

Changing Japanese Families

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Introduction

In today's shifting demographic landscape, Japan faces a population dynamic altered greatly from a generation ago. The steady decline in the birth rate has reduced the size of the child population, and at the same time, the continual rise in life expectancy has created a burgeoning pool of elderly people. The cumulative effect of these trends is that the total number of Japanese over age sixty-five now exceeds that of children under age fourteen for the first time.¹ As Japan faces this new demographic topography at the social crossroads of the postindustrial age, the Japanese family in transition is beginning to attract renewed attention of many observers of Japan concerned with the cultural and social consequences of late modernity. This attention also comes at an important time when the results of recent scholarship by feminist sociologists and historians in Japan have cast a new light on the Japanese family. This book addresses the Japanese family—as at once lived experience and imagined social and cultural construct—amid these continually changing social conditions.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Japan has entered a period of accelerated social change,² following the economic downturn and the restructuring of the “postwar” social system. This has created a context in which people have been forced to confront and reconsider past categories and assumptions about life, family, school, and workplace. In many ways, past categories and assumptions seem out of sync with today's social and economic demands. In this environment of discontinuity, reimagining the family and individual family roles and relationships within the family becomes an important element of a social discourse that shapes the experience of family life. As Anthony Giddens (1992) has observed, the transformation of intimacy is inevitable when past institutional arrangements lose their hold on contemporary life.

Opting out of prototypical “traditional” family arrangements seems increasingly feasible when the global media not only broadens our awareness of different family lifestyles, but also economic uncertainties have undermined past expectations. In Japan today, this “opting out” is expressed especially in the decreasing significance of marriage and child rearing among successive younger generations (White 2002). Millions of young Japanese adults today opt to delay marriage until later in life than in the past, and particularly for women, decide to forego marriage completely. Indeed, Ministry of Health Labor and Welfare statistics show that the mean age of marriage has increased from 25.9 for men and 23.0 for women in 1950 to 29.6 and 27.8 respectively in 2004.³ Sex and marriage have often been de-linked, and thus, premarital sex is the norm in contemporary Japanese society (Nakanishi 2004). It is therefore not surprising that a large proportion of young adults now endorse the idea of couples living together without marriage registration (Mainichi Shinbun 2004). Experimentation in alternative family arrangements has recently become sufficiently interesting to the general public that a popular magazine ran a feature story on couples who pursue what is known as “neo-marriage” (*neo-kekkon*) where friends are added to the family as housemates (AERA 2005). Whether this represents a new trend, or a new version of a historical pattern in extended families to define members of a household in fairly broad terms, as has L. K. Brown argued, is as yet not clear (Brown 1966, 1131). In either case, evidence suggests that the rising desire and need to revise the “prototypical” family in the past decades has been clearly influenced by the increase in women’s gainful employment and economic self-sufficiency (Ochiai 1989).

The declining aspirations for child rearing also point to some changes in the expectations for parent-child relations (Yamada 2001; Nakanishi 2004). Today’s youths, when asked about their ideal image of parents, overwhelmingly say that they want their parents to be “like friends” (*tomodachi no yōna oya*) (White 1993). This contrasts against images of traditional parenting still found among older generations in rural regions where, as one of John W. Traphagan’s informants put it, “children are [viewed as] the belongings of their parents. They are the parents’ pets” (*shoyū dōbutsu*)”⁴ (Traphagan 2000, 377). These sentiments surely attest to the children’s desire for nonauthoritarian parenting, a finding consistent with most other youth surveys. Yet, this desire to have the parents act like their peers also points to an unarticulated ideal about parenting, with a somewhat indeterminate view of what specifically the parents can do for the children (Hashimoto 2004a). At the same time, recent surveys have also shown that, given the choice between one’s own happiness and that of the family, a sizeable proportion of young people today would privilege their own happiness and eschew family sacrifices⁵—although

how this actually plays out when a family crisis arises is difficult to determine (Traphagan 2002).

Feminist sociologist Meguro Yoriko (1987) has claimed that these changes amount to the coming of “individualized” families in Japan, a trend toward a redefinition of relationships between individuals and collectivities. This trend is akin to what some American sociologists call the “coming of postmodern families”—diverse families that come together as voluntary social units that privilege individual needs over “traditional” institutionalized arrangements (Stacey 1996; Castells 1997).⁶ In American society today, a wide variety of families—single-parent families, blended families, stepfamilies, cohabitating couples, childless couples, gay and lesbian families, and other variations—replace the prototypical nuclear family, and comprise the majority of families. By comparison, the changes that have reconfigured the family terrain in the recent decade in Japan are increasing singlehood, late marriages, divorce, domestic violence and elder abuse. Individualization of or in the family, however, does not necessarily mean that Japanese society is hospitable to individuals living independently, nor does it imply that Japan is following a path of individuation that parallels or mirrors exactly that followed in the United States or other industrial countries.

The Family and Social Change

The Japanese family, like family elsewhere, has historically been varied and mutable. Over the centuries, it has seen much regional and class variation in patterns of marriage, succession, and levels of sexual freedom. From the less regulated and more egalitarian pairing families before the formal social organization of the eighth century through the emergence of the patriarchal family, control over family succession and inheritance mattered mostly for the elite class. Patriarchy, first established among the aristocracy, gained strength under the military rule in feudal Japan when marriages were serious political business for the elites. Thus developed the *ie*, a type of stem family system for the elite—particularly in the Edo (1603–1867) and Meiji (1868–1912) periods—which is now commonly referred to as *the* traditional Japanese family. The stem family of the Edo period, as part of a patriarchal order, embodied social hierarchy and the assumption of men’s privilege over women. With it, the elite woman’s ability to own assets, and maintain her surname after marriage also became less and less tenable (Sekiguchi et al. 2000).

When Japan encountered modernity in the end of the nineteenth century, Japanese leaders found themselves faced with a difficult issue of forging a nation-state among people who had been inhabitants of disparate

feudal domains. The solution to the problem was to reimagine the family by legally extending the *ie* family system that had been common among the elite to the entire population, and thereby enforce a national regulation of family life. The Family Law in 1898 formally established a stem family system that stipulated primogeniture, the passage of family headship succession and allocation of rights of inheritance of the entire estate from eldest son to eldest son. Thus, the Meiji state established the central regulation of the family, and arranged marriages spread thereafter in the late nineteenth century. The state also enforced laws to make married couples use the same surname, and intensified the domestication of women, and the sexual division of labor (Sekiguchi et al. 2000, 8). This regime therefore empowered the male head of households, and disempowered female family members by prohibiting them from making decisions about property, assets, marriage, or divorce. Women thereby lost legal rights as autonomous social agents. At the same time, patriarchal ideology also took on a national dimension with the stipulation of the notion that the emperor was the supreme patriarch of the nation. For the purpose of mobilization, taxation, and control, an intense ideological campaign sought to situate loyalty to the state above the family, and promoted the notion that the state was itself the ultimate big “family,” with the emperor’s family as the main family from which all others are offshoots.

Of course, the fact that the family was formally reconceptualized legally, in terms of primogeniture and a strict division of rights and obligations on the basis of gender and birth order, does not mean that family life was necessarily *experienced* along these lines. While many, perhaps most, families became organized around the *ie* structure, the mere facts of biology necessitate variation and inventiveness—families may lack sons, lack children, or prior traditions may stipulate the importance of matriarchal inheritance as M. Yoshida points out (1997). The heavy disruption and losses wrought by the fifteen year war in the Asia-Pacific also diminished the continuity of this system for many families (Sekiguchi et al. 2000).

In the wake of World War II, Japanese people experienced another formal revision of the family system as the patriarchal stem family and primogeniture were formally abolished due to political and social restructuring and planning dictated by the American Occupation. Since then the Japanese family has experienced a series of major reconceptualizations. The Family Law of 1947, enacted during the American Occupation, had considerable social consequences. To use the common refrain, as Japan ushered in the new postwar era, the Japanese family discarded its old garb—the *ie* and primogeniture systems—and effectively remade itself in a new image modeled largely on the “Western” democratic ideal

of the nuclear family. This was a radical makeover: the “new” postwar family was represented in the language of equality, individual rights, freedom of choice, and voluntary unions—civic principles derived from a Euro-American paradigm that was entirely distinct from the preceding Confucian patriarchy. The prewar authoritarian way of life, the “feudal” (*hōkenteki*) way of life, was now seemingly cast aside, discredited, and consigned to history (Smith 1996). The new family promised to turn a new leaf, and promote family relations based on democratic and individualistic rules of engagement (Kawashima 1950; Hashimoto 2004a). Based on the fundamental legal changes and economic expansion of the postwar era, family practices were transformed in patterns of marriage, urban, and suburban residential patterns, and the life course (Hashimoto 2004b). Yet at the same time, even with the internal momentum to reconstitute the family, basic structures associated with the *ie*, such as an emphasis on birth order in terms of identifying which child is likely to have primary responsibility to care for parents, continued to influence conceptualizations about roles, rights, and responsibilities especially within rural families (Traphagan 2000, 2004a, 2004b).

Changing Aspirations for Family Life (1940s–1970s)

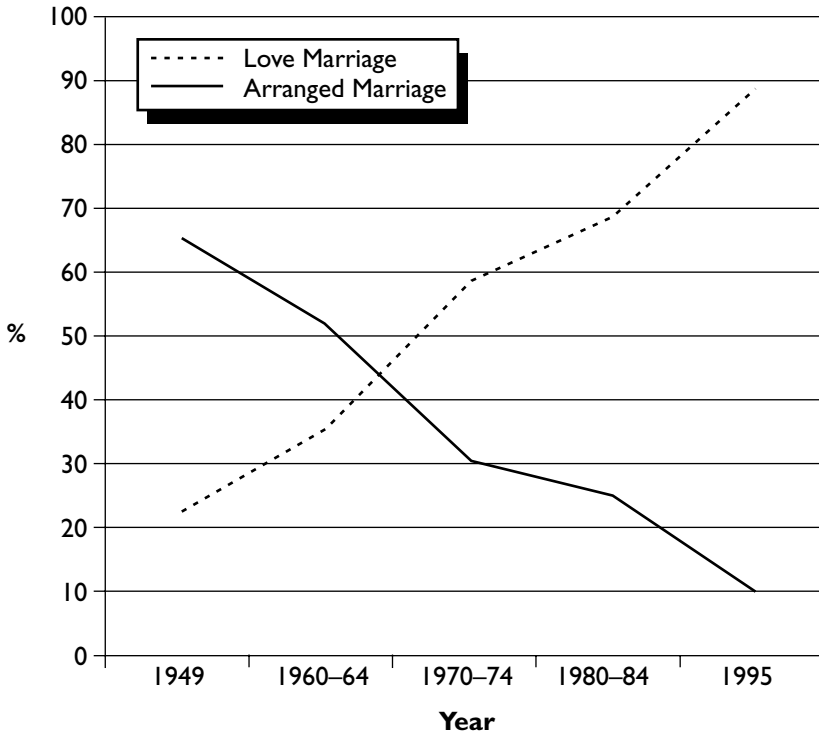
Given this recent history, it is not surprising that both premodern and postmodern elements coexist in contemporary Japanese families. Japanese people today create, especially in the realm of aspirations and desires, a hybrid model of family. This is because Japan’s transformation in the second half of the twentieth century was not a simple transition from *ie* to the nuclear family, but a product of myriad economic and social compromises between the focus on male lineage and mother-daughter-in-law struggles on the one hand, and aspirations for a loving home and a private space for parents to raise their children without interference, on the other hand. The influence of the Eurocentric modern family that idealized family love had already arrived in Japan by the early 1900s. Thus, the ideals of romantic conjugal love and the strong mother-child bond became part of the intellectual discourse, if not necessarily a widespread practice, at that time. The entrance of this ideal of romantic conjugal love was connected to processes of imagining and reimagining the family as it entered the youthful consciousness through media and entertainment even as the large proportion of mate selection remained under control of the parents. The strength of mother-child love, commonly believed to be a “traditional” legacy from prewar Japan is in fact also greatly influenced by European and American literature, films, and intellectual discourse

(Sakamoto 1997, 34, 153). In the course of such modern transformation, the bonds with extended kin became more peripheral, while the bonds among nuclear family members grew more intense and emotional (Yamada 2001). At the same time, while continuities from the past such as patriarchal hierarchies became less visible in the foreground, it nevertheless remained a salient part of family life especially in rural Japan.

Changes in Romantic Love and Marriage

The degree to which romantic love has come to dominate the ideals of intimacy and privacy for the couple in the imaginations of Japanese—emphasizing love, emotional bonds, personal attraction, compatibility, and individual choice for marriage—has been remarkable. Romantic love marriage overtook arranged marriage around 1970 as the popular form of marital choice; today they comprise almost all marriages (figure 1.1).⁷ Such marriages also began to shift later in age as the notion of individual choice became more desirable. While almost all women (95%) in their early thirties were married in 1950, fifty years later, the proportion had declined by almost one third, to 66 percent (Sekiguchi et al., 2000, 187). Today, only 18 percent of young people aged 18–24 feel that everyone should marry (Yuzawa 2003, 103). This perspective derives partly from the ideology of romantic love, and at the same time, it may also reflect their sense that the prospect of living with in-laws is unattractive (Yuzawa 2003, 97). The hybrid model of marriage is evident in the fact that despite the trend toward autonomy, couples still find it necessary to ponder whether or not to live with the in-laws. J. M. Raymo (2003b) has argued that delayed marriage or a decision not to marry at all is associated with high levels of educational attainment and suggests that this may be connected to the social milieu of Japan in which it is difficult for women to balance work and family.

Another consequence of the changing marriage practices has been the declining birth rate. Japan's total fertility rate dropped below the replacement rate of 2.1 in 1974 and has hovered around 1.3 children per woman over the life course since 1997, reaching 1.29 in 2003.⁸ It seems likely that delayed marriage or refusal to marry has contributed to the low total fertility rate in recent years, as a growing number of women are choosing not to have children. In the meantime, Japanese marriages have diversified further: the proportion of those who had experienced cohabitation without marriage reached 15 percent of women aged 20–49 in a recent survey (Mainichi Shinbun 2004); paper divorce is a practice now found among those who oppose the law that legal marriage requires couples to adopt the same surname; in-house divorce is another trend



Source: Japan Ministry of Health and Welfare, 11th Shussei dōkō kihon chōsa 1998 (cited in Yuzawa 2003), 93.

Figure 1.1 Changes in Proportions of Love Marriages and Arranged Marriages, 1949–1995

known among estranged couples who continue their legal marriage while divorced emotionally.⁹

Changes in Maternal Love and Domesticity

As historical sociologist Ochiai Emiko (1989, 237) has documented, modernity is also a time when the regard for the woman as a mother and the infant as a person heightened in the family. By the second half of the twentieth century, the figure responsible for the well-being of life at home shifted quite noticeably from the father figure to the mother figure. Indeed the loss of the powerful father figure is a recurrent theme in discussions of the postwar Japanese family, as the war had destabilized

masculine identity and along with it, his authority in the family (Yamada 2001, 356). This loss of a dignified male presence invariably forced a deepening reliance on the mother figure as the solid and dependable anchor of the family, a figure that had emerged untarnished by the violence, failure, and culpability in the war (Saitō 2003). The ideal postwar mother is also the solidly dependable figure who is always there to offer love and nurturance, in contrast to the ideal prewar mother who is predominantly imagined as the self-sacrificing, suffering figure (Sakamoto 1997, 176). Such myth of maternal love and maternal society intensified further in the enterprise society of the 1960s (Yoda 2000, 866).

Moreover, the powerful aspirations for the “new family” came in the context of the emerging economic affluence of Japanese society and spurred by the consumer revolution and the economic expansion in the 1960s and 1970s. The “new family” was Japan’s new middle class, typically in suburban homes equipped with consumer gadgets that ostensibly made the life of the housewife comfortable. This is the “salaryman” family that Ezra Vogel discusses in his work on the Japanese family in the 1960s; the nuclear family organized around the bureaucracies and businesses of postwar Japan that constituted a male domain juxtaposed against the female domain of the domestic sphere. The new family was the postwar version of the modern family, founded on reintensified gender division of labor. This new domesticity was also centered on the mother, who took almost the entire responsibility for child rearing and hearth tending (Yoda 2000).

The new family ideal was based on an ideology of home ownership called “my home-ism” in which urban middle-class workers aspired to a matricentric image of domesticity (Yoda 2000, 871). In a sense, postwar affluence and consumer culture greatly influenced and also depended on women’s domestic aspirations and choices (Miura 1999). Unlike their mothers who had assumed more passive roles in the prewar family, postwar mothers were expected to be the creators of comfort at home, nurturing their family with love, care, and nourishing food. Since there were limited role models for this in urban Japan, fictive models from American sitcoms, Japanese home dramas on television, weekly women’s magazines, and the flood of advertising became influential. The new family was supposed to be bright, sweet, and happy, like those fictive models. Mass aspiration for the middle-class new family was to erase class disparity, and realize the Japanese dream. Additionally, the idealization of home tended by the full time housewife that served as a refuge from the working world for men also helped to legitimate the excessive workload of that world. By 1975, the proportion of women who were housewives overseeing the domestic domain reached its highest peak

(Miura 1999). At around the same time, the growth of nuclear families also plateaued. Thereafter, co-residence with the elderly began to decline at the rate of 1 percent per year (Hashimoto and Ikels 2005). By the 1980s, however, the weight of contradictions between the dream and the reality of domesticity, finally began to expose.

The Transformation of Intimacy (1980s–2000s)

Anthony Giddens (1992) has pointed out that the transformation of intimacy occurs when relationships are freed from the confines and regulations of institutional arrangements at particular historical moments. At these junctures, the dissonance and contradiction between chosen bonds and institutional bonds become inescapable and create uncertainty. This is the case also for Japan in the 1990s and 2000s, especially in regard to parent-child relationships (Yamada 2001, 186).

By the 1980s, when Japan had achieved the prosperity it aspired to in the early postwar period, the children raised in the new families of suburbia knew already that the happiness that was promised with the idealized “my home-ism” did not resonate with their reality. In many respects, the ideal new families had been made possible by the consumerism that accompanied economic expansion; but when the economic bubble burst and the recession exposed the illusion of permanent and stable employment for the diligent work force, the children found that attaining a better living than their parents through hard work and better education was no longer guaranteed (Yamada 2001, 186). Once parents could no longer guarantee to their children that filial obedience would lead to success, the children’s expectations regarding filial bonds shifted to more individualized, voluntary ties. This trend illustrates Yamada Masahiro’s thesis that upward mobility can no longer serve as a family or individual goal, and institutional rules and norms geared to its attainment lose their power (2001, 49, 110).¹⁰

Japanese Families in a Global Age

The preceding discussion provides the context for the chapters that follow in this book. A multidisciplinary group of scholars address Japanese families from a variety of perspectives, including anthropology, political science, sociology, and literature. The key theme that runs through the contributions is an emphasis on how attitudes towards and ideas about the family have changed recently and how the Japanese are in the process, again,

of reconsidering or reimagining the nature of the family. The contributors look at conceptualizations of family expressed within families, particularly those faced with traumatic issues such as abandonment or long-term illness, as well as the public imagination about the family through media such as *anime* and *manga*.

Our primary interest is in understanding “the family” as a dynamic and continually changing social unit that does not simply exist, but is imagined or conceptualized and reconceptualized in the minds of individual people and in public discourse. A. Hashimoto’s chapter 2, S. Napier’s chapter 3, and K. McDonald’s chapter 4 examine representations of family in the popular media, such as newspaper comics (*manga*), animation (*anime*), and films. Hashimoto explores changes in the power dynamics among family members represented in comics over the last half century. Each successive generation reinterprets and redefines the notion of the “good” family as the times change, and they often reflect the tensions and conflicts of competing ideals. Napier argues that science fiction and fantasy texts found in animated films showcase discourses on the family precisely because the genres defamiliarize common issues such as intergenerational conflict, sibling rivalry, and even geriatric problems. She looks at popular films such as *Spirited Away* to show how alternative visions of family are portrayed and represented in popular culture. Turning to family issues that arise in relation to the end of life, McDonald considers the work of two female Japanese film directors and the images of aging and senile dementia that they portray. These films, endorsed by the Ministry of Education, represent the state-sanctioned perspectives and ideologies on the family, which are also constructed by women.

From these studies of fiction, the volume turns to a variety of social and political issues that have affected the Japanese family over the past sixty years. Steinhoff examines the families of political dissidents who were prominent members of the protest movements of the 1960s, and explores the family crises that ensued as a direct result of political activism, arrests, and state prosecution. Tamanoi takes a historical perspective and examines the problem of returnees from Manchuria, once abandoned in 1945, now seeking reunion with their Japanese families of origin. She expands the scope of her inquiry to the friction between “the Japanese” who emigrated to Northeast China (Manchuria) in the 1930s and were subsequently repatriated with their “Chinese” families, and “the Japanese” who never left mainland Japan, to challenge the perception that Japan is “a big family.” Long raises important questions about recent changes in family configurations and the effects on caregiving for the elderly. She shows concomitant strains of aligning roles and responsibilities, in difficult family circumstances filled with a sense of loss.

In summary, the chapters in this volume represent “the family” in Japan as a dynamic and changing unit that is interpreted in a variety of ways. As several Japan scholars have shown in recent years (cf. Goodman 2002; Traphagan 2003), no single representation of the family is adequate for understanding the manner in which families function and are understood in the Japanese context. What emerges from these chapters is a picture of complex Japanese families in which a variety of traditional and modern ideas and hybrid ideologies influence decision making within families and attitudes about what constitutes a family in the modern Japanese context. The family is not a stagnate entity, but is continually changing as individuals experience familial relationships within the framework of both the immediate social milieu and, increasingly in the twenty-first century, in a context of global informational exchange that exposes people to a variety of possibilities around which to imagine their own life situation.

Notes

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1. Demographic conditions of family relations are projected to change further during this century. At the current replacement rate, the population of Japan will shrink from the current 127 million to approximately 64 million by the end of the twenty-first century. Those over the age of sixty-five are expected to increase from just under 20 percent of the population in 2005 to a peak of almost 36 percent in 2055 and will remain over 35 percent for the rest of the century. By contrast, those between the ages of zero and fourteen will drop from slightly under 14 percent of the population in 2005 to a low of about 10.5 percent in 2055 (See Traphagan and Knight 2003).

2. We refer here to a speed of change under recent globalization trends that appears to be faster than in previous decades, measured in terms of significant socioeconomic indicators (Giddens 2000; Held et. al. 1999; Sassen 1999).

3. Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Statistical Bureau, <http://www.stat.go.jp>

4. The Japanese word *shoyū dōbutsu* 所有動物 literally means “owned animal.”

5. This is especially the case for women. Nihon Seishōnen Kenkyūjo. 2004. *Kōkōsei no gakushū ishiki to nichijō seikatsu: Nihon, amerika, chūgoku no 3 kakoku hikaku*. (Tokyo: Nihon Seishōnen Kenkyūjo), p. 87. <http://www1.odn.ne.jp/youth-study/research/2005/danjo.pdf>

6. The prototypical nuclear family consisting of father, mother, and one or two unmarried children now comprise only 25 percent of all American families.

7. The classification of love marriages and arranged marriages usually relies on self-report of respondents in social surveys that do not offer the hybrid form combining the two. Such hybrid forms may be more salient in rural areas than urban cities.

8. Source: Japan Statistical Yearbook online. <http://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/nenkan/1431-02.htm>. Accessed 9 January 2006.

9. See Masahiro, Yamada. 2001. *Kazoku to in risuku (The Family Risk)*. (Tokyo: Keisō Shobō).

10. Yamada argues that parent-child attachments have been rather materialistic and instrumental. Thus, he suggests that parent-child relations have been sustained mainly by need satisfaction, especially in the high economic growth and bubble periods (1960s, 1970s and 1980s).