

FAMILY VALUES: FACT OR FICTION?

By Tina Fogarty

Contact Information:

Phone Number: 731-589-3018

Address: 836 Hollow Creek Drive; Newbern, TN 38059

In submitting this essay to The Voices of West Tennessee Chinese History and Literature Essay Contest on February 18, 2009 as an Adult Entry, I give permission to DSCC to display and/or reproduce it online.

Familial relationships and the essential core values associated with them have long been the inspiration for the creative arts and entertainment venues. The diversity of the venues is relative to the plethora of inspirational sources, ranging from literature to modern televised situation comedies or daytime soap operas. While Confucian thought would seem out of place in a discussion where homosexuality, unwed teenage motherhood and divorce are common place, there is a link. Not unlike movie producers of today exposing every proverbial skeleton in the closet that a family could have, *Family* written by Pa Chin over 75 years ago shares with its audience the untold secrets of the Kao family. In their gilded cage, the suffering of the Kao brothers and the ones they loved is timeless and as meaningful today as when it was first published.

Confucianism is the basis of traditional Chinese family values with stringent guidelines for filial piety and the veneration of ancestors. It is with this reasoning that the Kao family's problems could be attributed to Confucian values, though it would simply not be fair to lay blame entirely on the values by which they were raised. Essentially, as individuals, every person's upbringing is merely a contribution that is blended through life with their experiences, emotions, and actions to create one unique being. All three brothers, as well as their grandfather and father each may have had the same core values instilled in them from birth but each evolved into their own person: Cheuh-hsin, the reluctant first master laden with sole responsibility of the Kao family women and his younger siblings following the deaths of his father and grandfather; Cheuh-min, granted moments of invisibility that only the middle son

could and the chance to follow his heart; and Cheuh-hui, aptly described as “the Humanitarian” (Chin, p 15) by his eldest brother for his perseverance in the fight against social hierarchy no matter how many miles he must walk rather than be carried by another man by using a sedan chair.

The women of the Kao family do not escape the wrath of Confucian-based values and their problems are further complicated by the additional restrictions simply for being born with an X-chromosome. As a whole, it is the women in the family that most epitomized Confucianism for rising against it took extraordinary courage or cleverness. It is the youngest, at fourteen years old, that truly upholds family values and relationships as Confucius described them. Shu-hua, the little Madame, blindly follows her stepmother’s example in all matters. This includes the harsh treatment of servants, without any regard for whether it is warranted or the feelings she may be hurting in the process. It is her character for which I personally feel the most sympathy. Children that have not yet supplemented their core upbringing with new experiences, knowledge, and mistakes are not solely responsible for the hurt they cause others. By the same token, they have not yet had the opportunity to truly experience life, as all children should have the right to do. Madame Chou, Mrs. Chang, and Miss Chen share an understanding that the traditions are truly unfair and outdated, but each expresses these feelings at a different level. Madame Chou is merely aware and accepts the boundaries in silence. Mrs. Chang, an undercover rebel, cleverly fights for equality of her daughter and other women under the guise of an absent-minded Mahjong enthusiast. All decisions that go against traditional values, such

as allowing Chen to remain unsupervised with her male cousins on several occasions, are ultimately overlooked or forgiven based on the old lady's seemingly one-track mind. Miss Chen, the feminist, is prepared take on whatever she must to enact change in the old traditions.

While partial responsibility for problems can be attributed to the old traditions and family values, this is not an area by which the Chinese hold exclusive rights. Every culture has their own version of traditions, expectations, and values that tend to create problems among its citizens. Every citizen of every culture is ultimately a victim of outdated traditions, values, expectations, or laws at some point in their lives. For the Kao brothers and Miss Chen, the most oppressive was the arranged marriages common at the time where love and happiness were disregarded for the benefit of the family as a whole. The brothers paid dearly for compliance with this filial duty. Cheuh-hsin was forced to discontinue his education, enter into a marriage where his bride was drawn from a hat, and endured an unfulfilled life having left behind the woman he loved. Cheuh-min, forced to flee his home and remain in hiding rather than fulfill his duty and marry a woman he did not love. Cheuh-hui, is unable to even consider his heart's desire due to her social standing. Ming-Feng, dismissed in her hour of need with but one precious kiss, commits suicide rather than forever be without him. Both Ming-Feng and Cheuh-hui paid dearly; one with death and the other, forever haunted by the guilt.

No matter the culture or the time period, a "golden age" or Utopia cannot be found. This is an idealistic idea as there is always a shortcoming in the morals of society. Colonial America is perhaps the most similar to the Confucian era. Comparatively, both were socially orientated

and involved slavery and the lack of women's rights. Frankly, the only purely positive attribute of these time periods that deserves another chance is the inherent respect given to one's elders. Modern society has blurred the line between right and wrong in general, pushing the bar lower and lower in a game of moral limbo. Our efforts to reach a Utopia can only make this world a better place. With this in mind, we should take heed of the wishful motto upon the gates of the Kao compound that read, "Benevolent rulers, happy family; long life, good harvests" (Chin, p.13) and simply do the best we can.