

The confucian struggles of three brothers

[Family](#)



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Throughout time, succeeding generations have rebelled against the values and traditions of their parents and grandparents. This continual pattern of insurgence is the key theme of Pa Chin's Family, in which the new generation of "enlightened" students fights against the "antiquated" Confucian values of their elders. In the Kao family, three brothers - similar in their dislike of the traditional Confucian system of their grandfather, yet very different in their interactions with him and others - begin to throw off the heavy mantle of Confucianism and strive for a breath of freedom. Their struggles against the old values lead to pain, suffering and eventually triumph for the three of them, yet at a bitter price for two brothers. The story of the first brother, Chueh-hsin, is undoubtedly the saddest in this novel. Cheuh-hsin has lived his entire life in respect and constant compliance with his elders. Although he is an "enlightened" person and does not wholeheartedly agree with many of the Confucian values which he follows, he feels that his position in the social hierarchy of the family leaves him no other choice. As the "first son of the first son" he is the head of his household and as a result is forced to take on responsibilities he does not want and which his two younger brothers, Cheuh-min and Cheuh-hui, ridicule him for. Chueh-hsin has lived his entire life following a "compliant bow policy" and a "non-resistance strategy" reminiscent of Gandhi's. At an early age, he was prevented from his dreams, by being forced into an arranged marriage, although his heart belonged to another woman, Cousin Mei. Although he comes to love the wife whom he lives with, he can never completely remove Mei from his heart and mind and neither can she, as is evident by her death, which is a result of her internal suffering through the years of separation and broken dreams from Chueh-hsin. In addition, Chueh-

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hsin hoped that despite his arranged marriage he would at least be able to finish his education and become a high-ranking official as was hoped for him by his mother, of which he only had his tragic memories. Instead, he is removed from school and forced to enter the workforce in order to provide for his family and younger brothers, as dictated by the Confucian values of filial piety. Although Chueh-hsin did not agree with these values, which so unfairly restricted him from his goals and desires, he felt as if he had no choice but to follow the word of his father and grandfather, the Venerable Master Kao. Towards the end of the novel, Chueh-hsin takes his last harsh blow from the Confucian dictates of his family, when his wife dies during childbirth, as a result of being forced away beyond the safety and comfort of the town and home, because of superstitious values of children being born in a household where a death had recently occurred. When this event occurs, Chueh-hsin realizes that he has made a mistake that is entirely irrevocable and that he himself is largely to blame for in adhering to the values and restrictions of the family. Upon realizing this, he decides to strike back in his own way, against the family, by helping his youngest brother, Chueh-hui, escape at the end of the novel. Chueh-min is perhaps the wisest and most coolheaded of the three brothers, yet also the most resolute in his actions and decisions; thus he is the one who suffers the least in this novel and fully prevails against the Confucian mandates of his family. Chueh-min stands up for his love of his cousin Chin and prevents the marriage arranged for him by his grandfather from going through, which is an action his two brothers were unwilling to take - their inaction and adherence to the Confucian traditions leads to the deaths of three different women. Chueh-min also rebels against the family by espousing the ideas and thoughts of the new generation, which

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are so alien and different from those his family holds. He and his brother Chueh-hui are the organizers and contributors to a new magazine which hopes to promote these novel ideas and despite adversity by both their family and the government, they continue on their goal of spreading the “message of truth.” The third and youngest brother, Chueh-hui, is the polar opposite of his eldest brother, Chueh-hsin, and is the most headstrong of the three. He is called the “humanitarian” in his family because despite his upbringing in a traditional, rich and elite family, he cares for the common people and feels more at home with them - an example of this being the fact that he would under no condition sit in a sedan-chair, as he refused to be carried by others. Chueh-hui constantly mocks and ridicules his eldest brother for being so weak and not standing up for the two women he loves, thereby killing them both and ruining his own life. Nevertheless, in this Chueh-hui is hypocritical himself, as he falls in love with a bondmaid, Ming, yet refuses to take any action on her account when she is in dire need of his help. It is his lack of action that leads to her death and brings up the similarity between his inaction and that of Chueh-hsin's. However, it may be said that it is this mistake which leads to Chueh-hui's resolve which makes him more of a rebel against his family and their “antiquated” values. When his grandfather is fatally ill, the elders of the family bring in a witch-doctor to cure him, despite their own lack of faith in these healing methods, but Chueh-hui is the only one brave enough to confront the elders, and show them the idiocy of their actions. Finally, at the end of the novel, Chueh-hui takes the utmost action against the Confucian value of filial piety by leaving his family entirely. This action demonstrates his total disregard for the Confucian system of his forefathers, as filial piety is one of the core values of

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the social structure and disregarding this fundamental part by abandoning his family is an extreme example of his dislike for them. Although the three brothers share in their disenchantment with the social structure in which they live, they have different ways of demonstrating this. The first follows a policy of inaction, which only leads to additional suffering, but earns him the approval of his elders, at the price of his love. The second one stands up to the family, although it is extremely difficult, and finally manages to succeed in winning his choice in marriage. The third, though, is essentially forced to escape from home, because he feels as if his family is “choking” him and that he must cast them off in order to truly live. The three brothers thus represent three different points on a scale of adaptation and coping to the Confucian hierarchy and society of the time. The first represents the extreme point of being weak, unable to stand up for anything and thus giving up the woman which is his; the third represents the other extreme. He is so headstrong and rebellious that his only means of surviving is to run away. The second brother is the middle-point of the two. He opposes the values of his time, yet he realizes that he must live with his family as that is also an essential part of his life. By standing up to his family, but not in a way that he cuts off all ties entirely, he reaches the goal that neither of his brothers were able to. He is the only brother who does not suffer needlessly, leading to useless deaths, and is the only brother able to finally attain his true love. As a result, it may be claimed that in order for any of the three brothers to have succeeded in truly throwing off the Confucian mantle, he would need to do so through compromise. The solution is not through the utter submissiveness of Chueh-hsin or the violent rebellion and escape of Chueh-hui, but through the strong resistance and slight compromises of Chueh-min.

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