

# FAMILY CONSTELLATION IN THE CHINESE LANGUAGE

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The present note is in answer to a notation by Paul Rom (3) that the Chinese have no word for "brother"—only for "younger brother" and "older brother"—and his question of the relationship of this to the psychology of birth-order position among the Chinese. I shall discuss first the linguistic phenomenon itself and then its psychological significance.

## FINER DIFFERENTIATION OF FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS

The paradox is that the above observation regarding the Chinese language is true, yet that I, as a Chinese, had not been aware of this until I read the above item. Several Chinese colleagues in the departments of economics and political science at Ball State University also thought the Chinese had a word for "brother" when I presented them with the seemingly contradictory fact.

After all, there is *shiong-dih*, older brother-younger brother, one of the five familial-social relationships specified in the social order of the philosophy of Confucius which has been practiced by the Chinese for thousands of years, the other four relationships being prince-minister, father-son, husband-wife, and friends.

Only when I checked with the dictionary for the definition of brother and tried to translate a sentence such as "John is my brother" into Chinese, did I realize that there was indeed no way of doing it. *Shiong-dih*, the brotherly relationship, is actually a compound word of *shiong*, older brother, and *dih*, younger brother, and the two words together are used for the plural, brothers. When I want to specify John's familial relationship to me I can use only one of the components: I must specify whether he is my *shiong*, older brother, or *dih*, younger brother.

And yet I may say, "John is my *dih-shiong*," or even "my *shiong-dih*." But then the term has changed its meaning; it no longer means brother, but comrade, and the sentence can only mean, "John is my comrade." Thus, in the familial sense there is indeed

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no word in the Chinese language for brother as "human male born of the same father and mother." In this familial sense I must specify whether he is older or younger than I am.

The same applies to sister, and in similar fashion to parent. While the term parents exists as father-mother combination, the singular, parent, can only be father or mother.

Since the English "brother" can mean both older and younger brother, it has always been translated as *shiong-dih*. The same principle applies to "sister" and "sibling." The Chinese student learns in the seventh grade that "brother" means *shiong-dih*, "sister," *jiee-mey*, without questioning that these translations are made-up words, not original Chinese synonyms.

Actually the Chinese language makes still finer differentiations of familial relationships. So long as there is a blood relationship, there is a specific word for it, as in the case of parents, different kinds of uncles, aunts, cousins, etc. Table I presents the specific

TABLE I. CHINESE DESIGNATIONS AND FORMS OF ADDRESS OF ONE'S BROTHERS AND SISTERS

brother, translated as <i>shiong-dih</i>	<i>shiong</i> or <i>ge</i> , older brother	<i>dah ge</i> , eldest brother <i>ell ge</i> , 2nd older bro. <i>san ge</i> , 3rd older bro. etc.
	<i>dih</i> , younger brother	<i>dah dih</i> , 1st younger bro. <i>ell dih</i> , 2nd younger bro. until <i>sheau dih</i> , youngest bro.
sibling, translated as <i>shiong-dih</i> or <i>jiee-mey</i>	<i>jiee</i> , older sister	<i>dah jiee</i> , eldest sister. <i>ell jiee</i> , 2nd older sis. <i>san jiee</i> , 3rd older sis. etc.
	sister, translated as <i>jiee-mey</i>	<i>dah mey</i> , 1st younger sis. <i>ell mey</i> , 2nd younger sis. until <i>sheau mey</i> , youngest sis.
	<i>mey</i> , younger sister	

linguistic expressions for brothers and sisters. It shows that there actually are special designations for the eldest, second, third older brother, etc., for which there are no counterparts in English. The same holds for the other relations mentioned.

Each sibling, then, is addressed by a term expressing his birth-order position, and each of these represents also a family status

position. Thus the status a child has and the role he plays in the family constellation, which were considered important by Adler, are actually codified by the Chinese language.

#### PSYCHOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Regarding the psychological significance of this cultural situation for the individual, we can only offer some general observations.

In ancient China the relationship among sisters was very informal; while that among brothers was quite formalized. The continuity of the kinship system depends upon the sons. If the wife gives birth to a first son, not only is this first-born "given a good deal of attention and spoiling" as Adler observed for Western culture (1, p. 377), but also the wife's status in the family is enhanced.

The inheritance of a throne in most dynasties was based upon the birth-order position. If the first-born son died, the second-born would take over the place. The same principle also applies to the kinship structure. The first-born son is treated by other siblings as father substitute and can discipline the other siblings in the absence of the father. The older ones should teach the younger ones. In a normal situation, the status of the first-born is stable unless the father "dethrones" him. The younger ones should respect and defer to the older. In some dynasties, the emperors did dethrone the first-born, and opened the way for the next to succeed.

Since the first-born's status is widely recognized in the society, theoretically the first-born would not consider the second-born as a rival, and the second-born would not try to excel the first. But psychologically the way the first-born and the second-born feel toward each other may be quite different. So far, there are no studies concerning sibling strife in China, but we know from the lives of royal families that the battles between the first-born and the second or another were not uncommon.

On the other hand, an incidental finding of a study regarding children's social relationships indicates that the percentage of first-borns, whether a girl or a boy, who felt socially lonesome was significantly higher than that of only and youngest children (2). The author considers that this finding lends support to some Western research concerning the higher incidence of behavior problems among the first-born.

Regarding the youngest child, theoretically he is subordinate to all the other members in the family. Yet, again as Adler noted,

even including the Chinese, the youngest is often the winner. "In German, Russian, Scandinavian, or Chinese fairy tales the youngest is always the conqueror" (1, p. 380). To this we may add that indeed the Chinese have a nickname for the youngest, *Lao-iau*, which is the number one card in the favorite Chinese gambling game.

#### SUMMARY

The significance of birth-order position is expressed in the Chinese language in that there is a special term of address for each position, and each term reflects a certain status and role. Yet in spite of these linguistic differences, reflecting differences in the cultures, the meager information we have seems to indicate that important observations regarding the psychological significance of birth order which were made for Western culture, apply also for the Chinese.

#### REFERENCES

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