Patterns of Japanese Families : Change and Continuity

S. M. Ali Reza[*]
Abdullah-Al-Mamun[**]

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This paper aims to look into the patterns of Japanese family, its change over the time and mode of continuity. Japanese family system has gone through many changes over the time. Before World War II Japanese family system was called the ie system and ie means family or household where continuity was the essential feature of the ie. The affairs of the ie were managed by the Head and he was supposed to be given privileges. Relations between members were organized hierarchically. Women were underprivileged and supposed to obey male members. With the introduction of the new constitution in 1947, democratic family system based on the equal rights of husbands and wives was instigated. Immediate after the postwar period, many traditional families had been fragmented to one housing unit per family or one room per family. Eventually, many middle class urban families in Japan are functioning as families but without the substance expected of the traditional family unit. Even at present, we can see "Week-end Families" and "Sunday Strangers Family". Japanese family system is still changing and facing a serious crisis. This paper tries to look into that aspect as well.

Introduction

The knowledge of a society's family system is essential to understand that society. It is the family where children nurture a picture of the world and family members are usually the first people they learn to classify and the way in which these close relations are defined varies from one society to another (Hendry, 2003, p 25.).

It is especially important in Japan because in this country the family rather than the individual is considered to be the basic unit of the society. When the decisions of marriage are made, the families of the both parties investigate one another and each side makes every possible effort to enhance it sown prestige. Since it is considered natural for the adults to marry and have children, the unmarried may be viewed as not quite socially acceptable. The Japanese society also assumes that growing up in an intact household promotes mature

[*] S.M. Ali Reza is an Assistant Professor of Political Science, University of Dhaka, Presently a Ph.D Researcher in Osaka School of International Public Policy (OSIPP), Osaka University under Japanese Government (MEXT) Scholarship.

[**] Abdullah-Al-Mamun is an Assistant Professor of Japanese Studies, Japan Study Center (JSC), University of Dhaka.

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character development. In fact, the family continues to play a central role in Japanese society today. But his family system is something that has been changed a great deal in the past few decades from one form that was strictly centered on Confucian law to one now based on Western democratic ideologies (Iwao, 1993. P.5). With the Meiji Restoration in 1868 a metamorphosis of Japanese society took place that was the beginning to change many aspects of the society including social conducts and interactions; notably the structure of families. The Confucian code of ethics, which once was limited to the Samurai Class, penetrated to all people of Japan as the distinctions between classes were officially abolished and Japanese society as a whole became much more male-dominated. What evolved as a family consisting of a dominant father, an inferior mother and their children whereas in the past a couple used to share much equality. For many years, this era persisted and little changed in the makeup of most families. They tended to be large, extended families, housing many generations and many branches of the family under one household. It was not until the defeat of Japan in World War II that change was instituted which was brought upon by the introduction of a new Constitution for Japan notably by the United States. This document clearly stipulated that "all of the people are equal under the law, "something that changed the way Japanese people acted, learned, perceived, felt and lived. In many ways, the structure of the Japanese family has changed dramatically since that pivotal pint in history: however in other more subtle ways, it has held on firmly to its traditions. This paper aims to focus on this very change and continuity of Japanese family-patterns.

The *Ie* and Traditional Japanese Families

The basis of the Japanese family system is the *'ie'* meaning family or household. Continuity is an essential feature of the *ie*. The individual members of a particular house occupy the roles of the living members of that particular *ie*. It was the *ie* as a unit that was regarded as owning any property in the traditional system but in the Meiji code this property had to be registered in the name of a particular individual. Members were also expected to maintain the status of their particular ie within the wider community. The affairs of the *ie* were managed by the Head, although certain tasks and responsibilities could be delegated to other members. The Head was legally responsible for all the members, who were subordinated to him (Sugimoto, 2003, P. 147-48, 152). Within the house, the Head was supposed to be given privileges, like being served first at meals and being allowed to take the first bath. On the other hadn, relations between members were organized hierarchically based on age, sex and expectation of permanency in the house. The relations between generations were characterized by Confucian principles of loyalty and benevolence. Women, who were supposed to obey male members and a new bride to her mother-in-law as well, held a very low status within the family and were expected to cater to the needs of the men in the household. This meant preparing and serving meals, cleaning the home, and caring for the children. All of the customs these families followed were seen as the "beautiful tradition of the family system" (kazoku seido not fifuu), and were very highly respected and upheld throughout the society as a whole. They were given little or no economic, political, or sexual freedoms and were "expected to behave in conformity to the norms and accepted rules of society" and were held to the standard illustrated in the old expression ryosai-kenbo, meaning "the good wife and wise mother" (Iwao, 1993, P. 19). Next, women were handed down from her father to a husband and then on to her sons in her old age, as dictated by Confucian law, Relations within the house were determined less by love and affection than by duty. In each generation, one permanent heir would be chosen, and a spouse would be brought in to share the role of continuing the family line (Hendry, 2003, P. 28). The insurance of continuity was more important than the particular means and all sorts of arrangements could be made to accomplish this aim. New brides, oyome-san, were brought into the family and daughters were married away to be oyome-san in other households. The title of successor, atotori, was passed from father generally to the first-born son as well as the family continued to grow in this manner. Occasionally, when a son was not present to be named atotori, the eldest daughter would marry a man from another family, and he would enter as a muko-yooshi, taking his new family's last name and becoming the male who would stand in line to become the head of the household upon his father-in-law's passing. If there were no children at all, a relative's child could be adopted. It was also permissible, if necessary, to adopt a totally unrelated child (Hendry, 2003, P. 29-31).

Post-War Reform and the Emergence of Modern Family

The traditional family system, based on the principle of ie, was formally abolished in 1947 with the introduction of the New Constitution that prescribed instead a more 'democratic family system' based on the equal rights of husbands and wives. This document mandated, among other things, that both sexes be treated as equals and that there would be no discrimination of the basis of sex, Females were now not encouraged to attend school along with their male classmates. On top of that instead of staying home and earning for the family exclusively, diligently maintaining the "good wives and wise mothers" doctrine, women were given much more freedom to explore their own desires; consequently, the formation of Japanese families was drastically altered. Though the transition of families from traditional to modern was slow, modern families appear almost nothing like their ancestral families on the surface; however some similarities remain, including a number of traditions and roles that are deeply engrained into Japanese society even today (Iwao, 1993, p. 20-24).

In the immediate postwar period, many traditional families had been fragmented and their main concern was to ensure the basics of food, clothing and shelter. Besides, 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, approaching to one room per person. However, this goal has not been reached mainly because of the high cost of housing. In reality securing suitable housing is a major difficulty for the contemporary Japanese families. In addition to changes in husing, modern Japanese families are influenced by the entire range of socioeconomic changes in Japan and has adapted to those changes (Imamura, 1990, p. 8-9). With a view to understanding today's families we should look at some of the major steps in that adoption process in accordance to their types. As per some sociologists Japanese family system has two apparently contradictory tendencies: the vitality and increasing stability of family system in comparison with its counterparts in other industrialized countries and the 'disinteration of family' and the 'age of family-less families.' They suggest that Japanese family system is undergoing a fundamental change and facing a serious crisis. In fact, many middle class urban families in Japan function as families but without the substance expected of the traditional family unit. In most cases the husband works overtime until late in the evening, the wife attends evening classes or meetings, their children go to private after-school classes popularly known as juku or cram school similar to the after-school tutorial or coaching system of our country. As a result, they dine together only once or twice a week which is alarming to any family bond. Some families are "week-end Families" in the sense that there is interaction of family members only on Saturdays or Sundays (Sugimoto, 2003, p. 173). In some cases, fathers are termed *"Sunday Strangers,"* as the only stay at home on Sundays. In the following subsections we shall look into the different dimensions of Japanese Families through 1970s the era of the beginning of Japan's Economic Miracle, till recent developments.

The Nuclear Family or Salary man Family

The declining birthrate brought about a sudden drop in the size of families in postwar years. The average household size hovered around five until about 1955 but declined to less than three in the early 1990s. The major change in the Japanese family of the late 1950s and the 1960s was the development of the so-called salary man family or the nuclear family. This type of family consisted of a bread-earning husband working outside the home or even the neighborhood. In this family the wife typically became a housewife upon marriage and was not under immediate authority of her mother-in-law. The husband's primary role was that of breadwinner who used to go for long hours six days a week, leaving the management of the household with his wife. He was still the head of the house but a shadow figure to his children. Many of the wives in the salary man families engaged their all-efforts at home and had little opportunities to work outside home. They were termd "full-time housewives". At home they mostly concentrated all their efforts and potentials for the education of their children proving themselves as "education mothers" or "kyoiku mama" (Sugimoto, 2003, p. 174). Salaried men were considered to be desirable husbands since they had assured futures and their wives would not have to work in a family bread-earning. The separation of the couple's daily world was not viewed as a problem. It rather gave the wife increased freedom and responsibility in managing her husband's salary, and the children's education. Thus, gradually she became the main representative of the family in the community. Therefore, these changes in the family structure provided an outlet for the increasingly well-educated Japanese women. At the same time, these new role of women encouraged families to educate their daughters and encouraged men to choose educated wives as well (Imamura, 1990, p. 10). While the number of extended families has remained almost constant, nuclear families with few children have dramatically increased during this period. For various reasons, including job opportunities, travel conveniences the urge to remain free from too many responsibilities and the increasing cost of education and housing, families choose to have fewer or no children than they had in the past. Most families with children have chosen to have only one or two, bringing the average to 1.75 (Sugimoto, 2003, p. 173). Nuclear families enjoy a high degree of autonomy and independence. In such a family the wife does not have to worry about the daily interventions of parents-in-law and is free to raise a small number of children the way they like without interference from the older generation. On the negative side, women in nuclear families in cities lead solitary and alienated lives. This is not just because their husbands devote themselves to their companies rarely attending to family matters, but also because the number of children is fewer, the women's parents may live far away and interaction with other families in the neighborhood is rare.

Decline in Extended Families

Japanese family structure differs from that in other industrialized countries in its large proportion of extended families with two adult generations living under the same roof. This pattern is inconsistent with the modernization theory that industrialization entails the overwhelming dominance of the nuclear family. But the proportion of extended families with two adult generations living under the same roof has rapidly declined to a little over 10 percent. In reality, most two-generation families make this arrangement for pragmatic reasons. Given the high cost of purchasing housing properties, young people are prepared to live with or close to their parents and provide them with home-based nursing care with the hope of acquiring their house after their death in exchange. Even if the two generations do not live together or close, aged parents often expect to receive living allowances from their children, with the tacit understanding that they will repay the 'debt' by allowing the contributing children to inherit their property after death. Aged parents without inheritable assets face much more hardships in this regard. It is not uncommon for the extended families to share a family budget between older and younger generations.

In extended families, the traditional norm requires that the family of the first son resides with his parents; however, this often leads to a bitter tension between his wife and mother. Because of rapid changes in values between generations, such a tension frequently becomes an often conflict. The old mother-in-law expects submission from the young wife, who prefers and autonomous and unconstrained lifestyle (Sugimoto, 2010, P. 186). The extended families however, show the signs that they are adapting to the changing environment while retaining some traditional features. Meanwhile, rural families show much clearer patterns of continued and even increasing tendencies of the extended family system although there are signs of decline in *ie* consciousness among the young generation (Sugimoto, 2003, P. 175-76).

New Pattern of Families

The first generation of salary man families found them fortunate as husbands saw many possibilities for self-actualization; wives had freedom from traditional family pressures and greater opportunities for their children: thus, proved a rising standard of living. These young people did not experience the postwar economic hardships. Rather they began to get familiar with family life as pictured in American movies. This phenomenon was called the "new family". It was touted in magazines and included the ideal of more participation by husbands in domestic affairs; also accompanying their wives to the supermakrket; carrying and caring the babies; and enjoying outings with families on week-ends. 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 children were to do well in school, their, mother had to help them. In this way the entire family often could not spend as much time together as orignally planned. This new family initiated several changes in Japanese social life. Day by day greater expectations were placed on father's participation at least occasionally in activities with their children (Imamura 1990, p. 10-11).

Another change was women's increased participation in activities outside the home. The increasing number of educated women with longer periods free from family obligations contributed to the development of a variety of opportunities for women ranging from part-time or temporary paid work. In this way the educated wives and mothers began to broaden their perspectives. Women's increased education and their work-experience, fewer children to raise and the high cost of both housing and children's education also compelled married women to enter labor force. The birth rate fell dramatically in 1989 to 10.1 per 1000 persons reflecting an increase in education for both sexes and virtually a universal pattern of women working outside the home for several years before marriage. The education gap between spouses got slim and significant minorities of women even agreed that if a woman could support herself, it was not necessary for her to marry. The average age of marriage for women in Japan has increased considerably in recent years (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, Feb. 23, 2009). These women are better educated and are able to live freely with well-paying jobs and relatively few obligations and responsibilities. Many are not interested in settling down with a husband and raising a family giving up their new-found freedoms. Instead they choose to lives as "Miss Old" remaining at home with their parents living a relatively care-free life full of shopping sprees, expensive trips, and above all, freedom to come and go as they please while their mothers cook, clean, and care for them.

Then, households outside conventional family structure dramatically increased in the 1980s. Mostly the youngsters who choose alternative lifestyles: life-time singles, co-habitation without formal marriage, single mothers are seen as single householders. The percentage is around 6. These percentages roughly correspond to the proportions of unmarried persons in their forties. White-collar employees are more eager to marry than blue-collar workers, self-employed or unemployed persons. On the whole, the institution of marriage remains the most prevalent form the male-female relationship, although community acceptance of other forms appears to be gradually spreading (Sugimoto, 2010, P. 186).

Social Issues Affecting Japanese Families Today

Divorce or Separation

A critical issue facing the family of today is 'divorce' while in the past it was unacceptable to end a marriage. Nevertheless, as there was little emotion binding them together, it was quite easy for them to divorce themselves from each other emotionally within the home.

Toady, however, there are many more love marriages; yet, divorce is something that is still somewhat frowned upon by Japanese society. Japan has one of the lowest rates of divorce in the world, standing at 1.26 percent as of 1990 (Iwao, 1993, p. 113). Unhappy couples many times will do the same thing their ancestors did by divorcing emotionally and staying together legally. With husbands who work long hours and make frequent business trips it is quite simple for the two to lead a separate lives, perhaps only sharing a bed in the evenings when the husband comes back home from work. Iwao (1993, P. 119) has termed this situation as "divorce within the house". In addition, Japanese people do not consider sexual fidelity or the maintaining of a good sexual relationship with their spouse to be of critical importance and a woman become more independent economically, socially, and psychologically, the rate of extramarital affairs continues to increase. Many times the wives, who feel distant from their husbands, cannot divorce for various reasons. Consequently; they will turn to other men for a secret passion in their lives which adds to the rise in this number of unfaithful spouses. In recent years more surprisingly, a small but rising number of senior-citizen divorces is making headlines. Since divorce is clearly listed and types of divorce is stated in family register system, if a child need to enter shcool, 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 considered more upsetting than divorce by consent. Sugimoto (2010, P. 182-83) opines that this attitude perhaps prevents parents from litigating divorce in a large scale.

Increase in Aged Population

Another major facing the contemporary Japanese family is the rapid aging of the Japanese population. The ratio is alarming among the women. Japanese women who have the longest life span in today's world (average 81 years). Although the obligation to care for parents still reises with the eldest son, aged women mostly prefer to be cared by their own daughters. But at home they have to live lonely lives as people around them are very busy with their own jobs. Although the traditional norm of care for the aged within the family is still quite strong, aged people living in the "old-age-home," or "nursing home" (in Japanese they call it "Roojin Home" is quite common in contemporary Japan.

Match-Making: A difficult Job Indeed!

Traditionally in Japan marriage was a man's market. At present the Japanese young women are scarce and young men are having difficulty to find suitable partners. A whole series of computer and video-based introduction services (such as *matching.com*)- labeled by some as internet marriage or high-tech marriage have developed which appear to be attractive to the young men working abroad for a Japanese company willing to find a Japanese spouse. Again, a shortage of women in the appropriate age range, an increase in their level of education and also earning capability, lead women to be fairly selective when looking for a spouse (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, Sept. 19, 2009). This situation is alarming especially in present-day salary man families, in farm families and in small-business families. To many ambitious female, the much-talked "salary men" (who are often called the symbol of Japan's postwar economic miracle) are the "rotten eggs" as they have to pass long hours for monotonous office work; hence, they are literally absent and isolated from families. Sometimes they are treated as a stranger and mercilessly labeled as "sodai gomi", big garbage! As ill luck would have it, their price in the 'matrimonial market' is not that high. Again, the dwindling number of farm families is also facing increasing difficulties in finding brides, because today's young women do not want to stay and engage in farming. On top of that, there is a fear to remain under the tutelage of their mothers-in-law. As a result, systematic efforts to import brides from Taiwan, Philippines, elsewhere in Asia, or from Japanese immigrant communities have got the way (Moon, 1998). We assume that 'Bride-Import in Japan' can be an interesting topic for Social Research. Sons from shop-keeping families are also facing the same problems in recent days. Again, a good number of Japanese women are getting married to the forigners (immigrants, or longtime workers) who are settled in Japan. Thus, a multi-culture is developing slowly touching the very culture of Japan. This also influences the core of Japanese families.

Has the *Ie* Disappeared?

In postwar Japan the *ie* was abolished as a legal unit. In place a nuclear family has to be registered. All children are supposed to have equal rights to inheritance and they share responsibility for the care of their parents. The laws are drawn up according to the Constitution of 1947 which states that "With regard to choice of spouse, property rights, inheritance, choice of domicile, divorce and other matters pertaining to marriage and the family, laws shall be enacted from the standpoint of individual dignity and the essential equality of sexes" (Article 24). These values are imported from the West and it was further decided that the existing family system was incompatible with the democratic state that Japan supposed to become. Today the majority of Japanese families live in urban areas and for most there is no longer a physical ie which had been passed down through generations. Therefore, the continuous trend of the so-called 'nuclearization' of family composition let many scholars to believe that the ie no longer functions as a real sociological entity. The postwar Japanese capitalist economy, founded on a highly advanced technology, has had a structure that is quite different from that of the prewar period. Undoubtedly there are many aspects that distinguish the postwar *ie* from the prewar one (Moon, 1998, P. 117-18). One ceremonial occasions, such as in wedding ceremony, the symbols of family lineage and genealogy surface as an indication of the survival of the extended family system. The Japanese funeral also exhibits the endurance of extended family principles. The common practice is that the body of the deceased is brought back home even if her or she dies in hospital. In the past a wake would hold nearly all night beside the body at the house where the person used to live. Memorial services were also held at home. This practice still persists in the rural areas of Japan. But in modern Japan, especially in the urban areas, wake and funerals are held in sogijo, or Ceremony Halls. The ashes are buried at the family tomb. Thus, the discourse about the ie and underlying principles are still used as forms of ideology in other areas of the Japanese society, though much of the family system has been modified within the domestic realm. In reality "the notion of the ie continues to be held quite happily in many parts of Japan, and elsewhere its underlying principles pervade the nuclear families which appear on the surface to be quite independent" (Hendry, 2003, P. 30-31).

Conclusion

Before the World II, the Japanese society was the strongly to a code of Confucian ethic, a factor of great importance in the structure and function of families of the era. These families were often male-dominated and large with several branches of the family and several generations living in one house together. Women were subordinate and were expected to submit to the strict rules of society, as it is already mentioned. However, Japan's defeat in World War II brought about a change dictating both sexes as equal. Shortly thereafter women began to get more education and were no longer subjected to the harsh principles of Confucian law. While still expected to be the caretakers in the family, they were given more freedom to choose how their lives would be. Couples began to marry at older ages and have fewer children than in the past drastically changing the structure of Japanese families. In addition, there was a decrease in the number of arranged marriages as both women and men were allowed to seek out love marriages. As the structure of Japanese families changed, so did the technology available to these families, and both play a large part in determining the altered roles of men and women in modern Japanese families. With the introduction of modern appliances women have much more free time to spend to develop their own interests. Fathers, on the other hand, spend relatively little time at home, spending most of it at work. Their children almost never see them and as an additional discredit to the father's authority, they no longer actually see their father's financial contribution to the family. Consequently, mothers hold nearly all of the authority in the modern Japanese family while fathers are oftentimes merely seen as another son. In many ways, the structure, values, and roles of the Japanese family have changed drastically over the past century from very large and male-dominated to much smaller and essentially female-dominated. Nevertheless, there are still many ways in which these families are very similar to their ancestors' families. The share many of the same traditions even though some ideas have been changed through the years where the Japanese family is heading for depends on the changing socioeconomic factors. The 21st century young Japanese people expect for more individual choices than their parents' generation had. But they are expected to consider the "Americanization of the Japanese society" that leads to extreme individualism with alarm. The American Model should not be their ideal because American social problems, such as a high divorce rate, drugs and homelessness are a matter of great concern even in America. Following the glory of the past, the future Japanese family is expected to rely on its own traditional strengths (we have seen that still the *ie* remains, may be in alternative forms as the basic unit of social, political and religious life in a Japanese family) and welcome the elements that are best-suited to the Japanese society and modify or reject the obsolete ones.

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