On Augustinian Studies in China: A Chinese and Western Discourse on a Family-State Relationship

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Abstract: There is a growing interest in Augustine’s social and political philosophy as a result of the popularity of Augustinian studies in modern-day China. The Augustinian idea that the fall of Western classical civilization occurred when the natural order of “family-state” was replaced by a “denaturalized, de-politicized fellowship” is one discernible trend. This trend involves using the ancient natural order of “the unity of family and state” as a “righteous” standard to explain Augustinian thought. This interpretation calls into question our understanding of “the natural order” in the contemporary world as well as how people interact with one another in society. This paper compares and contrasts the fundamental debate between “family” and “society” in both Chinese and Western contexts. It begins by outlining three different natural orders in relation to “family-state unity” in pre-modern China and the West. It then uses Augustine’s context, especially *The City of God*, to illustrate the notion of the natural order. The essay contends that Augustine reformulates the Roman “natural order” using a “family-state unity” model derived from Caritas. This essay also makes the case that Augustine is used in the Chinese context in a way that shows how deeply concerned Chinese intellectuals are with family issues.

Keywords: the natural order; family-state unity; conjugal family; Augustine Studies

1. Introduction

As a patristic philosopher in the 4th and 5th centuries, Augustine is regarded by contemporary classicists as a great thinker who upheld classical Greco-Roman civilization and assessed it through the lens of Christianity. Some of them highlight his ideas to demonstrate a significant split and conflict between the classical ancient and the Christian modern worlds, while others highlight them to demonstrate a significant fusion and regeneration (Outler 1959, pp. 213–20; Cochrane 1957, pp. 399–400). The interpretation of Augustine has evolved into a key battleground for comprehending contemporary issues in the many perspectives on modernity and as an approach to the social analysis of the clash between “the ancients and the moderns” or the conflict between “the East and the West”.1 As an aspect of the “boom” in Augustinian study in today’s China,2 a striking research trend involving his social and political thought makes use of the ancient natural order of “the unity of the family and the state” as the “righteous” standard to explain Augustinian thought as the destruction of Western classical civilization. This tendency is most notably seen in the “Beida (Peking University) School of Augustinian Study”. These scholars argue that Augustine destroyed the natural order of “family-state unity” in Greco-Roman tradition and built an individualist fellowship of “marriage” as the fundamental unit of family, which replaced the ancient family and gave rise to the modern nuclear family. To blame Augustine for the breakdown of the natural family/social order seems anachronistic, and other individualist presumptions from 19th- and 20th-century philosophy have contributed to this growing perception. This article focuses on the main presumption of “the natural order” as a righteous foundation in order to make a comparison between the concept of the natural order in ancient Chinese society and that in Greco-Roman thought, as well as its...
transformation by Augustine. In the first section, this article defines three types of natural orders related to “family-state unity” in ancient China and the West, revealing their patriarchal model; then, it illustrates the idea of the natural order in Augustine’s context, arguing for a “family-state unity” model in Augustine that is derived from *Caritas*, as a reformulation of Roman “natural order”. This article does not attempt to provide an “adjudication” between these alternative readings; its position is comparable to that of Eric Gregory, who states that his interest “lies very much ‘in what [Augustine] has become’ rather than ‘what he was’” and in “how certain kinds of Augustinianism proceed from different characterizations of citizen’s attitudes and dispositions in political life” (Gregory 2008, p. 77). Ultimately, this article makes the point that this interpretive tendency is not only a result of the complexity of Augustine’s thought but also of the Chinese intellectuals’ significant concern regarding the diminishing importance of family life in contemporary Chinese culture.

2. The Natural Order of “Family-State Unity” in Ancient Chinese and Western Thought

The idea of the “natural order of family-state unity” refers to the close ties and interdependencies that exist between the family and the larger political unit within society. It implies that the state’s well-being and the family’s operation are fundamentally in sync with one another. The peaceful coexistence and unbroken cohesion of the family and state were justified, thoroughly understood, and treasured within this framework. There is an understanding that the roles and obligations within the family, such as those between parents and children or among family members, are in line with and contribute to the efficient operation of the state within the natural order of family-state unity. A harmonious and prosperous community is thought to be built on the characteristics and values that are fostered within the family, such as filial piety, loyalty, and respect. We can distinguish three different types of “family-state unity” within the context of the natural order in ancient Chinese and Western societies.

2.1. The Concept of “Family-State Unity” in the Chinese Order of Rites and Law

The Confucian civilization was in agreement that the family and the state should be one. Many words and phrases in the Chinese language represent this unity, and every traditional Chinese person has them ingrained in their mind. Confucian familism is an ideal of Chinese society that understands the family as the only adequate and appropriate place for the genesis, development, and cultivation of human feelings and moral attitudes. This concept should be illustrated within the Confucian perspective on the role of humans in the world: (1) human nature is basically good and has a general disposition towards goodness; (2) (moral) knowledge and (moral) action are one; and (3) the way to attain it is through incessant educational guidance. The human role should develop within the framework of the social conditions of the Five Cardinal Relationships (*Wulun*): (1) between the lord and his minister; (2) between father and son; (3) between husband and wife; (4) between older and younger brother; and (5) between friends. According to the tradition of “ritual governance”, various aspects of society are characterized by hierarchical differences and norms, emphasizing respect for authority, familial bonds, and virtuous conduct. Paternalism forms the cornerstone of the family and the state, creating a stable structure from the patriarchal clan’s integration into ancient Chinese society. “Chinese political organization can be characterized as a form of paternalistic governance, with the family serving as the prototype for the entire realm” (Ono 2010, p. 3).

At the national level, the regulation of “ritual governance” is primarily achieved through the promulgation and enforcement of laws and is commonly referred to as “integrating ritual into law”. In his well-known work, *Law and Society in Traditional China*, Chinese sociologist Chu Tongzu provides a compelling instance of this integration through his examination of the country’s ancient legal structure. He discovered that Confucian philosophy and Chinese society strongly emphasized the maintaining of order, both inside
families and among social groups. These hierarchical structures, which have a stronghold in traditional Chinese law, are fiercely upheld. Chu demonstrated through the use of ancient judicial cases that the leader of a family took an exceptional role in maintaining law and order and developing a close link between family dynamics and the administration of justice. “A family was regarded as a vital unit of the entire legal and political system …… It may be said that a family or tsu was the basic legal unit and that its head was considered as the supreme authority of each unit and accountable to the government” (Chu 2011, p. 42).

On the one hand, the male head of a family, or tsu, is given some authority to direct and control family members; on the other hand, the government asked the male head of a family to be accountable for the private actions of his family members; this became the strict obligation of a Confucian man as a head of the family. The ability to manage one’s family well according to the “ritual” principles indicates one’s capacity to rule not only one’s own home but also to exert influence over the government of a country or perhaps the entire world. A family is charitable, a state is charitable; a family is modest, a state is modest, as stated in the teachings of Confucian classics like The Great Learning. Chu used the term “legal familism” to characterize the complex legal framework that seamlessly combined state rules with family administration, fusing social and family order. Numerous baffling legal conundrums that may befuddle modern people are clarified through the perspective of legal familism. As an illustration, consider the complex lien compensation system used by families. Legal familism, which protected the purity of familial relationships and prohibited internal accusations in recognition of the significance of keeping harmony within the family unit, can be used to understand the right of concealment among relatives practiced from the first century BC to the Ming and Qing Dynasties, with the exception of crimes involving treasure (Chu 2011, p. 88).

2.2. The Concept of “Family-State Unity” in Natural Teleology

In ancient Greek political thought, family and state are viewed as natural associations. Family is the primary social organization and the beginning of the human community, while the political organization acts as both an extension of the family and the fulfillment of humanity’s natural progression. The most influential political philosophy to link family and state within a natural teleology is that of Aristotle. His narrative describes how civilization “has advanced sequentially, through three ‘associations’, koinōniai: the household, the village, and the state (polis). The validity of each association is strongly emphasized. Man–woman: formed by nature for daily purposes; master–slave: natural ruler and naturally ruled; household: formed by nature for daily purposes; village: “by nature to an especial degree, as a colony of a household—children and grandchildren”; and the state: it exists by nature, for all men have a natural impulse towards such an association (Crisp and Saunders 1999, pp. 126–27). However, Aristotle quickly emphasized that the state and the family are essentially different human associations, and that the family merely serves as a preparatory domain, laying the groundwork for the eventual entry into the political realm. Through active engagement in political discourse and decision making, Aristotle contends that political life presents a great chance for the full development of human nature, particularly reason and speech. According to him, this interaction represents the fulfillment and completion of one’s inherent nature (Aristotle 2013, p. 43). There are significant disparities between the “family” and the “city-state” in terms of their governance arrangements. While the family follows a patriarchal system, the city-state adheres to the idea of “rule and ruled in turn” (Aristotle 2013, p. 41), in which equally qualified citizens take turns holding positions of power. No one could enter the political world of equals without the patterns of domination in the domestic system.

Cicero, a well-known Roman republican who adopted Greek political philosophy, expressed a similar viewpoint when he claimed that the family is the foundation of civil government and the place where the state is born (Rei Publicae Seminarium). In his book On the Commonwealth, Cicero makes the claim that a great statesman is rewarded with a kind of immortality and rises to a respected status like a deity (Cicero 1999, pp. 93–94). Hannah
Arendt states unequivocally: “For Greeks and Romans alike, all differences notwithstanding, the foundation of a body politic was brought about by man’s need to overcome the mortality of human life and the futility of human deeds. Outside the body politic, man’s life was not only and not even primarily insecure, i.e., exposed to the violence of others; it was without meaning and dignity because under no circumstances could it leave any traces behind it” (Arendt 1961, p. 71). This binary nature of the family and state gives precedence to the public realm over the private realm. Although the political influence of the male heads of households, as citizens, waned during the Roman Empire, male citizens still retained their legal status under imperial rule.

2.3. The Concept of “Family-State Unity” in Roman Patriarchy

While the importance of the ancient family has historically received less attention in Western classical political philosophy, some modern social theorists work to emphasize the crucial role that family and kinship had in ancient societies. In fact, we found that in acknowledging the family as the foundation of social and political order, ancient Western societies and the Chinese environment are comparable. As Max Weber argued, the political features of patriarchy in the home provided explanations and models that rulers could employ to organize and legitimize political power (Hamilton 1990, pp. 77–104). The fundamental importance of the ancient family in forming societal dynamics, governance, and cultural traditions in the past is emphasized in works like Maine’s Ancient Law, De Courlanges’ The Ancient City, and Morgan’s Ancient Society. In his seminal work Ancient Law, Maine notes that families rather than individuals formed the foundation of ancient society. This realization is especially important when studying the legal system of ancient Rome, which was primarily focused on the composition and dynamics of the family rather than on the individual. Families in ancient societies, unlike those in modern times, were constantly enlarged by the absorption of strangers within their circle. However, these persons who were merged into a family were typically “held together by common obedience to their highest living ascendant, the father, grandfather, or great-grandfather” (Maine 1963, p. 128). Maine notes that the lifelong authority of the father over the person and property of his descendants, known as Patria Potestas, was a defining characteristic of the family structure of ancient society as a system of law (Maine 1963, p. 130). Maine also notes that the form of rule in the Roman family, which is a creation of legal fiction, can extend to tribes and nations, whose right to rule was a sort of expanded patriarchy: “We can think of them as a network of concentric circles that progressively grew from a single point. The family is the basic social unit, and they are all subordinate to the highest male ascendant” (Maine 1963, p. 124).

De Couranges agreed with Maine that the foundation of the Roman family and social structure was paternal power. He further demonstrated that the authority of the father was merely a result of religious authority and not its primary cause. He argued that fathers had the right to preside over family rites and sacrifices to the household gods because paternal authority in ancient societies was derived from religious authority. “The father ranks first in the presence of the sacred fire. He lights it, and supports it; he is its priest. In all religious acts, his functions are the highest… The family and the worship are perpetuated through him; he represents, himself alone, the whole series of ancestors, and from him are to proceed the entire series of descents…he can almost say… ‘I am the god’” (Fustel de Courlanges 1980, p. 85). This cultural insight highlights the complex nature of paternal roles beyond simple biological paternity, shedding light on the larger understanding of paternal figures among ancient societies.

In the context of ancient societies, the heads of patrilineages held authority over what the Romans referred to as family and the Greeks referred to as aikos. These expansive households typically comprised lands, extended family members, servants, slaves, and diverse forms of property. The family patriarchy served as the guiding factor influencing the family-state dynamic, according to the sociological concept. The political model claims that, in contrast to this sociological viewpoint, it is a “private sphere” and that the rules
regulating political authority are very different from those governing familial relations. However, in general, the ancient cultures of Greece and Rome saw the family and the state as natural connections for satiating various aspects of human nature. The city-state and the family were the two pillars of the citizens’ lives. They acquired virtues and everlasting glory by taking part in politics, while they had the authority of the family patriarch, with an obligation to carry on the family’s fortune, reputation, and customs. The natural order of family-state unity highlights the coexistence and mutual influence of these spheres in society.

3. The Critique of De-Naturalization

Borrowing Charles Taylor’s view, the natural order of family-state unity is a way that people in earlier societies “imagine” their social existence “embedding” in society and in the cosmos (Taylor 2007, p. 150). Before “the great disembedding”, the unity and continuity of family and state were understood, and they received justification within the context of a natural order that included society and the cosmos. So, the question is this: is it possible to discuss any sort of “unity of family-state” that leaves behind a natural order? This question relates to a perennial question regarding how individuals relate to each other in society. In “The Beida School” in China, a dominant view about Augustine’s social and political thought is that Augustine ended the Roman political model based on family and kinship structure by severing the individual from all natural ties and substituting them with a “fellowship” consisting of “de-naturalized strangers”.

If the supreme community given to ancient philosophers is a naturally occurring city-state, then the supreme fellowship of Augustine is *The City of God* (in both the earthly and eschatological sense) constructed by de-naturalized strangers. The “city” of God is not a city-state in the strict sense, but a de-naturalized, de-politicalized, abstract fellowship (Sun 2014, p. 6: my translation).

According to their critical views of Augustine’s social–political thought, Augustine perceived the Christian society as a “de-naturalized, de-political, abstract fellowship”, an abstract collection of individuals disembedded from the traditional social structure of family or state. This perspective, it is argued, results in a thorough disruption of the natural order of the family-state. It is “de-naturalized” in the sense that Augustine downplays or disregards the natural familial and social bonds that constitute the foundation of human society. It is “de-politicalized” in the sense that Augustine opposed the idea that the pursuit of perfection and true happiness can be achieved through political systems.

In his interpretation of Augustine’s *Civitate Dei*, Wu Fei focuses on the issue of whether there is “a third city”, namely a middle ground between the Earthly City and the City of God in Augustine. A city, according to Augustine, is a society binding people by love; thus, any actual city might include each association, ranging from family to a political organization. However, Augustine divided the two cities with two kinds of love: the Earthly City is “created by self-love reaching the point of contempt of God”, while the Heavenly City is created “by the love of God carried as far as contempt of self” (*The City of God*, 14.28). He claimed that the two cities were distinct from an eschatological perspective: “In this world, the two cities are indeed interwoven and intermixed in this era, and they will remain so until the last judgment shall separate them” (*The City of God*, 1.35). For Wu Fei, this issue bears on the moral and spirit role of earthly organization. Wu Fei, after discussing different interpretations of Markus, O’Donovan, etc., argues that while Augustine acknowledged the limited significance of earthly political authority, he fundamentally insisted on a clear distinction between the two cities and thought of the earthly city as the City of Devil; therefore, he denied any spiritual meaning of family or state in the earthly city with respect to human perfection, which explains his negative attitude towards pagan Roman politics and history (Wu 2012, p. 36). In our view, Wu seems to mistake the secular history, which is, as Augustine said, “interwoven and intermixed in this era”, for instituted domains, thereby concluding that Augustine denied that there was any real or natural good in actual societies in the earthly city. He finds textual support
for his contention that the heavenly city and the earthly city are, in essence, two different orders of mind. By permitting individual souls to merge with God, Augustinian individuals detach themselves from the classical community and enter the religious community with the same soul for God. “By defining the earthly political realm as the City of Devil, according to the standard of the highest good in the city of God, and by reuniting human beings in One in the imitation of Christ, Augustine ultimately brought an end to the ideals of Roman civilization” (Wu 2013, p. 28).

In a similar vein, Sun’s interpretation highlights the significance of the sanctification of marriage in Augustine’s teachings. Sun Shuai emphasizes that Augustine changed the ancient “kinship family” into a “conjugal family”, which consisted of man and woman bound together by the impersonal bond of God. “Sacramental marriage is the union of estranged individuals, freed from their family identities, in the presence of the unfamiliar God; this very departure from nature’s structure marks the beginning of a new family” (Sun 2014, p. 48). He argues that by elevating marriage to a sacred level, Augustine sought to detach individuals from their natural associations and to create a universal spiritual society based on fellowship in their place. Sun’s interpretation suggests that Augustine’s concept of marriage as a principle of communitas personarum and the sanctification of marriage contribute to a liberal imagination of society.

Augustine argues that the family is no longer constituted solely by the father–son relationship but by the marital relationship; it is no longer based on kinship ties but rather on the foundation of the marital bond. The “conjugal family” is not only the basic unit of Christian fellowship but also the fundamental form of modern families today; it has become the fundamental structure that modern states and societies seek to integrate (Sun 2014, p. 3: my translation).

On the surface, their interpretations appear to repeat some common criticisms of Augustine, which either praise or criticize Augustine for his ideas, paving the way for the modern Cartesian subject and the model of the “individual and society” (O’Neill 1966, pp. 255–60; Glidden 1999, pp. 440–51), wherein disengaged individuals organize various forms of society for the purpose of “protecting their rights and self-interests” (Hanby 2003, p. 8; Taylor 1989, p. 127). However, aside from these contemporary accounts of Augustine, we discovered that the family issue is at the center of the concerns of these Chinese Augustine scholars. These scholars emphasize that the ancient family occupied a pivotal role in the entire framework of the family-state and that family relationships played a fundamental role in reconciling the tension between family and state, between natural community and political community, and between human nature and civilization in ancient times. Mostly supported by 19th-century sociological works on ancient society, they argue that the “family patriarch” was responsible for building ancient civilization: “Whatever it is representative or not, the Roman patriarchal system is the archetype of ancient society, constructed on the paternal authority of the patriarch” (Sun 2014, p. 11). In addition, “the unity of family and state” in the natural order had a sacred meaning for the ancient people, even as “the soul of Western classical civilization,” (Wu 2013, p. 496) while this classical order was deconstructed by Augustine and replaced with a new order of the individual with God, therefore denying the human being the possibility of achieving perfection through any secular social organization. In Wu Fei’s view, Augustine replaced “the order of the natural world” with “the order of mind” (Wu 2013, pp. 283, 496). In his other work on the loss of human relationships in the modern world, Wu states that in Chinese traditional thought, the order of human relationships (Renlun) represents the order of the cosmos (heaven and earth), and it forms the foundation of the order of the family-state (Wu 2017, p. 464).

4. Augustine: In the Context of “Natural Order” of Family and State

We have discussed three models of the ancient natural order in relation to “family-state unity”: the Chinese order centered on family rites, the Greek order centered on city-states, and the Roman order centered on the father of the family. Disregarding their distinc—
tions, these orders are both natural and political: on the one hand, social–political order is thought to be based on some eternal natural order encompassing the cosmos and humanity; filial piety, paternal authority, or human reason to justify the social–political order; on the other hand, social–political orders pursue the human longing for virtual perfection or immortality with the creative development of these natural characteristics in the larger political community. The concept of natural order depends on two assumptions in ancient thought: the first is that a male citizen (a patriarch) can attain perfection by pursuing public honor or developing moral virtue in some large community; the second is that nature is good and a source of perfection. However, Augustine emphasized the limitations and the fallen nature of humanity. He believed that the fallen nature and inherent sinfulness of humanity made nature itself imperfect, asserting that a worldly community cannot fulfill our longing for true glory and immortality. Augustine also opposed the deification of nature, though he affirmed the goodness of nature as God’s creation. At the same time, while he attributed the deification of the transcendent to the realm of God, he recognized the importance of the family as a component of the natural order and did not deny the emotional and ethical significance of familial bonds within the natural order. For him, our longing for companionship is never a “de-naturalized” yearning. As Jean Elshtain comments, human social life, according to Augustine, is not just a solution for sin that requires order and coercion to control our wickedness. Instead, it is an expression of our social nature, our longing for companionship, and our ability to demonstrate a widespread Caritas (Elshtain 2019, p. 40).

4.1. The Naturally Occurring Social Bonds

Augustine, like Aristotle and Cicero, believed that human communities develop on three levels: the first being the household, the second being the city or state, and the third being the larger human world (The City of God 19.7: Augustine 1998, p. 928). According to him, human life is a social life: “This peace the Heavenly City possesses in faith while on its pilgrimage, and by this faith it lives righteously, directing towards the attainment of that peace every good act which it performs either for God, or—since the city’s life is inevitably a social one—for a neighbor” (The City of God 19.17). He understood that human beings are created to forge bonds with others based on a “similarity of nature” and “affection”. Speaking about Adam’s creation, he said: “God, therefore, created only one single man: not, certainly, that he might be alone and bereft of human society, but that, by this means, the unity of society and the bond of concord might be commended to him more forcefully, mankind being bound together not only by similarity of nature, but by the affection of kinship” (The City of God 12.22). Contrary to the Beida Scholars’ view, this affection is hardly a “de-naturalized” sentiment for “abstract fellowship”. Augustine thinks that the human need for social unity can be found in natural similarities and a plurality of human beings and that it is pushed by “affection of kinship” in the first stage. Augustine did not think that people could achieve perfection or glory only in politics. As John Heyking indicates, Augustine “did not distinguish between the political and the social” (Von Heyking 2001, p. 61); for him, the same bond of concord forms different kinds of communities, whether family, city, or state. Of course, more concord can be found in a family and more “discord” in the state, but strangeness and difference in a large group of people make it necessary for a broader social organization than the family to develop, “endowed with the authority and responsibility to seek the temporal common good of individuals and the families that make it up” (Burt 1990, p. 160). At the same time, there is a bond of concord that forms the people of a state; so, he said, “A people is the association of a multitude of rational creatures united by a common agreement on the objects of their love” (The City of God 19.24).

The links of social affection, which originate in personal relationships and spread outward, are valued by Augustine. He argues that although it was important for early humans to marry close relatives, people were later able to broaden their circle of love through marriage. As a result, he contends, human social interaction cannot be restricted to the
boundaries of the family and must instead include other families as well as strangers. It becomes possible to manifest social affection on a larger scale. As stated by Augustine, “For affection is now given its proper place, so that men, for whom it is advantageous to live together in honorable concord, may be joined to one another by the bonds of diverse relationships … thereby bind social life more effectively by involving a greater number of persons in them” (The City of God 15.16). In his opinion, family and the social and political associations satisfy various natural needs of human beings, who actualize multiple social roles with their natural talents, thereby deepening their social affections.

The search for the right social order is closely linked to our comprehension of the origins of civil society or the pre-political life of man. However, unlike ancient political philosophers such as Aristotle, who valued nature as an unchanging good and “natural right”, Augustine reminds us of the corruption of human nature in the fallen condition: “For there is nothing so social by nature, so discordant by corruption, as the human race” (The City of God 12.28). After the Fall, those who were ruled by self-love experienced friction, tension, conflicts, and violence when they formed relationships, due to their corruptive and contradictory impulses. All facets of society, including families, are corrupted by the craving for dominance (libido dominandi). As Augustine said, if “there is no security even in the home from the common evils which befall the human race, what of the city? The larger the city, the more is its forum filled with civil law-suits and criminal trials” (The City of God 19.5). He contends that the early Roman Republic’s political virtues of patriotism, self-sacrifice, and devotion to the common good were, at best, splendid vices driven primarily by the lust for dominance and “the inflated ambition of a proud spirit” (The City of God 1. Preface). Augustine admitted that, in some cases, political governance helps to lessen the effects of the collapse. He saw that political dominance allows the discipline and restraint of humans’ fallen nature, maintaining society’s order. He did, however, nevertheless think that the political structure, or what we refer to as “the state”, focused on promoting the good life or the self-fulfillment of human nature. We can infer that Augustine’s “low anthropology”, rooted in the fallen nature of humanity, is what prevents a natural conception of any well-ordered political order outside of Christian redemption. According to the presumption of classical political philosophy, we could say that Augustine deconstructs the concept of the natural order when viewed from the perspective of “a stark biblical repudiation of ‘creative’ politics” (Markus 1988, p. 75).

4.2. “Well-Ordered Concord” in Family

A typical Roman family in Augustine’s day consisted of a wide variety of families, including agnatic descendants, cognate relatives, servants, and dependents. Augustine began his autobiographical reflection of Confessions with self-questioning, but if we read Confessions as a reflection on his own experience of growing up (written until his conversion in 391), we perceive the importance of his parent’s family in all the formative years of his life, especially his relationship with his mother. In his Confessions, he understood the family more intensely in the wider conception of the extended household. Augustine was dedicated to establishing a sacred common life in his monastery from the start of his priesthood at Hippo in 391 AD. His monastic community was a “fellowship” in the truest sense of the word—a close bond with a fellow citizen on the journey to the heavenly city. As opposed to “normal society, which emerged from the clash of fallen human wills” (Brown 2012, p. 180), he sees this monastery as an experiment in common life. However, his ecclesial fellowship was composed of his family, friends, and acquaintances from a similar social class, and it did not stray from the authentic connections that Rome cherished (Brown 2012, p. 174).

Augustine acknowledges that there is a “natural” hierarchy based on a “well-ordered concord” between the superior and the lower, such as between husband and wife, parents and children, and masters and servants in the household. As he declared in The City of God, “The order of this concord is, first, that a man should do no harm to anyone, and second, that he should do good to all, so far as he can. In the first place, therefore, he
must care for his household; for the order of nature and of human society itself gives him
readier access to them and greater opportunity of caring for them” (The City of God 19.14).
A Christian head of a household must prioritize taking care of his family because of the
order in nature and human society, which makes it easier for him to do so. Augustine
asserts that the head of a household (paterfamilias), who has tender love and equal concern
for all members of his household, is the source of familial power because he may better
fulfill God’s demand to love one’s neighbor within the context of his own family. The
leader of the household was referred to as the paterfamilias since “this is so much by the
natural order” (The City of God 19.16). In practicing benevolent care and equal concern for
members of the community, this familial rule becomes an example for political rule, and
Augustine assigns the Christian father the duty to keep domestic peace in favor of civil
peace. He spoke with a Roman civic spirit: “Since, then, the house (domus) ought to be
the beginning or element of the city (civitas), and every beginning bears reference to some
end of its kind, and every element to the integrity of the whole of which it is an element,
it follows plainly enough that domestic peace has a relation to civic peace, in other words,
that the well-ordered concord of domestic rule has a relation to the well-ordered concord
of civic obedience and civic rule” (The City of God 19.16).

According to this political text, Augustine does not prioritize the public over the pri-
ivate, or classify the family and political society as fundamentally distinct types of domains.
Instead, he believes that the family, household, and state are all carried along on the jour-
ney of the earthly city. In contrast to Greek–Roman patriarchy, he acknowledges the legit-
imacy of the father’s rule over family members, including women, but only because “such
deference is provided for in tradition and is necessary to promote the ends of domestic and
civil harmony”, not because the paternal authority gave fathers complete dominance over
their children or because he believed in a separate and inferior female nature or consigned
women to the status of necessary objects (Elshtain 2020, pp. 71, 73). He does not analogize
the authority of fathers in the household to the political authority, like the Roman patriar-
chal model; instead, he believes that there are different types of rule in the family and the
state because the desire for dominance is comparable to some extent to that in the politi-
cal sphere, where powerful commands are made “out of a desire for mastery” rather than
“dutiful concern for others”, or “out of pride in ruling” rather than merciful love (The City
of God 19.14). As Elshtain stated, “For a lust to dominate taints and perverts all human
relations, from family to city, Similarly, a decent love, a concern for the well-being of all
in the household or the city” (Elshtain 2019, p. 41). Augustine believed that there are only
two types of love that may coexist within the family and within the framework of a civic
order: Caritas or cupiditas, private, self-love or public, sharing charity. A respectable love
is similar in that it shows concern for everyone in the home or city.

4.3. Marriage as Companionship

Similar to Aristotle, the Stoics, and the Roman jurists, Augustine called the coupling
of the male and female “the seedbed of a city” (The City of God 15.16). Augustinian scholars
in the Beida School point out that Augustine replaced the idea of a “kinship family” with
a “conjugal family,” where the union of a male and female is considered the basic build-
ing block of society. Indeed, he refers to marriage as a “conjugal society” in The City of God
(14.22) and The Literal Interpretation of Genesis (Augustine 1982, p. 79). However, it is crucial
to note that Augustine used the word “conjugal bond” or “conjugal union” to refer to the
relationship within marriage, where the ability for friendship is considered a great and nat-
ural good, rather than denying the characteristics of the Greco-Roman family. Augustine
begins his treatise On the Good of Marriage by emphasizing the companionate nature of
marriage: “Since every man is a part of the human race, and human nature is something social
and possesses the capacity for friendship as a great and natural good…And so it is that the
first natural tie of human society is man and wife” (Augustine 1999, p. 9). He realized that
unity and harmony between spouses, grounded in mutual love and respect, provide the
basis for a strong family and a flourishing society. He assumed that God created marriage
to expand and consolidate the social bonds of people’s social dílectio, so that men are bound together not only by similarity of kinship but also by family affection (The City of God 12.2, 15.16). In his description of Edenic marriage as “a faithful partnership based on love and mutual respect” (The City of God 14.26), he occasionally prioritized companionship in the family over living and reproducing. He explained that Eve did not use sexual attraction to lure Adam to eat the fatal fruit but that he ate with her out of “closeness of bonds between them” (The City of God 14.11). He gives a nascent argument about the value of friendship in marriage: friendship, not sexual desire, set their relations of marriage intercourse because the purpose of marriage was not reproduction in the Garden of Eden.9

As Cormac Burke comments, Augustine “was no doubt too much a man of his times to give the same importance to the affective or sentimental aspects of love, as we tend to do today” (Burke 2012, p. 386). For him, the truth of the natural order finds its place within the ordo caritias. By promoting a moral revolution built on love relationships to support the family and social community, Augustine’s ideas did in fact undermine the established form of family and state in Roman society. He questioned the idea of a so-called “natural order” that justified these hierarchical systems, and he criticized the patriarchal structures that typified the Roman social and political order. In contrast to this prevalent model, he highlighted the value of love and respect among family members and fought for a more equal and humane treatment of couples. He said that the state should be governed by the values of Christian charity and compassion, with people and leaders motivated by love and care for the welfare of all members of society, regardless of social rank or gender. Augustine’s theories had a significant influence on Western thought’s view of family and societal structures since they criticized the dominant patriarchal rules and advocated for a more accepting and loving society.

5. Conclusions and Remarks

There was a shared category of “family and state in the natural order” in ancient Chinese and Western political thought. In recent years, this category has been used by some Augustine scholars in China to interpret the profound influence of Augustine on Western civilization, from a viewpoint of Confucianism. The perception that Augustine is solely responsible for the breakdown of this natural order may be influenced by the presuppositions of later philosophers in the 19th and 20th centuries, who might have interpreted and framed his ideas within the context of their own time. In fact, it is a collapse of the ancient “natural order” that Augustine was addressing in The City of God. When he reflected on the fall of Rome, Augustine sought to provide a Christian perspective on the natural order amidst his time’s social and political upheaval.

Augustine is being employed in the Chinese context in ways that are of importance, as is referred to in the debate on the different readings. Confucianism places family relationships as the central and foundational element in the construction of society; however, the structural changes of the modern nuclear family and the increasing individuality have made it difficult for the “family” to become even a basic production unit, and the “family” is not the ultimate ideal and sacred symbol of physical and mental stability. At the same time, China today has fallen into a trap of low fertility. Late marriage, remaining unmarried, living alone, having fewer children, and infertility are increasingly becoming a choice for individuals and family couples. Facing modern nihilism and individualism, and in response to the unfounded ethics of popular neoliberalism, some Chinese scholars who studied Augustine turned to the Confucian family-state analogy and family-state unified narrative, and to some degree, their readings of Augustine run with the grain of their other fundamental claims regarding the importance of the revival of filial piety and rituals in today’s Chinese society.10

This article aims to demonstrate that Augustine should not be criticized for undervaluing the family as the origin of the emotion of love and the meaning of ethical life; instead, he can help us better understand the meaning and value of love and affection. At the same time, his thought can make one wary of the deprivation of individual members’ rights
and the suppression of women by the isomorphic narrative of the family-state because the latter does diminish the true value of “family”.

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**Notes**

1. There has been a general interest in Augustine as a philosopher and a prominent figure in Western intellectual history over the past two decades in Chinese academia. A number of translations, introductions, and commentaries on Augustine have appeared. Important monographs include *The Holy Call: A Study of Augustine’s Theological Anthropology* (Zhang 1999), *Memory and Light: A Study of Augustine’s Theology* (Zhou 2001), *Augustine’s Christian Thought* (Zhou 2005), *Will and Freedom: A Moral Psychological Interpretation of Augustine’s Concept of Voluntas* (Wu 2010), *Pilgrim Dwelling in the Earthly World: Research in Augustine’s Teachings on Human Nature* (Zhang 2013), *Beyond Classical Philosophy: A Study of Augustine’s Thought of Emotions* (Gao 2022), and *Study on Augustine’s Early Thought of Will* (Hua 2022). However, for ideological reasons, most of the research on Augustine primarily focuses on his philosophy and theology, with relatively less on his social and political thought. Important research works on Augustine’s social and political thought include *The Earthly Authority: Social and Political Thought in Augustine* (Xia 2007), *Mind Order and World History: Augustine’s Ending of Western Classical Civilization* (Wu 2013), and *Nature and Societas: Study on Augustine’s Theory of Marriage and Family* (Sun 2014). A newly published monograph is *Under the Roof of The Empire: Augustine’s Political Philosophy* (Hua 2023). This book places Augustine’s political philosophy in the historical background of the Roman Empire and early Christianity and conducts a more neutral historical and textual analysis.

2. For the boom in Chinese Augustinian studies and the rise of the “Beida School”, see (The Chinese Committee for Medieval Philosophy 2018); Wu Fei and Zhou Weichi point out that there are three Augustine research centers in mainland China: one in Beijing, which is mainly associated with Peking University, Renmin University of China, and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences; one in Hangzhou, which is associated with Zhejiang University; and one in Guangzhou, which is associated with Sun Yat-sen University. Cf (Zhou 2020).

3. There are numerous terms and expressions in the Chinese language that convey this isomorphism; for example, a local magistrate was called parent-official and was expected to love people like his children. A man was educated to love his small family (小家), to take care of everybody in the community (大 家), and then to care for the country (Guo jia 国家). Cf. Lu (1985, p. 214). Chu observed that the legal provision promoting concealment among family members did not extend to cases involving rebellion. It becomes evident that the legal system recognized the paramount importance of upholding loyalty to the state over other familial obligations when the two principles clashed. See Chu (2011, p. 92).

4. Chu observed that the legal provision promoting concealment among family members did not extend to cases involving rebellion. It becomes evident that the legal system recognized the paramount importance of upholding loyalty to the state over other familial obligations when the two principles clashed. See Chu (2011, p. 92).


6. French Augustinian scholar, Henri-Irénée Marrou, first proposed that the earthly city could be called a tertium quid between two cities. According to Markus’s interpretation, secular history—the history of all human societies—exists in “the region where the two cities overlap”, but is “neither a third thing somewhere between them” (Markus 1988, pp. 98, 101). Markus points out that Augustine’s saeculum is a concept of time rather than a concept of the domain, but he interpreted it as a middle term between earthly damnation and heavenly salvation, thereby giving it a neutral liberalist meaning. O’Donovan and Milbank argued for Augustine’s eschatological dualism and opposed the secular society as the third something (O’Donovan 1987, p. 98; Milbank 1990, p. 9). James Wetzel thinks there is a third city in Augustine for the pilgrim to journey to in the world: “Augustine needs two cities—one eternally debased and the other eternally blessed—to set up a polarity between good and evil. The city that has to work its way between the poles is a tertium quid” (Wetzel 2004, p. 276).


8. Markus gives another argument for Augustine’s denial of the Roman patriarchal model, that is, Augustine’s theory of the “dual providence” of God—the providence of “nature” and the providence of “will”—led him to separate the social and political order of human affairs from a cosmic or natural order, while earlier political theory presumes a single cosmic order to control all things, human, social, and political, and calls them all “natural”. Markus (1988, pp. 91–93).

9. Elizabeth A. Clark proved that this vision of Augustine was often overshadowed by his emphasis on the sexual and reproductive functions of marriage in his early debate against Pelagianism and asceticism in marriage. See Clark (1986, pp. 139–62).
Such as, after translating and studying Augustine’s political thought, Wu Fei’s academic interest in recent years has been the study of traditional Chinese rituals with the comparative undertaking of Chinese and Western civilizations, see Wu (2023): Yi (Rights) is the beginning of Li (Rituals): Exploring Principles of Traditional Rituals.

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