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Author

Kroeber, Alfred L.

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PROCESS IN THE CHINESE
KINSHIP SYSTEM

By A. L. KROEBER

IN THE last number of the *AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST* for 1932, Chen and Shryock contribute an article on Chinese Terms of Relationship which is both valuable for its material and penetrating in its analysis. In one respect their interpretation can be carried farther. The Chinese system appears to consist of a "classificatory," that is non-descriptive,¹ base, which has been made over by additions into a "descriptive" system similar in its working to the English one, in fact is more precisely and successfully descriptive than this. Relationships through males and through females have not been merged as in West European systems; distinction between elder and younger siblings has been kept; and at the same time the number of describing terms is greater than in Europe. The consequence is that the Chinese distinguish precisely, by terms or phrases of specific denotation, a greater number of relationships than we do, without having recourse to circumlocutory or enumerative phrases; and at the same time they have kept more of their former presumably non-descriptive base. In short, their system shows how a non-descriptive system was made over into a descriptive one by devices different from and independent of our own yet very similar so far as their effect or functioning goes. The pointing out of this change is the purpose of the present paper.

The kernel or base of the Chinese system is as follows.

Fu, f.
Mu, m.
Tzu, son (also child).
Nü, d.

Hsiung, o. br.
Ti, y. br.
Tzu, o. sis.
Mei, y. sis.

Tsu, gr. par. (specifically, f.'s f.)
Sun, gr. ch. (specifically, son's son)

¹ The term "classificatory" continues to be used, although all the discussion about it does not meet the objection long ago raised that fundamentally the common criterion of classificatory systems is that they are different from European ones. Until the term is purged of this culturally egocentric connotation, it is as unfortunate as "agglutinative" in linguistics, "Turanian" in ethnology, and "irrational" as a means of distinguishing the other animals from man. Important, too, is Lowie's point (*AA* 30: 264, 1928) that classificatory and descriptive are logically not complementary.

Po, f.'s o. br. (also o. br., h.'s o. br.)
 Shu, f.'s y. br. (also h.'s y. br.)
 Ku, f.'s sis. (also h.'s m.)
 Chiu, m.'s br. (also h.'s f., wife's br.)
 Yi, m.'s sis. (also wife's sis.)
 Chih, sibling's ch. (since A.D. 265-419; before: wom.'s br.'s d.)
 Sheng, sis.'s son, d.'s_h.

Fu, husband
 Ch'i, wife¹

Hsü, d.'s h.
 Fu, son's w.
 Sao, o. br.'s w.

To these can perhaps be added, although they are not separately listed:

Szu, h.'s o. br.'s wife; recipr. betw. wives of brs. (p. 640: 4, n. 54)
 Hsiao, h.'s o. sis. (p. 640: 7)
 Ta, h.'s y.? sis. (p. 640, n. 55)

I do not know whether the terms fu, father, fu, husband, fu, son's wife, and tzu, son, tzu, older sister, are alike or different in tone. The written characters are different, of course. Except possibly for the first two, there can be little doubt that they are independent stems, secondarily more or less assimilated in sound.

It is clear that we have here a system still distinguishing the sex of the connecting relative, and giving age as much emphasis as sex in denoting siblings. In fact, age among parents' siblings may once have been consistently expressed; and, in certain cases, the speaker's sex. Ku-chih and tsusun suggest that more of the terms may have been reciprocal in denotation. Cross-cousin marriage, as Chen and Shryock point out, was abundantly indicated and accounts for the absence of parent-in-law terms. In short, we have before us, still partly preserved, a system as "primitive" as that of most surviving primitives; closely parallel, in most of its essential features, to those of many American, African, and Oceanic natives.

The present Chinese descriptive system is built up from this kernel partly by combining the original terms of relationship listed, and partly by combining them with non-kinship terms which have acquired a specific—but also classifying—kinship meaning, exactly in principle like our "grand," "great," and "in-law." The chief of these metaphorical extensions are:

Tseng, "added, contiguous," has the force of our "great" before "grand"; it denotes lineal relatives one generation farther removed than grandparents and grandchildren.

Kao, "revered, old, ancestors," and Hsüan, "far, distant," go one generation further up and down respectively, corresponding to "great-great" before "grand."

Pao, "placenta," denotes own brothers or sisters, that is, siblings as distinct from cousins. Compare, although the analogy is not exact, our "uterine."

Wai, "outside, foreign," denotes relationship through females.

Nei, "inside, inner," denotes descendants of the wife's brother.

Yo, "high mountain," equals our "in-law" with father and mother, as used by a man.

For different kinds of cousins there are several terms:

T'ang, "hall," denotes first parallel cousins in the male line, that is, the children of brothers.

Yi, the relationship term meaning mother's or wife's sister, also denotes first parallel cousins in the female line, the children of sisters.

Piao, "outside," denotes first cross-cousins.

Tsai, "again, repetition," with Tsung, "follow, attend," denotes second parallel cousins in the male line.

T'ang piao, "hall outside," denotes second cross-cousins.

Tsu, "thrice venerated?," denotes third parallel cousins in the male line.

Finally, several true kinship terms, like yi above, are used also with a descriptive or qualifying meaning:

Fu⁽¹⁴²⁾, f., for males of any older generation, whether connected by blood or marriage.

Mu, m., for females ditto.

Fu⁽¹³⁹⁾, h., adult male, for males of one's own or any younger gener., whether connected by blood or marriage.

Fu⁽⁴⁷⁾, son's w., woman, for females ditto.

These last four terms merely denote the sex of the person referred to, when they are added to other kinship terms: they are then understood as not carrying their intrinsic significance. Thus ku is f.'s sis.; but ku fu means not f.'s sis.'s f., but f.'s sis.'s husband, that is, the older male associated with the f.'s sis. Similarly, ku seems not to be ordinarily used alone for f.'s sis., but in the forms: ku mu, lit. "f.'s sis. (who is an) older female"; or anciently ku tzu mei, "f.'s sis. o. sis. y. sis."; or colloquially ku ku, "f.'s sis. f.'s sis.," that is, f.'s sis. who *is* the f.'s sis. and not her husband, viz., f.'s sis. as such.² This kind of usage is well known as characteristic of the Chinese language as a generic vehicle of expression. The "secondary" or mere sex-age qualifying use of these four terms must be clearly distinguished from their use as primary kinship designations retaining their intrinsic meaning.

Nü, d., and Hsü, d.'s h., have analogous secondary use.

A few examples will illustrate how terms are built up from combinations of basic and qualifying elements.

Tsu fu, f.'s f.: lit., "gr.-par. (-par-excellence) old-male."

² Compare colloquial po po for f.'s o. br. instead of the more correct po fu (p. 633, n. 21).

Tsu mu, f.'s m.: "gr.-par. (-par-excellence) old-female."

Wai tsu fu, m.'s f.: "outside gr.-par. old-male."

Wai tsu mu, m.'s m.: "outside gr.-par. old-female."

These four terms show that even if tsu originally denoted only the specific paternal grandfather, it now functions with the meaning of grand-parent.

Sun, son's son.

Sun nü, son's d. (viz., gr.-ch. who is daughter-like in age and sex; *not* son's son's d.)

Wai sun, d.'s son.

Wai sun fu, his wife.

Wai sun nü, d.'s d.

Tseng tsu mu, f.'s f.'s m.

Wai tseng tsu mu, m.'s f.'s m.

Tseng sun, son's son's son.

Kao tsu fu, f.'s f.'s f.'s f.

Hsüan sun nü, son's son's son's d.

Pao hsiung, o. br.

Pao tzu fu, o. sis.'s h.

T'ang ti, f.'s br.'s son, younger than self; i.e., 1st par. cous. through males.

Yi hsiung, m.'s sis.'s son, older than self; i.e., 1st par. cous. through females.

Tsai tsung ti, f.'s f.'s br.'s son's son, y. than self; i.e., 2nd par. cous. through males.

Tsu ti, 3rd par. cous. through males, y. than self.

Piao ti, f.'s sis.'s son, y.; also, m.'s br.'s son, y.; hence, any male cross cous. y. than self.

T'ang piao hsiung, f.'s f.'s br.'s d.'s son, o.; also, m.'s f.'s br.'s son's son, o.; hence male 2nd cross cous. o. than self.

Yo mu, wife's m.

Chih, br.'s son.

Chih nü, br.'s d.

Wai sheng, sis.'s son; "outside sis.'s-son."

Wai sheng nü, sis.'s d.; "outside sis.'s-son d."

T'ang chih, f.'s br.'s son's son; "hall sibling's-child"; i.e., son of 1st par. cous. thr. males.

Nei chih fu, wife's br.'s son's w.; "inside sibling's-child wife."

Nei chih sun, wife's br.'s son's son; "inside sibling's-child son's-son"; or, "through-wife collateral grand-child."

Returning now to a consideration of the pure kinship term basis of the system in the light of the system as a whole, we may infer a reconstruction

of this as it presumably was before the descriptive additions had begun to luxuriate. It seems certainly to have been a bifurcate-collateral system, in Lowie's terminology;³ that is, paternal and maternal uncles and aunts were distinguished from one another as well as from the parents. The same principle perhaps applied to grandparents; that is, four were distinguished, by separate terms, of which one survives, used sometimes in its presumable original specific sense, and sometimes with metaphorical extension to denote grandparental relation of any sort. Nephews-nieces and grandchildren quite likely were similarly distinguished according as their descent was from male or female kin. There is a hint of indication in the preserved old meaning of *chih* that the terms for nephews-nieces (and perhaps grandchildren) may have been exact correlates or conceptual reciprocals of the uncle-aunt (and grandparent) terms. In full form, this would have involved designation of sex of the older speaker in place of sex of the younger relative, as in some western American systems; but the evidence is insufficient to affirm that the influence of the reciprocity idea was as strong as this. Seniority was given enforced expression in sibling terms, there being no word for "brother" or "sibling" in general. Relative seniority may also once have been given wider expression in the uncle-aunt terminology; for which there would again be West American precedent. Words for affinities by marriage were probably restricted in number because cross-cousin marriage, or the habit of thinking in terms of such marriage, suggested blood-kin term designations in their place. There are however some puzzling remnants of sibling-in-law terms. There is no indication of how cousins were called, either parallel or cross, near or remote, since the present designations are all built up on sibling terms, and these would perhaps not have been employed throughout with normalized cross-cousin marriage.

All in all, the indications are of a former system generically similar to that of many primitive peoples, especially in western America; rather like that of the Cocopa, for instance, as described by Gifford.⁴

The development of the descriptive or qualifying part of the Chinese system probably resulted in some elements of the older system becoming unnecessary and being dropped, and others suffering a change of denotation. The new trends due to the descriptive additions however did not blur at any point the rigorous distinction made between kinship in the male and the female line, either ascending or descending; nor between older and younger siblings. The desire to express these two sets of distinctions is common to the hypothetical old non-descriptive and the historical and

³ AA 30: 263, 1928.

⁴ UC-PAAE 18: 67, 1922.

present-day descriptive Chinese system. Neither distinction is observed in English or, at least extensively, in most West European systems. The former seems to have become lost with us as our systems became descriptive; the latter either was lost or had never been present. To this extent then the Chinese system remains the richer and fuller instrument.

The Chinese impulse toward specific denotation has resulted further in the choice of descriptive classifiers which allow of the exact expression of a great many relationships. Chen and Shryock cite 270 terms; and it is evident that the list might be considerably enlarged by applying the cited elements in somewhat altered combinations. To be sure, not all of the 270 terms are in customary use; but apparently they would all be readily understood. It would be going too far to say that the Chinese apparatus suffices for the unambiguous designation of every conceivable variation of relationship within the seventh or eighth degree. But it certainly does specify a very much larger portion of the total possibilities than do any European systems.

Take for instance *t'ang ti*, the father's brother's son younger than oneself. Apart from the seniority which the Chinese term expresses, we cannot possibly, even with expletive auxiliaries, specify this particular relative. "Paternal male cousin" is ambiguous between the father's brother's and father's sister's son; and the phrase would hardly be used ordinarily, and might then be considered difficult or puzzling. We have just one way to designate this particular relationship precisely: by enumerating the successive steps of kinship first up and then down; or jointly down from a common ancestor. This method of step-enumeration is what we actually fall back upon as soon as the precise denotation of all but the nearest kinship becomes necessary for purposes of science or law or property inheritance. It is a last resource left us after our system, which is built on the fewest possible summarily classificatory principles, is exhausted. We are like people whose number system is so deficient that when they want to add or multiply above ten they have to fall back on manipulating counters. One interest of the Chinese system is its exemplification that a descriptive kinship system can be at once inclusive and exact. This result is achieved both by the retention of presumably archaic features, such as the categories distinguishing the male from the female line and the older from the younger sibling; and by the formation of descriptive auxiliaries chosen so as to serve fine instead of gross denotation. The Chinese obviously remain interested in kinship, whereas we want to refer to it as sketchily as possible. To use another simile, they are like people who want to know the exact time, we like those who would rather estimate by the sun than be bothered to keep clocks running.

This lumping-by-all-means quality of our kinship thinking is a very real reason why the term "classificatory" as applied to other cultures is misleading in its implications.

In one respect the Chinese and European systems are alike: a man and a woman who stand by birth in the same relation to a third person call him by the same term, in all cases. Put differently, the category of sex of speaker is absent.⁵

At another point, Chinese usage parallels a recent English tendency. Chen and Shryock say of the terms used by the wife for her husband's relatives that these

are not common today, for the wife generally uses the same terms as her husband in referring to members of his clan [*sic*, i.e., relatives].

This is like our habit, especially perhaps among those of pious antecedents, of referring to a brother-in-law as brother, and so on. There is however the difference that our usage is two-way, the Chinese by the wife only.

The actual successive steps in the transformation of the Chinese kinship system from its prehistoric to its historic phase can of course be traced only by the intimate historian of Chinese language and culture. It does however seem reasonably clear that there were such phases and what they were. Starting out apparently with a non-descriptive system similar to those of many genuinely primitive peoples, the Chinese have elaborated this into a supple instrument by the development of descriptive additions strongly reminiscent of the descriptive elements in modern European systems, as regards their general character, but quite different in specific content and function. By judicious selection of these added elements and at the same time retention of a considerable variety of distinctions expressed in earlier times, they have built up a rich system where ours is deliberately impoverished. From the point of view of theory, the interest of these phenomena lies in their presenting a second instance, and with little doubt a historically independent one, of the development of a kinship nomenclature of "descriptive" type; in both cases presumably in association with the transition from a lower or barbaric to a higher or "civilized" stage of culture; and yet with the resultant products very diverse; presumably because only the direction of the trends was similar, the historic antecedents as well as the specifically shaping historic influences being different in the two growths.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

⁵ It is an interesting question how often, the world over, the expression of this category is a function of the reciprocal principle, as in western North American and Australia.