changing trend, patterns and characteristics in family structure, relationships among family members, function and values, in recent years in China. It has found that family size has reduced, family forms have become more diversified, family relationship has remained intimate but distanced, many functions has been taken over by public agencies or weakened, and family norms and culture has been reshaped. While changing in various ways and important challenges remain, however, the Chinese family has been so far resilient to societal transformation due to its deeply rooted tradition and current structural constraints, which makes intergenerational reciprocity attractive and therefore maintaining many types of family function. In the future, both the government and the family have to face decreased ability to maintain family functions (e.g., sufficient support for the elderly) to keep pace with demographic transition, persistently large-scale migration and parent-child geographic separation, and a surge in changing norms towards the family.

Keywords: Family structure; Change and Continuity; Societal change; China
Introduction
As a basic social unit, the family organization has never been independent or isolated from societal change, but modifying its forms and roles accordingly. With industrialization and urbanization, the family institution has inevitably undergone changes globally. In the US and other western countries, for example, norms toward marriage and family have largely reshaped, and proportion of traditional conjugal family has largely declined: in 1960, nuclear family with children younger than 18 years of age accounted for 45 percent, while it was only 23.5 percent in 2000. Conversely, over half of American families were remarried family, and between the year 1900 and 1950, the number of single-parent family had tripled, and further doubled in the past forty years.

Family in China has also experienced substantial and continuous changes. In the past century, Chinese family had encountered three drastic internal and external shocks: the May 4th Movement in 1919, the chaos of Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s through 1970s, and the socioeconomic reform and demographic transition since 1978. What do the changing economic, demographic, and social landscapes mean for the family? How is the family reconfigured by societal transformation? Has the Chinese family declined with societal change or is the family sufficiently resilient to change? How has the family adjusted itself to adapt or accommodate to macro-level transformation?

This paper attempts to examine the Chinese family in various ways in the past half century, particularly these recent 30 years by situating the family organization into the broad social, economic and demographic contexts. We focus on changes of family structure and their consequences to family relations and family function. By doing so, it contributes to our understanding of how the family responds to changes in the public arena, and how it may affect the wellbeing of family members.

Family structure: changing trend, characteristics and patterns
China has witnessed an extraordinary transformation over the past three decades: from centrally-planned and self-sufficient economy to market-based and global economy; from closed-door policy to opening to the outside world; from authoritarian governments to more democratic governments and peaceful political transitions; from rural-based populations to urban majorities, and from high fertility to low fertility.

As society modernizes, indicated by the extent of industrialization, level of education, and geographic and occupational mobility, women get married later and bear fewer children and people live longer and healthier lives. In turn, decreased fertility has implications for modernization and urbanization process, and intergenerational reciprocity. These factors would no doubt reshape family structure, as well as family relations and family function.

Declining family size
Historically, household-based, agricultural economic structure valued large family size, as they would ensure a better survival chance and wellbeing of the family. Wolf argues that “Chinese farm families were potentially large everywhere and actually large whenever material conditions were somewhat better than miserable.” Since early 1980s, however, family size has reduced dramatically due to restrictive fertility policy and socioeconomic changes. Figure 1 depicts the changing trend of family from 1911 to 2010. There has been fluctuation in family size over the past century, but since the mid-1970s, it has dropped constantly. In 1974, the average family size was fewer than 5 persons, fewer than 4 persons in 1990, 3.44 persons in 2000, and 3.10 persons in 2010.

![Figure 1 Trend of Family Size in China: 1911-2010](image)

Sources: multiple sources compiled by the author.

Simplified yet consistent family forms

The reduction in family size is closely linked to the number of generations in a family. There are two lines of thinking regarding the Chinese family structure. First, the Chinese households were dominated by large multigenerational co-residential pattern. The traditional Chinese ideal was for coresidence of parents with their married sons and their families in a large, joint-stem household unit. Moreover, Eastman suggests that traditional Chinese households were characterized by four generations living together, that “five generations under one roof represented the family ideal,” and that the proportion of such households might have reached 6 or 7 percent in the past. Second, extended household structure has never been very common. Historically, multigenerational families appeared to have been the ideal exception and a luxury, and none but the well-to-do were ever able to maintain extended living arrangements in one household.

Contemporarily, extended households are rarer, but it still hold a decent proportion among all families, as Figure 2 illustrates. Between the year of 1930-2010, family
patterns have been reconfigured in several ways. First, between 1930 and 1982, the proportion of one-generation and two-generation family households have substantially increased, from 2.5 percent and 48.9 percent in 1930 to 12.8 percent and 67.0 percent in 1982, respectively, while three-generation family decreased from 48.5 percent in 1930 to 19.7 percent in 1982.

**Figure 2 Trend of Number of Generations in the Family, 1930-2010**

Sources: multiple sources compiled by the author.

Second, between the year of 1982 and 1990, about two-thirds of families have two generations, and about one-fifth has three generations, while the proportion of one-generation family remained approximately the same. Third, after 2000 the share of single person family has risen fast, while two-generation family has declined, but three-generation family has not changed much. Clearly, in the past thirty years, what has changed the most is not the decline of three-generation households, but the decrease of nuclear family and the increase of single-person family. Conversely, three-generation family has been relatively stable.

If we look at family types, we find similar patterns. As Figure 3 shows, Chinese family types, classified as nuclear family, stem family, joined family, single family and other types of family, remain rather stable between 1982 and 2000. The three lines for three census years coincide, reflecting the stability of family types over time. Over these 20 years, nuclear family accounts for approximately two-thirds; stem family and joined family together account for about one-fifth; single-parent family account for 6.3 percent, and other types of family less than 1 person. Such patterns suggest that while societal change has reduced family size in the past 30 years, family types have not overturned correspondingly.
Diversified living arrangements

While in the past 30 years, family types remain constant over time, living arrangements among family members have diversified dramatically. Many new types of living arrangements have emerged in the process of urbanization.

First, marital dissolution, widowhood, and non-marital childbirth all have contributed to the rising proportion of single-parent family. Figure 4 describes the nearly linear rising trend of divorce rate since 1978. In 1978, the crude divorce rate was only 0.2‰, 1.0‰ in 2000, and 2.0‰ in 2010, about 10 times increase. While the absolute number and relative share of divorce in China remain very low, due to the huge population size, a small proportion could affect many people. The effect of divorce not only involves in the two parties but also the entire family, particularly children.

Sources: multiple sources compiled by the author.
Second, the share of remarried family rises with the increase of divorce. With changing norms of marriage and family, people are more tolerate on divorce and remarriage, contributing to the rising rate of remarriage. The size of people remarried was only 500 thousand in 1985, 78.8 thousand in 1990, and 92.2 thousand in 1997. Consequently, the rate of remarriage has risen from 3.1 percent to 4.1 percent and 5.1 percent from 1982, 1990 to 1997, and 10.6 in 2009 (see Figure 6). Remarriage does not only affect the adjustment to new marriage of two parties, but also family relationship that is more complicated, and the fulfillment of family functions.

Third, incomplete intact families due to labor migration has rising dramatically. Migration, particularly rural-to-urban labor transfers, has brought unprecedented changes to living arrangements among family members. The past 30 years have witnessed a huge number of internal migration (i.e., 221 million in 2010) and a more complicated composition of migrant. In the 1980s and 1990s, migrants tended to be young and single, but more and more married people with children have joined the tidal wave of migration in the past decade. Various institutional and structural constraints render married migrants to leave spouse, children and parents at the place of destination, generating left-behind children, left-behind spouse and left-behind parents. Consequently, many intact families at both the place of destination and origin become incomplete.

There was one such family in every five families in China. Based on the 0.95% sample data of the 2000 Census, of the 336753 sample families, about 20.1 percent households have at least one member migrating out, and the size of left-behind family

---

Figure 6 Number of Persons of Remarriage and Its Share in China: 1985-2009

Source: multiple sources compiled by the author.
Note: Rate of remarriage = number of remarriage/total number of marriage in the same year.
was 3.27 persons. There were 348.37 million families in 2000, which totalizes some 70 million left-behind families, and involve in approximately 240 million people (accounting for 20 percent of China’s total population).

The migration has caused great changes to family structure. As can be seen from Table 1, apart from nuclear families, the ratios of all other family types of left-behind families is higher than those of non-left-behind families. As the elderly, children and women are the major family members staying at sending places, regions with many left-behind families face great challenges of providing support for the left-behind elderly and children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family types</th>
<th>Non-left-behind Families</th>
<th>Left-behind Families</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single-person family</td>
<td>8.59</td>
<td>8.69</td>
<td>8.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple family</td>
<td>12.51</td>
<td>15.07</td>
<td>13.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-generation and other family</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear family</td>
<td>58.23</td>
<td>46.17</td>
<td>55.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skip family</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>5.85</td>
<td>1.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-generation joined family</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>1.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three-generation step family</td>
<td>16.51</td>
<td>18.92</td>
<td>17.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three-generation joined family</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four-generation step family</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Calculated from the 0.95‰ sample of 2000 census.

The types of family at the place of destination are similarly diverse, as Figure 5 illustrates. According to a nationally representative survey in 2011, single-person family accounts for the highest rate, 27 percent, which is followed by nuclear family with couples and children (26.2 percent); about 10 percent of families have only couples; families with only the father and children or only with the mother and children account for 16.8 percent and 6.8 percent, respectively. Together, the share of single-parent family due to migration totalizes over 23 percent. Three or four-generation migrant family accounts for less than 2 percents. Additionally, there are 11.7 percent of families with only siblings or other members. Since the size of migrants in 2010 was over 221 million, the number of people that are affected by migration should reach over 600 million.
In the households of migrants with children, only 63.6 percent of migrant families have all their children at receiving societies (see Figure 8); 26 percent of parents left all children at the place of origin; 7.4 percent of migrant families having children split between the hometown and the place of destination. The rest migrant families have more complicated living arrangements between the parents and children.

Fourth, the proportion of skip families has gradually risen. In 1990, families where...
unmarried children lived only with grandparents but not parents accounted for 0.7 percent of total families. Since the death rate of adults is rather low, and thus families where both parents pass away before grandparents are rather few, it is reasonable to believe that skip families result mainly from the migration of parent(s). The number of skip families has increased consistently with the increase of migrants and the rising number of married-with-children migrants. In 2000 and 2005, skip family accounted for 1.8 and 2.9 percent, respectively. The rapid rise is in accordance with the rapid increase of internal migration.

Fifth, the share of empty nest families has rapidly increased. Children leave parental houses for education, work or marriage, leaving parents to live alone. It is not a new phenomenon, but becomes more salient during socioeconomic transition. The lowered birth rate, prolonged life expectancy, reduced family size and individual living patterns, as well as the expansion of public education, have not only greatly increased the share of empty nest family, but also make it appear in much younger ages. In the past, empty-nest family tends to refer to elderly families, but currently, with many teenagers traveling far for education, some mid-aged parents have already experienced the empty nest. For the “post-80s born” generation, the average age at the first marriage is about 25 for women and 27 for men. Assuming the average interval between marriage and childbearing is 2 years and the only child leaves home at age 18, the average age of the parents entering the stage of empty nest is between 45 to 47 years old, at least 15 or 13 years prior to the life stage of the elderly. Data shows that the empty nest families accounted for 10 percent of all families in 1982, 30 percent in the 1990s. In 2000, 65-and-older families account for 1/5 of the total number of families, of which 22.8 percent are empty nest families (elderly living alone accounted for 11.5 percent, and married couples 11.4 percent).

Sixth, dink families also exists in China. Due to changes in reproductive norms, great pressure in work and high costs of childrearing, many white-collar employees either willingly choose not to have child, or too old to conceive since they have kept delaying childbirth. However, as the parental generation, who have stronger family norms, can still exert impact on their offspring, young couples who did not plan to have children eventually have children. Thus, very few married couples ages 35 or older are childless in China.

Seventh, other non-traditional family forms (i.e., cohabiting families and homosexual families) have appeared within the past few decades. These types of families, strictly speaking, are not lawfully recognized, since families in China are still defined as a social unit based on marriage, blood or adoption. Nevertheless, with people being more open-minded on issues of marriage and family, and higher social tolerance to individual sexual behavior and respect for one’s personal choices, cohabitation and homosexual behavior are more widespread among young people. However, up to now, cohabitation remains largely a temporary behavior and a strategy of trial marriage, which will disappear once people get married.
Consequences of changes in family structure for family relations and family function

As can be seen from above, families in China are now displaying a combination of traditional, modern, and post-modern characteristics. Family size has declined, and core family members no longer live under one roof, but rather form a network across different regions by spreading out. The minimization of family size and diversity of family form, together with urbanization and modernization, would have profound implications for family relationship and family functions.

Family relationship

Family relationship is a form of social relationship, defined as interpersonal interaction and relations among family members either horizontally or vertically. The horizontal relationships refer to same-generation relationships between husband and wife, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, and sisters-in-law, etc.; the latter refers to intergeneration relationship, including parents and child, mother-in-law and daughters (sons)-in-law, uncles and nephews, and grandparents and grandchildren, etc.

Simplification of family relationship

Family relationship is closely related to family size and living arrangements, and its complexity depends upon the number of family members, which can be calculated using the equation of “(N² – N)/2.” For example, a family of six has 15 types of relationships; a family of four has 6, and a family of three has only 3 types of relationships.

While the interrelationships, interdependence and inter-complementation between family members still exists in modern family, the reduction in family size and numbers of generations in a family has brought about a simplification of family relationship. For example, relationships with brothers-in-laws and sisters-in-laws, which were prevalent in traditional society, have become less common. The simplification of interpersonal relationships has reduced the opportunity for young members of the family to experience the more complicated and networked relationships associated with extended families, and therefore missing or lacking the full social experience of family life. Social roles such as husband and wife, parent and child, grandparent and grandchild, and brother and sister have become the main social roles in the family.

Both tightened and detached parent-child relationship

Unlike western families that put more emphasis on the relationship between husband and wife, Chinese families have always valued the parent-child relationship the most. Individual happiness is less important than having son(s) to keep the family line continued. Historically, family power is distributed based on generation, age and sex, with the grandfather or the father on the top of the hierarchical ladder of family power. With modernization, this male-centered family power system is beginning to
The parent-child relationship in China has been characterized as a lack of adequate psychological and physical space from one another. Presently, however, their relationship is displaying signs of contradicting feature. On one hand, children have become the center of the family, the source of family pleasure and happiness, and the hope to fulfill parents’ desires and dreams in the low fertility regime. Meanwhile, children have been dependent too much on parents (especially the mother) emotionally and in daily life, which has strengthened the emotional entanglement and interdependency between parents and children. This might be particularly the case for two types of families: the left-behind family where the father migrates out and the mother stays at home, and the single-child family. With few or no siblings, children may only have the parents to interact. Similarly, parents today, unlike times with high fertility, only have one child or fewer children to devote all their resources. A survey conducted by Feng (1998) in nearly 2000 middle-school students in 14 Chinese cities shows that singletons have a closer relationship with parents than children with siblings. In fact, the close bond between parent and child in China is often used as a strategy to compensate for the lack of emotional fulfillment between the husband and wife.

On the other hand, the parent-child relationship (particularly with older children) is also displaying a tendency of detachment. The invasion of public goods (e.g., television and the internet, and easy access to public resources) has distanced the relationship between parents and children. Time spent together with family members has been interfered and shortened by time spent on other things, leading to fewer face-to-face contacts and exchanges between family members. At the same time, children are more aware of personal privacy and independence, hoping to break away from parents’ control. Meanwhile, few or no siblings motivate them to have established their own friendship and networks with peers, and they would rather spend time with friends than with parents. This, of course, does not mean that emotional attachment between parents and children has been weakened; rather, it can be strengthened due to children’s sense of responsibility, and thereby developing an new relationship characterized by “intimate but distant” feature.

**Changing conjugal relationships**

As the society puts more emphasis on the quality of marriage and affection, marriage ties are becoming more important today than in the past. The rapid changes of the society have had a great impact on traditional gender role ideology and labor division patterns. Higher levels of education for women helps women become more involved in social labor and an indispensable financial pillar of the family. This has broken down the ideology of “men responsible for the outside world and women for household chores.” Consequently, women assume not only traditional roles as the mother and wife, but also social roles as colleague, boss, subordinator, etc. Financial
independence has weakened their dependence on their fathers, husbands and children, therefore creating changes in marriage relationships.

Spousal relationship affects family structure: a divorce may lead to single-parent families, while a remarriage creates a new family, on one hand. On the other hand, the decrease of family size and the simplification of family form will also affect spousal relationship. For example, a lower birth rate means a great decrease of time spending on raising children, and therefore couples have much more time to spend with each other, and greater need to manage their marriage. Also, the simplification of living arrangements allow couples no longer facing complicated family relationships, which helps alleviating family conflicts and maintaining a good spousal relationship. However, changes in family structure may also cause problems for spouses. For example, as blood ties are more important than conjugal ties in China, children are often the mediator and bond for spousal relationship. Moving out of parental homes of children leads to a loss of an important bond for maintaining their relationship. This, together with the pursuit of career, could lead to a detached spousal relationship or even a higher possibility of marital dissolution.

Family function

Family function covers many aspects and dimensions, including biological, educational, cultural, psychological, political, and entertaining aspects. An effective operation of family function is the foundation for maintaining a normal, stable and harmonious family and society.

In the traditional agricultural society, the family is both a living unit and a production unit, and self-sufficient in meeting the needs of its members through producing goods, offspring and emotional wealth. The rapid changes and development of modern society as well as the changes in family structure have, to a certain extent, changed the way and practice traditional family function exists in the last two to three decades. Family function has been both weakened and adjusted, expanded, strengthened by adding new elements. The main executors, methods of executing, and time and places of execution of family functions have been modified, and some economic, educational or other traditional family functions have been partly or even fully externalized. Even so, the family is still responsible for love and sex, care and support, socialization and emotional comfort for family members.

Socialization of family function

Many family functions have been socialized with industrialization and modernization. The rise of the service sector, the development of public resources such as childcare, education, healthcare, and other social welfare have more less taken over some family functions, or share some functions along with the family and society. There are hospitals for babies, nurseries and kindergarten for young children, schools for education, workplaces for work, friends for emotional needs, television, internet and gyms for leisure, nursing homes for the elderly, and mortuaries for the
dead. In general, the fast development of social services and electronics have given people new choices and ways of life, and thereby reducing need for the family to meet the demand of family members in various ways. In fact, with the development of industrialization and urbanization, no family can still be an independent production unit or a unit that can meet all the needs of family members.

Reproduction under the control of fertility policy

Childbearing is a mode of social reproduction, and the biological capacity of species. However, public institutions have intruded the private sphere of pregnancy and birth, transferring many family problems into social problems. In western society, having fewer children is a personal and familial choice, greatly influenced by social transitions accompanying modernization. In China, the substantially reduced fertility is an indicator of publically weakened reproductive functions due to the restrictive fertility policy. Between the 1980s and 1990s, the continuous and steady decline of number of children mostly resulted from the implementation of the one-child policy. In the 2010s, economic transformation and social transition may play a more important role in childbearing behavior.

Figure 9 depicts the trends of total fertility rate and crude birth rate between 1953 and 2010. The macro-level data reflect the collective behavior of individual families. In 1953, the total fertility rate was over 6 children per woman, and the crude birth rate was 37 per thousand; in 2000, the two numbers are 1.22 and 14, respectively, and in 2010, they are further reduced to 1.18 and 12.1‰, respectively (National Statistics Bureau, 2012). Even if both the government and academia have doubts on these two figures in 2000 and 2010, there is a consensus that China’s total fertility rate is lower than the replacement level (i.e., 2.1 children per woman). Such low total fertility rate has brought about great societal concerns, especially on the family support function and the sustainable development of the society.

Figure 9. Trend of Total Fertility Rate and Crude Birth Rate in China: 1953-2010
**Alienated childrearing function**

With the transition from a planned economy to a market economy, and the globalization of China’s economy, as well as the “Opening-up Policy,” the way of family life has undergone fundamental changes. The family has put unprecedented priority to child education, as the knowledge economy age arrives and intellectual power has become the signs of capitals. At the same time, the reduced number of children, the simplification of family structure, and the shortening of childrearing years have allowed parents to spend more time, energy and financial resources on the fewer children, which in turn strengthen in an alienated way the family function of child education when education is largely taken over by public institutions. In hours after school, weekends, and holidays, parents send children to different kinds of training classes or tutors for further study. Putting too much emphasis on formal education not only deprives children of enjoying a colorful childhood, but also fosters a rebellious feeling towards the family and even society.

**Weakened socialization function**

Socialization of children occurs during the early stage of life. Babies lack the ability for independent survival, and thus need constant care and support from family members. As they grow up, the families need to teach them basic survival skills and abilities to adapt to surrounding environments. In modern era, the requirements for skills and abilities are more diverse, which cannot be entirely taught by the family, although the family still plays a major role in this regard. However, rather than accommodating children’s diversified needs, and teaching children survival skills and social norms, the family tends to focus on school education. This has greatly deprived children of experiencing learning and practicing basic survival skills, which in turn hinders the development of independent personality, and living and adaptive abilities. Also, the simplification of family structure turns parents into the main (if not only) role models. Children develop their own behaviors and values through learning, imitating and internalizing their parents’ needs, attitudes, emotions and values. However, too much caring, indulging and spoiling of children will not only prevent children from adapting to and learning social norms, but also lead to selfishness and laziness of children. Additionally, parental ideologies and behaviors may contradict with social norms, which would mislead children, bringing about social problems such as juvenile delinquency.

**Shrinking elderly support function**

Caring for the elderly is another vital family function in order for them to live a decent life in old ages. Biologically, the elderly need more frequent daily care, more financial support, and more emotional comfort. The elderly support used to be a common practice across the world, but modernization has changed this traditional mode. Developed countries have well established a social support system in which the government and society provide old-age pensions and medical insurance for the
elderly, and non-family institutions enroll a good proportion of elderly who needs daily care. China has had a very long history of and much experience in family support for the elderly. Structural change of families in recent years, however, has directly weakened the function of family care, making it harder and less realistic for the elders to completely rely on their children or other family member for support.

First, changes in family structure have weakened the family’s ability to provide non-financial support. On one hand, there are more parents waiting for care due to the extended life expectancy. On the other hand, the reduced number of children has substantially shrunk the pool of elderly support, and enlarged distance between parents and children due to mass migration and changing living arrangements make in-person daily care for the elderly less convenient.

Second, changes in family structure have weakened the emotional comfort of the family to the elderly. Historically, having many children and grandchildren under one roof is the pride and a symbol of prosperity and wealth. The reduced number of children and increased distance among family members has made it harder for the elders to enjoy old ages, especially for those widowed, although the technological advancements certainly offset the lack of face-to-face contacts between parents and children. Nevertheless, while a separated living arrangements do not necessarily mean a detached intergenerational relationship, face-to-face contacts among family members has decreased drastically, which greatly limits the psychological and emotional comfort and support for the parents.

Third, changes in family structure have also weakened the financial support for the elderly. Conceptually, the low birthrate could reduce the total spending on children, allowing adult children to enjoy better economical life, and labor migration has improved the financial status of families and the ability to care for old parents. Realistically, however, the cost of each child rises with the decrease of the number children, and many families face the double pressure of raising children and caring for the elderly in a context where the amount of societal and familial resources is (relatively) inadequate. The low fertility makes children unprecedentedly valuable, motivating family members, including the elderly themselves, place children’s needs on the top of their own, leading to an unequal distribution of resources among family members. It is a common strategy to sacrifice the wellbeing of the elders in order to satisfy children’s needs. Additionally, there is an inadequate respect for the elderly, while too much love for the children.

Clearly, family functions in China have both externalized and weakened, but also readjusted, adapted or even strengthened to suit the new societal contexts. In the transforming era, the family has to share with other social institutions to fulfill many functions. The externalization of some family functions does not imply the loss of the importance of family, nor is it the evidence of decline of the family. No matter how
much the family changes in the future, the family roles -- including raising the young, socialization teenagers, and nursing the old -- would never completely disappear.

**Conclusion and reflections**

The family is the cornerstone of the traditional Chinese society. A healthy family is able to fulfill functions of the family that have not yet been socialized, lay the foundations for a stable, peaceful and sustainable society and country. If some families face problems, society would be as well; if many families are having problems at the same time, it could lead to social instability and distress.

The family is always under change. Presently, Scandinavian and Western European countries have the lowest marriage rate, highest divorce rate, extremely low fertility rate, smallest family size, simplest family relationships, and widespread cohabitation. This new wave of change has also affected the east, including China in the process of modernization, causing challenges to family structure and forcing the family to adjust itself to adapt to the new situation. Although Chinese families have not experienced such violent changes as those in western societies, family structure, family relationship and family function have all displayed similar changing patterns and characteristics in recent decades.

For example, the reduction in family size and changes in living arrangements have turned the traditional family into “network” family. Core family members (i.e., parents-children, spouse) need not to live together under one roof anymore, but spread out across different places; the relationship between core members becomes simpler and detached, or intimate but distanced. Meanwhile, market economy fosters more individualistic behavior, which has interrupted the balanced traditional family relationship, obstructed the successful implementation of family functions and lowered individual sense of family responsibilities. All of these changes can greatly reduce families’ ability to face societal risks alone.

However, the fundamental difference between family and other social institutions lies in that its members have an unbreakable blood bond; no matter where family members are, they are naturally connected by a blood tie, which makes it extremely difficult for any external force to break. This characteristic gives family resilience to withstand challenges.

First, if we look at the family from the centennial perspective, we can conclude that families in China have undergone great changes in the past century: family size decreased drastically, the share of large-sized families fell while that of single families rose greatly, which brought about the simplification of family relationships, the socialization and externalization of some family functions. From the 1970s to the 1990s, the number of children in each household dramatically decreased, largely due to birth planning programs and fertility policies. The continuous reduction of the
birthrate after 2000 is partly due to the effect of fertility policy, but is more affected by socioeconomic development.

Second, if we look at the family from the decadal perspective, we can conclude that, while facing great, radical, and profound social transitions, there is more continuity in family structure and family functions than change. Chinese families are still marriage-based. Although many new family types have emerged, the nuclear and stem families remain to be the most common family forms, and the number of generations in a family remains stable. Meanwhile, although some family functions have been externalized, love and sex, rearing children and supporting the elderly are still mainly taken on by the family. This continuity is in fact a choice of family strategy to cope with relatively low socioeconomic development level, inadequate social welfare and public service. Externalization of family function is, on one hand, an inevitable result of urbanization; on the other hand, it is also the result of the negotiation and coordination between the government, society and family, and the inter-generational interactions and reciprocity.

Based on the above findings, we can make some preliminary predictions for future trend of family structure in China.

First, family size will remain small. Even if the policy may be reformulated to allow each couple to have two children, family size will not largely rebound in the next two to three decades, because macro-level factors are incompatible with private family behaviors.

Second, family form will remain relatively simple, and conjugal family continues to be the main type of family forms. Nuclear families will still account for the highest proportion among all families; the cohesiveness and differentiation of the stem family will continue to coexist. Although non-marriage-based family is prevalent in the west, different regions may have different development paths due to different culture and ideologies. With huge population size, less developed economy, and deeply rooted traditional ideology, it will be hard for China to follow the footsteps of western families any time soon.

Third, family types will continue to be diversified, and not completely converge to nuclear family. In the next two to three decades, the proportion of stem family will not decrease much, but the proportion of empty-nest family will rise notably and become a common family form. These two types of family will become the second most prevalent family types after the nuclear family. Conversely, the share of dink families, co-habiting families as well as homosexual families will not raise much in a short period of time. Also, the number of skip-families, separation of couples, and separation of parent and children due to migration will first increase, then stable, and eventually decrease with equal access to public service and welfare of migrants.
Fourth, the remaining family functions will continue to be stable. Despite the change or shift of executing entities, methods and locations and the executing center as well as new characteristics regarding the form and requirements of family function, the fundamental family functions such as sex, love, birth, nurturing and nursing will not be completely replaced by public institutions in the next two to three decades. Family function will not dissolve with the decrease of number of family members or the change of family form. Conversely, the family will work together with social institutions to ensure the nurturing and educating children, and nursing and emotionally supporting the elders.

In conclusion, Chinese families have been relatively resilience if ever changing; they display both changes and continuity. In the next two to three decades, the family structure will not completely converge towards the nuclear family, and Chinese families will not decline, nor will it fall apart.

However, this is not to deny tremendous changes that Chinese families have undergone, which make it harder for the realization of certain family functions and pose great pressures to the social welfare system. The government, society and families must all adapt to these changes, and jointly deal with the challenge brought about by family changes in transitional China, and improve the quality of life for older and younger generations in order to solidify the foundation for a harmonious and prosperous society.