The Japanese Family

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Knowledge of a society's family system is essential to understanding that society. In the case of Japan, it is especially important because the family rather than the individual is considered to be the basic unit of society. Family responsibilities take precedence over individual desires, and familial relations provide the model for social integration at all levels. Furthermore, the family plays an important role in determining individual life chances. When marriage decisions are made, the families of the two parties investigate one another, and each side makes every effort to enhance its own prestige. Since it is considered natural for adults to marry and have children, the unmarried may be viewed as not quite socially acceptable and therefore not the best candidates for jobs. The Japanese also assume that growing up in an intact household promotes mature character development. For this reason, all other things being equal, employers generally prefer to hire a person raised in a two-parent household.

A stable family system provided the foundation for the Japanese "economic miracle." Gender- and age-based division of labor produced a part-time and temporary labor pool of women and retirees and enabled Japanese firms to offer "permanent employment" to only about one-third of the labor force.

The family continues to play a central role in Japanese society today. However, the modern family is not the same as the traditional family, nor, of course, is it identical to the American family. Rather, as we shall see, it has evolved in response to the socioeconomic changes that have Occurred in Japan.

The Traditional Family

There have always been a variety of family forms in Japan, but the model held as an ideal throughout most of the 20th century has been the agricultural household, or *ie*, The main features of this kind of household were a strict gender-based role division with a patriarchal head and a hierarchy by birth. The *ie* included all people residing in the household, even those not related by blood, thus providing a model for family-style relations extending beyond the family. A third feature of the household was its "stem" family system, in which one child (usually the eldest son) remained in the household to take over the family business and care for his aged parents. The other sons moved out and sometimes established branch households which remained in a subordinate relationship to the main family (with the degree of subordination depending on factors such as economic interdependence). Daughters married into other families, and the position of the bride of the eldest son was the lowest in the household. Her primary function was to produce heirs, and she was expected to learn the ways of her new household under the tutelage of her mother-in-law. She was also expected to engage in the family business and ultimately to be the primary caretaker for her aged parents-in-law.

The most important role of the family was to preserve the household resources and pass them on to the next generation while honoring the family ancestors through household-based religious practices. Because providing an heir was one of the primary duties of the family, adoption was approved of when necessary. If the family had only daughters, one remained in the household and her husband became an adopted son. If there were no children, the preferred pattern was to adopt a daughter and then find a groom for her who could carry on the family business and adopt him as well. Although not a particularly desirable position for a young man, becoming an adopted groom provided economic opportunity for a younger son or for one whose family resources were more limited than those of his bride.

In the traditional family, marriage was viewed as a liaison between households, and the members of the young couple had little or no say in the process. In fact, marriages were registered by the head of the household and often only after the bride had proved herself by fitting into the family or bearing an heir.

The parents-in-law could send an unsatisfactory bride back to her family, and children belonged to the father's household. Another important legacy of this family system is that the patriarchal head and his wife typically retired at a given age or when they were too elderly to carry on the family business. At that point, the son became the family head and the "bride" moved to housewife (*shufu*) status. This made her the person responsible for keeping the household running, allocating resources, and passing on the ways of the household to her daughter-in-law when the time came.

We are not concerned here with how typical this pattern was or the extent to which these ideal norms were followed, but rather with understanding the legacy of the traditional family, which was held up as a model for contemporary families. Let us now turn our attention to the Japanese family of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

The Modern Family

In the immediate postwar period, many traditional families had been fragmented, and their primary concern was to ensure the basics of food, clothing, and shelter. Housing was a major problem, and the first goal was to acquire one room per family.

Over time this became one housing unit per family, and today the goal is approaching one room per person (that is, a four-person family living in a four-room housing unit). However, this goal has not been reached, mainly because the cost of housing is high. The price of a new home tends to be close to seven times the annual income of the average householder. Thus, securing suitable housing is a major difficulty for the contemporary family.

A second housing-related issue is the move from a multi-generation, traditional Japanese home with sliding doors and little privacy from either family members or visitors to apartments and modern homes with solid walls and doors. The ability to preserve family privacy is a recognized advantage of modern housing. At the same time, room allocation is controversial. Whereas there appears to be a general desire to provide private rooms for children when they are studying for school entrance examinations, there is some debate over whether providing a separate room for children serves to isolate them from the family and may be detrimental to their development. (For example, the video *Sanae* remarks that traditional sleeping practices reflected the fact that the family was a core unit of society.) At any rate, the percentage of families in which children have private rooms is significantly smaller than in the United States until the children reach junior high and have to study for high school entrance examinations.

In addition to changes in housing, the modern Japanese family has been influenced by the entire range of socioeconomic changes in Japan and has adapted to those changes. In order to understand today's family we must look at some of the major steps in that adaptation process.

The "Salaryman" Family

The major change in the Japanese family of the late 1950s and the 1960s was the development of the so-called salaryman family. This type of family consisted of a wage-earning husband who worked outside the home (and typically outside the neighborhood), his wife, and their children. In this family, the wife typically became a housewife (*shufu*) upon marriage and was not under the immediate tutelage of her mother-in-law. The husband's primary role was that of breadwinner, and he was gone for long hours six days a week, leaving the management of the household in his wife's hands. He was still head of the family, but because he was not at home much of the time, he became a shadow figure to his children. They never saw him at work, and he was too tired to do much with them when he was at home. Thus, children were largely deprived of a male role model, and their father's presence at home became a disruption of their schedules rather than a natural part of their family life. He needed peace and quiet and his wife's service at home, and he took up some of the limited living space. He became the center of attention on weekends and got in the way of everyone else. Outside the family, his interpersonal relations were with colleagues

and former classmates. In contrast, his wife's were in the neighborhood, primarily with other housewives and the mothers of' her children' friends. Their social networks did not overlap, and in many respects they led essentially separate lives until the husband retired.

The small size of both housing and the family (which typically had two children) and the fact that there was no longer a family business to work in left the housewife with time on her hands and launched the era of the "full-time housewife." While many of the wives in salaryman families did piecework at home, there were relatively few opportunities for them to work outside the home. With their husbands absent most of the time and the expanding economy offering virtually unlimited opportunities to children who did well in the education system, these wives became "education mothers" (*kyoiku mama*) who concentrated all their efforts on getting their children through an increasingly competitive examination system into the appropriate universities. This was particularly important in the case of boys, whose future depended solely upon entering the right university. The education of girls was not considered to be as important, but girls who graduated from select junior colleges or women's colleges were viewed as prime candidates in the marriage market. Therefore, a good education could assure a daughter's future as well.

Although the salaryman family was certainly not in the majority in the early 1960s, salaried men were considered to be desirable husbands since they had assured futures and their wives would not have to work in a family business. The separation of the husband's and wife's daily worlds was not viewed as problematic at first. It gave the wife increased freedom and responsibility. She managed her husband's salary and the children's education and gradually became the main representative of the family in the residential community. Therefore, the changes in the family structure provided an outlet for the increasingly well-educated Japanese woman. At the same time, these new roles for Japanese women encouraged families to educate their daughters and also encouraged men to choose educated wives.

The "New Family" of the 1970s

The first generation of salaryman families viewed themselves as fortunate. Husbands saw many possibilities for self-actualization, wives saw freedom from traditional pressures and increased opportunity for their children, and both saw a rising standard of living. However, their children had a different perspective. They grew up with virtually absent fathers, saw that their parents had very little in common, and recognized that after retirement their fathers no longer had the satisfaction they had found in their careers and lacked a set role for their old age as well. These young people did not remember the wartime or postwar economic hardships, and they were familiar with family life as depicted in American movies and with the concept of the "love marriage." While they did not leap with abandon into love marriages, they did look more carefully at their marriage partners, and they embraced the ideal of becoming and remaining friends with their spouses.

This phenomenon was called the "new family." It was touted in magazines (several of which were developed to meet the market) and included the ideal of more participation in domestic affairs by the husband. There was a visible difference. One could see young husbands accompanying their wives to the supermarket, carrying the baby, and enjoying outings with their families on weekends, with the entire family frequently wearing "look-alike" clothing down to matching sweaters for mama, papa, and baby. However, as the husband entered his early thirties and the children approached school age, the family's early goals were modified. If the husband were to succeed, he had to spend more time on the job, and if the children were to do well in school, their mother had to help them. Thus, the entire family often did not spend as much time together as originally planned.

Although not completely fulfilling the ideal, the new family initiated several changes in Japanese social life. Family-oriented leisure facilities became an important market. In contrast to earlier facilities geared to travel in all-male or all-female groups, family restaurants, amusement parks, hotels, and package tours rapidly developed. Greater expectations were placed on fathers to participate at least occasionally in activities with their children. The couple's early desire to develop common interests and their belief in the

importance of maintaining them after retirement were considerably different from the feelings of the previous generation. In the mid 1970s a television drama ("Fufu") depicting a man's problems of communication with his family when he retired became a major topic of conversation. Wives, at least, were concerned that their family not suffer the same fate.

Another change that occurred stemmed from women's increased participation in activities outside the home. In the 1970s, economic development, men's work outside the residential community, and the increasing number of more highly educated women with longer periods free from family obligations contributed to the development of a variety of opportunities for women, ranging front part-time or temporary paid work to adult education and community participation. The educated wife and mother began to broaden her perspective and engage in community activities, while continuing to shape her involvement's outside the home to fit her main roles: educating her children, caring for her aged parents-in-law, and providing for her husband's needs.

The birthrate fell dramatically in 1989 to 10.1 per 1,000 persons. The average age at marriage is rising and is rather late for an industrialized country (29.5 for men and 25.2 for women). This reflects increasing education for both sexes and the virtually universal pattern of women working outside the home for several years before marriage. The education gap between spouses is decreasing. A significant minority (about 40 percent) of women agree that if a woman can support herself, it is not necessary for her to marry. This is in contrast to the traditional belief that a woman's happiness lies with the family. All of this undermines patriarchal authority.

Yet the vast majority of Japanese marry, and the belief is strong that marriage should occur at the appropriate age. Women prefer to have their children before they turn 30, both for health reasons and so that the children can be settled in their adult lives before the husband retires and family income declines.

Another major issue facing the family of the 1980s and 1990s is the rapid aging of the Japanese population. The first problem that affects the family is that the traditional norm of care for the aged within the family is still quite strong; indeed, government documents cite family care for the elderly as the "Japanese way."

For the most part, aging is a woman's problem. Japanese women have the longest life span in today's world (living on the average to age 81). Although women indicate an increasing preference for being cared for in their old age by their own daughters, the obligation to care for parents still resides with the eldest son. Since two-child families predominate, this means that increasingly the majority of Japanese men will have parental-care responsibilities. It will be interesting to note the extent to which daughters' care of their parents increases as women's earning power improves and as sons' resources prove insufficient to deal with that responsibility.

Today's women must plan to care for increasingly long-lived parents-in-law as well as plan for their own old age. The former obligation may curtail their ability to participate in paid employment, while the latter concern may impel them to seek such employment. An additional factor affecting the family is the gradual raising of the retirement age, which will keep people in the labor force longer and also gradually push up the age at which they can begin to receive social security benefits.

Through out the postwar period, women have served as a reserve labor force in Japan due to a combination of factors, including sufficient male labor, the economic efficiency of keeping a pool of cheap labor to be used only when needed, the demands of the family, and women's level of education. In the 1980s several of the factors that had prevented women from full participation in the work force began to change. Women's increased education and work-force experience, their longevity, the fact that they had fewer children to raise, and the high cost of both housing and children's education were reflected in the increasing participation of married women in the labor force. These developments as well as external pressure stemming from the United Nations Decade for Women (1975-1985) led to changes in the

employment laws that removed many of the previous "protective barriers" to women's participation, and young women now increasingly express hopes of working throughout their adult lives. Because Japan is experiencing a labor shortage, one can expect that women's participation in the labor force and the conditions of that participation will continue to improve.

Related to this is the recognition by parents that their daughters should at least be prepared to earn an income, whether or not they actually work outside the home. Therefore daughters are encouraged to develop a skill they can use throughout their lives. Today computer programming and other skills that can provide a home-based income are eagerly sought.

In today's Japan it is difficult to judge how many marriages are for love and how many by introduction with marriage in mind (*miai*). Most contemporary couples describe their marriages as in between, which means that someone introduced them and then they fell in love and decided to marry. Love alone is still not viewed as a sufficiently solid basis for marriage. The young Japanese couple is more cognizant than its American counterpart of the need for social support to keep the marriage going. Family investigations are an important precursor of marriage decisions, and a Japanese man or woman is still unlikely to marry a partner who is opposed by the family.

Throughout the 1970s marriage was a man's market. Today young women are scarce and young men are having difficulty finding suitable partners. A whole series of computer- and video-based introduction services have developed which appear to be especially attractive to the young man working abroad for a Japanese company who wishes to find a Japanese wife. A shortage of women in the appropriate age range, and an increase in their level of education and earning capability lead women to be fairly selective when looking for a spouse, and the "buyer's market" increases the strength of women in the family. This is notable in salaryman families but also apparent in farm and small-business families. In particular, the dwindling number of farm families is having increasing difficulty finding brides, because today's young women do not want to engage in farming or live under the tutelage of their mothers-in-law. As a result, there are systematic efforts to import brides from elsewhere in Asia or from Japanese immigrant communities in countries such as Brazil. Since these farm families are in one of the most traditional sectors of Japanese society, it will be interesting to see what the impact of such wives and their children on the local community will be and whether or not such marriages will succeed. A similar problem in finding brides is beginning to affect sons of shopkeeping families.

Another issue facing the family of today is divorce. Because in the traditional family brides were often returned to their families before the marriage was registered, it is not possible to compare divorce rates then and now. The divorce rate, which was widely lamented in the Japanese media in the 1970s, has stabilized at about one-fourth of the U.S. rate.

More interesting perhaps than the divorce rate per se is the type of divorce that occurs today. Although the majority of divorces are between people in their thirties, in recent years a small but rising number of senior-citizen divorces is making headlines. In these cases, couples divorce around the time of the husband's retirement. Among the various factors contributing to this phenomenon are the following: the couple's children are settled and the parents' divorce cannot affect their life chances anymore; the wife feels entitled to "retire" because she has fulfilled her obligations by rearing the couple's children; and the wife has developed her own social network and is not dependent on the husband. This clearly contrasts with the traditional norm of the wife entering her husband's family and bearing up under any differences with the husband. This small but interesting phenomenon is worth watching in the near future as new families reach their sixties. Will their earlier common interests help keep them together? Or will women's increasing opportunities provide a basis for more divorce?

A related issue that affects all families is the family register (koseki) system. Under this system, married couples share a surname and the spouse marrying into the other's family (usually the wife) has her name removed from her natal register and placed on her husband's. In some cases it may be the husband who

moves if the wife's family has no one to carry on its name or if he becomes his father-in-law's designated successor (this latter pattern is popular in the political world). A small but growing number of working women say that they do not want to change their names when they marry. Should they go through marriage ceremonies but not officially register their marriages, they run the risk of their children being classified as illegitimate. Since the family register is used for everything from entering school to applications for employment to obtaining passports, being labeled illegitimate can be quite problematic.

Another way in which the family register system affects the family today is that divorce is clearly listed and the type of divorce is stated. Therefore, if a child needs the registry to enter school, or later to apply for a job or engage in marriage negotiations, all involved can see when and how his or her parents were divorced. Divorce by litigation is viewed as providing a more upsetting environment for children than divorce by consent and thus is perceived as the greater of two evils. This attitude has prevented women from litigating divorce and may well be related to the phenomenon of senior-citizen divorces, which occur after the registry can do no damage.

The Family in Transition

The family of today is in many ways a family in transition. Whereas the traditional family norms no longer strictly apply, neither do individualistic norms. There is still a strong gender-based division of labor. Husbands are perceived as the primary breadwinners and wives as primarily responsible for the home. This is reflected in the video in many ways, including the wife's night out. In general, wives' free time comes during the day and they are expected to be home in the evening. In contrast, husbands work all day and the evening is considered their free time.

Care of the aged is still a family responsibility. There is no clear-cut solution, although for those who can afford it a variety of options including retirement villages and two-generation housing are being marketed. Women's participation in activities outside the home will continue to increase, yet children's education still depends very much on their mothers' active involvement. Mothers today are expected to participate in the PTA, monitor homework (which is designed so that the student needs help to complete it), participate in school activities, provide a range of homemade materials (for example, made-to-measure cases for various types of equipment, monogrammed covers, and the like, which are sent back by the teacher if they do not meet exacting standards), and see that the child has the proper environment and additional education to pass increasingly competitive entrance examinations to higher levels of education. Family life is not expected to interfere with the husband's work, and therefore the major burden is still on the wife.

In spite of attempts by new families to incorporate men in the family's daily life, there is still little room for the husband and father. The demands of work still take up most of his time: there is still little physical space for him in the home; and when he retires he is still referred to as "large trash" (sodai gomi). Recently the Japanese press his reported that Japanese men are suffering from a fear of going home, where they feel there is no place for them. Consequently, they tend to linger in bars or coffee shops until late in the evening.

In contrast to such reports, there are also indications that schools are scheduling classroom visits on Sundays so that fathers can attend and that, building on the legacy of the new families, there is more interest than before in providing opportunities for father-child interaction.

At the same time, for a variety of reasons, Japanese men are beginning to have more time to spend with their families. In reaction to international criticism as well as to attract the scarce labor supply, employers are offering more vacation time and flexible work schedules which are likely to change patterns of family participation.

The concept of the family in transition carries over to the role of religion in the family. In the traditional ie, the main family maintained the Buddhist altar at which the family dead were honored. The living were

seen as the link between the ancestors and future generations, and most religious activities took place within the family. Today, this is becoming problematic. Buddhist altars are large and not compatible with small housing (although compact altars are on the market). The eldest (and likely the only) son may live far from the family temple or cemetery and find it difficult to take care of the graves or hold the ceremonies commemorating the anniversaries of the deceased, and the young couple may be unfamiliar with the necessary ceremonies.

Expense contributes to the difficulty of fulfilling these obligations. In the traditional community, extended families and neighbors provided an economic basis for such events. All who came to a funeral or memorial service brought "incense money," which was used for expenses. Every family kept an accurate record of who contributed how much; the amount varied with the closeness of the relationship between the families. When the recipient family was called upon to attend a funeral, wedding, or other important ceremony in another family, it knew exactly how much incense money to bring.

Today's family faces some of the ceremonial obligations left from the past as well as some resulting from more recent developments. Not to participate (for example, not to attend a junior colleague's wedding or not to act as marriage go-between for a former student) would be extremely difficult (and cause the individual much disgrace in some cases), yet to participate could be equally difficult because of expense and lack of sufficient expertise in the required ceremonies.

Where the Japanese family is headed depends on changing socioeconomic factors. In the 1990s it seems safe to say that the young Japanese want and will have more individual choices than their parents' generation had. At the same time, they view extreme individualism with alarm and cite American social problems such as a high divorce rate, drugs, and homelessness as reasons why the American model is not their ideal. Following the pattern of the past, the family of the near future should draw on its traditional strengths, keeping the elements that are suited to the contemporary world and modifying or rejecting those that are not.