

# FAMILY ROLES IN 20TH CENTURY CHINA

Elizabeth Seeger

EXCERPT FROM *The Pageant of Chinese History*

1 For in China, the family was even more important than it is in our country, and it was very much larger. In our country, a family is usually made up of a father and mother and their children; perhaps one or two of their relatives may live with them, but usually each family has its own house. In China, however, when a man grew up, he did not leave his father's house; he brought his wife home with him, and they lived with his parents in one big household. His brothers did the same thing, so that there were several families living together in the one home. The houses were built around open courtyards, and new houses and new courtyards could be added if they were needed, so that there was room for everyone. No one left the home except the daughters when they married, for then they went to their husbands' homes and lived with their parents-in-law.

How would this change the dynamics of a household?

2 The oldest man, usually the grandfather, was the head of the household; he was called the Elder, and no matter how old the sons and the grandsons were, they must respect and obey him, and they could do nothing important without his permission. His wife, the grandmother, had charge of all the housekeeping, and the unmarried daughters and the sons' wives must obey her and serve her. When the Elder died, his oldest son took his place, and the life of the household went on as before. Nothing belonged to any one person, for everything belonged to the family. All that the men raised in the fields or earned by their work was brought home and shared by everyone, and the women did the work of the house together.

Explain how this information relates to the story "Two Kinds".

3 When anything important had to be done, the Elder called a family council, and they decided together what they should do. The family arranged the marriages of the sons and daughters, and decided what work the boys should be prepared for; if one of the sons wanted to go to another village or province and make his home there, he must ask the consent of the Elder. This way of living bound them all very closely together, and gave them a strong family feeling. The household was a little community, where each one lived for the good of all. It was like a tiny state.

Would you like this type of family unit? Explain

# Mother to Son

By Langston Hughes

Well, son, I'll tell you:  
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.  
It's had tacks in it,  
And splinters,  
And boards torn up,  
And places with no carpet on the floor –  
Bare.  
But all the time  
I've been a-climbin' on  
and reachin' landin's,  
And turnin' corners,  
and sometimes goin' in the dark  
Where there ain't been no light.  
So boy, don't you turn back.  
Don't you turn back.  
Don't you set down on the steps  
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.  
Don't you fall now –  
For I've still goin', honey,  
I've still climbin',  
and life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

Highlight and  
explain the  
extended  
metaphor in  
the poem.

# Mother to Son

By Langston Hughes

Well, son, I'll tell you:  
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.  
It's had tacks in it,  
And splinters,  
And boards torn up,  
And places with no carpet on the floor –  
Bare.  
But all the time  
I've been a-climbin' on  
and reachin' landin's,  
And turnin' corners,  
and sometimes goin' in the dark  
Where there ain't been no light.  
So boy, don't you turn back.  
Don't you turn back.  
Don't you set down on the steps  
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.  
Don't you fall now –  
For I've still goin', honey,  
I've still climbin',  
and life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

Why do you  
think the  
poet repeats  
this line?