

THE JAPANESE FAMILY IN TRANSITION

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Abstract

Family as a basic unit of society holds an important place in every society. It comprises of the mother, father and children. The family is also an adaptive institution, not fixed for ever, but evolving in response to the changing demands of life.

This paper describes the family system in Japan i.e from traditional to modern. The family in Japan began to take on modern form and function characteristics in the high growth period of the 1960s from that time on, the number of employed worker household rose sharply until they formed the majority. At the same time, households became smaller, also a modern characteristic.

The Japanese family has, over the last century, undergone a remarkable change, reflecting the economic, political and social transformation of the nation.

Introduction

The pre war Civil Code, which was adopted in the Meiji Era (1868 – 1912) when Japan embarked on modernization, institutionalized a family system, the so called i.e. system, based on the pattern of succession prescribed, by Confucianism and long practiced by Samurai families¹. The ideal was direct descent in an extended family to preserve the existence of the family and in principle inheritance was patriarchal, meaning that the eldest son inherited all the family's assets. Every single Japanese was listed in the register of the family to which he or she belonged and used the same last name as that of the family head. The authority of the head was considerable. For

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instance, his approval was necessary before family members could marry or divorce. Naturally this patriarch and his eldest son were accorded special treatment while other family members had fixed roles to play depending on this order of birth and sex.

Upon marriage the bride entered the family of the groom, and these she was expected to accommodate herself to the family's ways. Her duties included not just bearing and rearing of children and serving her husband faithfully but also attending to the needs of her parents-in-law, and her status was even lower than that of her husband's sisters. Since only men had parental authority, a woman who was divorced had no right to take her children with her. The wife's inferiority extended to financial affairs, where she was not authorized to buy, manage or sell assets. Despite the glaring inequities of this family system, most Japanese did not question it.

In 1946, following the defeat in World War II Japan adopted a new constitution stressing respect for the individual and equality of the sexes. The Civil Code was thereupon rewritten, and the new Code went into effect in 1948. The impact of this reform on the structure of the family and the relations among its members was initially not great. As the years rolled by, however the family slowly but surely assumed its present modernized form. Thus, the demise of the old family system became inevitable in the 1960s.

Post war reforms and socio-economic changes have had a far-reaching impact on the family. In the 1960s the Japanese family took the modern form, the trend toward employment increased and the nuclear family system was adopted with smaller number of members.

The data for household shows how remarkable this development was. At the time of First National Census in 1920 the Japanese household averaged 4.89 people, and this figure of around five stayed fairly constant throughout the 1930's and 1940's. The fall began in 1950's from a figure of 4.98 people in 1955 the average

household size fell to 4.0 in 1965, and to just over 3 in the 1980's. By 1990 it had fallen to 2.98.³ As has been the case in other countries, this reduction is attributable to both a fall in the number of children per household and a rise in the number of nuclear families.

The prewar Japanese family was based on a unique direct lineal family system founded on the strongly normative principle, laid down in the Meiji Civil Code. With the introduction of the new Civil Code after the war, the remnants of this family system remained. However, one result of high economic growth was an increase in the number of nuclear families with fewer children, this being a family mode more suitable to employed – worker households. The typical Japanese family today is nuclear family, with a mother, father and two children, in a two or three bedroom apartment or house in an urban area. Most typically, the father commutes by electric train to his job in the city, comes home late at night after socializing at a bar with his colleagues. The wife spends her week days caring for the children and the house, paying special attention to her children's educational needs and creating a nurturing environment for the whole family.⁴

Western democracy, inspiring post war legal reform and general social change has had a great influence. Children now benefit equally from their parents estate, erasing the ancient distinction between the eldest and younger sons and between sons and daughters. Eldest sons, having lost their privileged position are no longer universally expected to live with and take care of their parents and daughters in law have also been freed from the absolute authority of their mother-in-law. Women, less restricted to the home, are free to pursue education, jobs and hobbies. The trend of arranged marriage has almost discriminated. The younger's can now have their own choice in marriage. Discussions about marriage are legally cooperative discussion between parents and children.

Legal Changes

The new constitution of 1947 introduced during the occupation specifically forbade “discrimination in political, economic or social relations because of race, creed, sex, social status or family origin”⁵. The Civil Code provision pertaining to family relations were thoroughly revised and as a result the legal status of women in family life has markedly been improved.

Under the old Civil Code enacted in July 1898, marriage was based on the approval of head of the family i.e. a man under 30 years of age and a woman under 25 years of age had to obtain the consent of their parents to enter into matrimony⁶. It was also necessary that the married woman must have her name entered in the family register of her husband and must defer to the choice of domicile.

But under the revised Civil Code adopted in 1947 the old legal system of the family was abolished, enabling adult i.e 20 years and above to marry on mutual consent.⁷ Also under the new Civil Code the principle of equality between husband and wife has been firmly established. The old Civil Code stipulated the obligation of the wife to defer to the husband’s powers and her legal incapacity with respect to disposition of property. The husband was bestowed with the right to manage the property owned by the wife, while fathers above exercised parental power own children. Only the wife was placed under legal obligation to maintain chastity. All such provisions which were against the principle of equality between the sexes have been completely abolished.

The prewar family system was characterized by the succession to the household by the eldest son or the legally adopted son as the sole heir by law, denying the younger sons and the daughters the right of inheritance.⁸ Under the existing Civil Code, however, the system of succession to the house head has been abolished and instead property is inherited collectively i.e. one third by the spouse and two thirds by all the children in equal shares irrespective of sex. As for

parental power, whereas parental rights were in predominance in pre war days, now the parental power is exercised jointly by both father and mother as matter of principle.

The revision of the Civil Code after the war reflected a rejection of the legal dominance of the family over the individual. Article 24 of the constitution expressly provides for the dignity of the individual and the equality of sexes in family life⁹. The era when a new wife's name was added to the family register of the head of the house came to an end. The very term 'head of the family' is abolished and when a marriage is registered, a new husband and wife family register is set up. As a matter of law this meant the rejection of the old direct lineage family system and the adoption of the one – married couple system based on the nuclear family. As a result inheritance of the headship of family is no longer possible. Along with the establishment of the wife's right to such on inheritance there is provision for an equal division of the estate among children regardless of their sex. These new laws symbolized a revolution in Japanese family life.

A major factor contributing to rapid progress in nuclearization of the family has been the concentration of population in big cities. Although the population influx into urban areas since the middle of the Meiji era (1868 – 1912) remained low – keyed during and immediately after World War II, increase in demand for labour in the 1950s, concomitant with high economic growth, induced a massive exodus of the rural population involving young people in particular to big cities. It is these new city dwellers, who have formed nuclear families. The typical Japanese family today is a nuclear family. Women who do not have to work for financial reason and whose children are school going, enjoy taking various lessons with their friends, joining different form of short courses etc. Most of women want to work in order to increase their families' ability to pay for better housing, children's education or weddings etc. Some better educated women want to work in order to utilize their training and

to pursue careers of their own. However, where economic circumstances permit, the ideal for most women seems to remain at home with their children¹¹.

Strong moral feelings seem to be involved in attitudes towards working women. Since high value is placed on a woman's loyalty and devotion to her family, she receives social approval if her working is clearly for the welfare of the family. Many women who work along side their husbands in family businesses demonstrate unquestionable loyalty to their family. Such working women are often more busier than their husbands because they also have a full load of household to attend to.

The urban middle class family, dominant type and the model for all Japan middle class ideals and standards of living have penetrated rural areas as well as the cities. The persistent life style in Japan has changed from a rural agrarian village centered way of life to an urban industrial life style where social life is focused on nuclear family and work place.

Marriage and Divorce

In feudal Japan, when a girl married, she was marrying husbands' family and was treated much like a servant by her mother in law. In the early post war period, arranged marriages continued to be the main method of mate selection and in mid 1960s, 73 per cent of marriages in large cities, 86 per cent of those in rural areas were still arranged. But the number of love marriages had been increasing rapidly over the last three decades¹². Meanwhile the arranged marriage system has itself been changed in the post war period. In the 1960s the age of marriage increased in Japan. The age of marriage is now usually around 25 for women and around 27 for men.¹³ Within the marriage relationship, things have changed in the post war period. The nature of family life is affected by the growing number of nuclear families the improved educational attainment of

women and the increase in the number of married working women.

A women's relationship with her husband in the usual nuclear family is much more important than her relationship to any of his relatives. Further more, majority of younger generation today influenced by the west, want to have a more companionable and romantic marriage than their parent had.¹⁴

Nevertheless, after a year or two of marriage, most couples settle into a pattern of social world and a clear cut division of labour. The husband's life is absorbed in his place of work; he works long hours and socializes with his work group. The husband nominally heads the family and bears clear responsibility for financial support and the home is clearly the wife's sphere of control. The typical Japanese husband wants his wife to take care of everything about the home, so that can be free to concentrate on his work. The wife's responsibility is to create a nurturing environment.

Though some husbands and wives are quite close and companionable, emotional intimacy is not seen as a necessary element in a well – functioning family.

The divorce rate, though rising, still remains low as compared to that in many industrial societies for a number of reasons. One is a strong cultural emphasis on maintaining family harmony. Another factor is the problems a divorced woman faces. There is no provision in Japanese Civil law for alimony, and the amount of money awarded for child support tends to be extremely small. Some public assistance is available for divorced women, but again amounts are minimal.¹⁵

Divorce is most common among those who have been married for 5 to 10 years. In Japan, 89% of divorce are by mutual consent, about 10% are arranged by arbitration and about 1% are divorces through court of law. About 60% of divorces have a child or children under 20 years of age. While there is a rising trend in the divorce world wide, the rate for Japan is still lower than many other western

countries.¹⁶

Child Bearing and Rearing

The Japanese birth rate declined significantly since the war. This decline can be attributed to many factors, housing and economic conditions, spread of birth control methods, the decline in the rate of infant mortality, the emergence of new customs whereby a woman is rated socially for what she is rather than by the number of children she bears and weakening of the desire to preserve the family lineage. Particularly effective in curbing the birth rate has been the Eugenic Protection Law, which legalized abortion for the purpose of protecting the mother if specific conditions were met.

Not only the rearing and education of children the responsibility the mothers but it is a task that does not easily allow for substitutes. Motherhood and the careful nurturing of children are valued as supremely important in Japan more than in any other country of the world. A mother is expected to provide all the physical and emotional care for her children and to be available to her family 24 hours a day. Even a wealthy family that can afford servants will only employ a maid for house work or minor help in child care. A mother seldom leaves her children to the care of a maid or a baby sitter, a grandmother is the most acceptable substitute. Mother and child are usually inseparable while the child is young. Even in the later years the mother child relationship continues to be the strongest and closest relationship within the family. The father is less involved in day-to-day discipline, but he represents an important model of proper behavior for his child and upholds standards of performance in the outside world.¹⁷

The mother has to spend much time and thought on the child's education to assure a child's success. A mother is totally responsible for the rearing of children. The child rearing like other household chores is largely left up to women. In only 12% of workers

households, couples cooperate in bringing up their children, whereas wives have primary responsibility for child care in 83% of such households.¹⁸

Conclusion

The traditional family system was a joint family system where the eldest male member was the head of the family and was called the patriarchal family. Every decision taken by him was in the interest of the whole family but with the opening of Japan to the U.S occupation the family shifted to nuclear family system comprising only the parents and their children. Before the war, most housewives used to spend an enormous amount of time and energy looking after the home. Neither cooking, laundry nor house cleaning was mechanized. After the war, however the volume of household chores declined drastically. The reason for this was a reduction in the average size of the family, especially the number of children, expansion of facilities such as water, gas and electric supply.

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