THE JAPANESE FAMILY FACES TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CHALLENGES

Family-related issues are at the forefront of social challenges facing Japan as it enters the twenty-first century: women are postponing marriage, the birth rate is falling, the divorce rate rising, teenage girls are dating middle-aged men to earn money to buy luxury goods, young men are finding it difficult to attract wives, and the percentage of the elderly is growing rapidly and their care is a major social problem. Japanese leaders are lamenting the breakdown of the Japanese family system or seeking to develop policies to shore up that system.

Is all of this cause for worry, or not? In order to understand the importance of these issues, it is necessary to understand what is meant by "the Japanese family system" and why its purported demise should so concern the state.

BY ANNE E. IMAMURA

BACKGROUND—The development of the Japanese family was a cornerstone of the formation of the Japanese state in the late nineteenth century.[1] The low position of Japanese women was among the various criteria the West used to declare Japan a backward society. Women's roles were debated by Japanese reformers, and the Meiji state (1868–1912) developed an ideology centered on the importance of educating women to be good wives and wise mothers.[2]

The Meiji state also put forth in legal code and ideology the concept of the Japanese family: patriarchal, with the role of each member well-defined by age, gender, and relationship to the patriarchal head. Prior to this time, a range of marriage, family, and sexual relationships had existed throughout Japan with some variance by region and major variance by class.

The main elements of the Meiji family system as defined in law continued until the Post World War II Allied Occupation. The system was based on the assumption that marriage was for the family rather than for individual love. The continuance of the family across generations was supported by inheritance laws that gave all to a single heir who was in turn responsible to care for the parents. In addition to inheriting family property, the heir inherited the family Buddhist altar and all responsibility for funerals and memorial services. Although in fact there were variations, the assumption was that the heir would be the eldest son.

To perpetuate this system, children were raised according to their roles. Eldest sons were treated as future heads of family, served after their father and before their younger brothers; daughters were last because they would one day marry out of the family. The bride's position was very lowest of all. If she bore a son, one day she might become a mother-in-law to whom her son's bride owed strict obedience.

This family became the foundation of social stability and order as Japan moved from the nineteenth century into and through the Pacific War. Women's roles increasingly focused on marriage, childbearing, and raising their children to be good citizens of Japan. Men's roles increasingly focused on military service.

At the same time, from the Meiji period on, women's opportunity for education and employment outside the home grew. Women were an important part of the labor force, especially on farms, in shops, and in factories. As in other countries during the war, women filled the jobs that men left.

After the war, during the occupation, laws concerning marriage changed. Under the new law, marriage became a union between two consenting adults and did not require approval of the household head. Inheritance and responsibility for caring for parents was to be divided equally among all children.

As Japan moved into the 1960s and its period of double-digit economic growth, new family forms developed. However, there were strong legacies from the past, including the social expectation that the happiness of a woman lay in marriage and that the role of married women was to be good wives and wise mothers. In spite of the legal changes, daughters did not expect equal inheritance or equal responsibility for care of their parents. At marriage, they signed documents stating they had received their inher-

itance as their dowry and expected their eldest brother (and his wife) to look after their parents; daughters, in turn, might look after their husband's parents.

The first new family form to gain recognition was the salaryman family. Economic growth and industrial development produced salaried workers, a minority of whom had "permanent" (until retirement) jobs. These men were excellent candidates for marriage. They had job security, predictable earnings until retirement, did not live with their elderly parents (at least when first married), and their wives could manage their small homes/apartments without the interference of mothers-in-law. The path to obtaining one of these plum positions was education. As competition increased, education became even more important.

The salaryman's wife was an important part of corporate Japan; as her role took on new dimensions, it required the commitment of a profession.[3] As wife, her duty (often described during wedding speeches by representatives from the groom's workplace) was to manage the household and its finances so that her husband could come home and relax to be energized for the next day's work. As mother, her duty increasingly focused on getting her children through the education system, and the phenomenon of the "education mother" was born. Indeed, it has been argued that corporate Japan found the ideology of the Japanese family system and its division of labor a very convenient base for motivating men (as husbands/fathers) to put in long hours. Thus, corporate Japan actively perpetuated the family ideology that had been developed by the state in the Meiji period.

The economic growth and industrialization of Japan impacted gender roles. Education (through junior college when possible) became increasingly important for women who wanted to attract a salaryman husband. Once married, women were available to do piece work in the home, and their cheap labor provided the foundation for Japan's industrial development.[4] Men's jobs took them outside the neighborhood and local community, which resulted in separate social networks for husbands and wives, and over time the necessity and opportunity for women to take on community responsibility.

As this hard-working salaryman family moved into the second generation, a variation appeared that was called the new family[5] in Japanese. This new family was based on the belief that husbands and wives should be companions and have shared interests. These goals developed from the recognition that couples of the previous generation had little in common after the husband retired when the two had lived virtually separate existences for decades. The new family also developed because the younger generation had more exposure to Western influences and had seen a range of family models depicted in the media.

This new family in its early stages included family leisure activities. However, by the time the couple had been married about five years or so, on the surface they looked like the salaryman family. The husband spent long hours at work and the wife concentrated on rearing the children. The difference between this family and the salaryman family of the 1960s was the expectation on the part of the couple that they would have shared interests.

Another difference was the increase in employment opportunities for married women outside the home. They could work in a growing range of occupations including newly developing neighborhood supermarkets, fast food restaurants and the like, participate in PTA and other child related organizations, join or found a community related group, and/or pursue personal education through courses offered at community centers and women's centers.[6]

As Japan moved into the 1980s, women's education levels continued to increase. Japan signed the United Nations Declaration on Women and consequently passed the 1986 Equal Employment Opportunity Law that opened more job opportunities to women. To comply with the principle of this law, companies created a two-track system and women were employed in virtually every field. One track (sougoushoku) leads to possible managerial positions, the other track (ippanshoku) to routine work with limited promotion potential. In theory, men and women have equal opportunity in both tracks. Hiring decisions should be made by educational and other work-related criteria, not gender. In practice, the majority of women are in routine work and virtually all men are on the sougoushoku track. The law, however, was merely advisory: it had no penalties for non-compliance and no affirmative action components. The prohibition on late night work for women and other protective legislation remained in effect.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s a number of trends became noticeable: women were marrying later and later; the birth rate was falling; Japanese men were increasingly seen as undesirable husbands and as problems when they grew older. Young Japanese men were viewed as less cosmopolitan than young Japanese women (precisely because the young men had to devote so much time to work), and definitions of masculinity blurred. The once "ideal" strong, silent male was replaced by a young man who used cologne, removed excess body hair, and served as a social companion to young women.[7] Older Japanese men, retired husbands, also had an image problem. They were labeled large trash *sodai gomi* (because they were hard to get rid of), "sticky autumn leaves" *nureochiba* (because they clung to their wives), and "I want to do it too" *washi zoku/otoko* because they had nothing to do and wanted to go everywhere with their wives. The return of the retired husband to the home continued to be problematic.

Throughout this period, as Japan became increasingly aware that its society was rapidly aging, the government called on women to carry out three key missions: to bear children, care for the aged, and fill the needs of the shrinking labor force. Unsurprisingly, women resisted the government's urgings, not with protests and marches, but by changing their behavior or quiet non-compliance.

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RESISTANCE AND NEW PATTERNS—One of the most striking behavior changes reflects the fact that marriage is becoming less and less attractive to Japanese women. The age at first marriage increases every year. In 1980, the average age for women marrying was 25.9, by 2001 it was 27.2.[8]

Sexual mores are also changing. One example is young girls dating older men for money (*enjou kousai*). When interviewed, the girls say there is nothing wrong with what they are doing. If anyone is wrong, they say, it is the older men who pay for their services.

Although Japanese look askance at the behavior of the above-mentioned young girls, they seem to accept other types of extramarital sexual activity with relative equanimity. For example, on Christmas Eve, the major hotels are booked by young (unmarried) couples for the night, and there appear to be no protesting parents or scandalized upholders of traditional morals raising their voices against this practice or even against ads the hotels publish.

In fact, pregnancy seems to have become a recognized catalyst for marriage. The term *dekichatta kon*, (marriage after the child is conceived) is in common usage, even in commercials. Media reports the availability of maternity wedding dresses and according to Ministry of Health, Welfare, and Labor statistics released in March 2002, 26.3 percent of brides are pregnant.[9]

While the age of marriage is rising, the birth rate is falling. It is well below replacement at about 1.32. However, for married couples, the birth rate is 2.2.[10] Once women marry, they have children. Thus, the real issue affecting birth rate is the unattractiveness of marriage.

Why is marriage so unattractive to Japanese women? One reason is that women have another option for economic security: employment. Another is the difficulty of combining family and career in Japan today because of the Japanese employment system and the expectation of total commitment of worker to company. Yet another important reason is the legacy of the Japanese family system, including care for the aged.

The Japanese government has begun to recognize that systemic change is necessary to prevent population decline. The Revised Equal Employment Opportunity Law that went into effect in 1998 aims at improving the employment environment so that working women are not discriminated against, can make full use of their abilities and skills, and can feel free to have children while continuing to work. Under the law, the names of companies discriminating against women in recruitment, hiring, assignment, and promotion are published. Business proprietors are responsible to prevent sexual harassment in their workplace, and employers must lighten or change the work of women so that they can have proper medical care during and after pregnancy and can follow the instructions of their doctors.

Changes in the Labor Standards Law are also family-friendly and gender-equal. Restrictions on night work by women have been abolished, but men and women who are raising a child or caring for family members have the right to ask for reduced overtime up to three years. These changes aim at providing women equal opportunity in both the labor market and balancing family care responsibilities—a theme reinforced in the 1999 White Paper on Welfare.

In a time of economic stagnation, the true effect of the above legislation is difficult to see. In principle, Japanese women should be able to compete equally with Japanese men in the labor market. In practice, this is not happening. Although the above-mentioned laws protect women, companies may pressure women on maternity leave to resign because their jobs must be cut as part of "restructuring".[11]

EXITING THE SYSTEM—As Leonard Schoppa[12] argued, the current socioeconomic situation in Japan has opened opportunities for citizens to exit the system, opportunities reflected in behaviors and attitudes toward family and gender roles.

DIVORCE— "By 1988 the rate of divorce per 1,000 persons was 1.26 and Japan as a modern nation ranked very low indeed compared to the United States. By the end of the 1990s, there was a rise to 2.00 per 1,000 persons, still half the rate of the United States."[13]

More interesting than increase in the divorce rate is the growing number of divorces after 20 years of marriage. In 1999 the average length of marriage at divorce was 10.3 years. This phenomenon reflects women "exiting the system." Once their children are raised, these women want to retire, just as their husbands are retiring. They, however, want to retire from housekeeping, caring for their husband, caring for his aged parents, and someday caring for him. They thus reject many of what were considered women's most important roles.

OTHER EXITS—Exiting the system takes forms other than divorce. Nancy Rosenberger[14] identifies as "fragile resistances" women's consumerism that symbolizes individual indulgence in the face of the call to be self-sacrificing nurturers.[15] Karen Kelsky[16] describes a different form of resistance in her work with a small minority of Japanese women enthralled with the West.

A growing form of exiting the system is represented by the "Freeters," young women and men who "choose"[17] to work in temporary positions rather than seek a more permanent career track. This phenomenon is viewed with concern by social analysts who worry both about the values of these young people and whether the Freeters will ever be able to earn enough to live independently of their parents, purchase homes, and provide for their own old age.

NEW PATTERNS: CARE FOR THE AGED—In the current environment, a number of changes are occurring in the way Japan cares for its aged. As in other countries, the single stereotype of the fragile elderly has been replaced with the recognition that there are a range of types, including people who are

physically active (traveling, engaging in sports) and those learning new skills (the Internet). Regardless of type, the goal of care for the aged is related to one's social responsibility to be an active, contributing member of society by taking care of physical and mental health, avoiding situations that burden others, and to returning the obligations one incurs through relationships of inter-dependence with others. This transfers a certain amount of responsibility to the senior citizen.[18]

Even though many senior citizens may be able to live inde-pendently for years, the issue of long-term care cannot be ignored. Changes in demographics, the family, and the role of women mean that care of the aged by the eldest son and his wife is no longer a viable model for Japan. With the vast increase in the number of senior citizen households, there is less consensus as to who should provide care.

Long and Harris have identified a demand for men to cross the boundaries of conventional gender roles by caring for elderly parents and spouses.[19] Their research found that for women, care-giving calls on familiar skills, and for men it is uncharted territo-ry, yet each brings certain skills to the task. Women caregivers were more used to anticipating the needs of others whereas men brought more practical skills learned in the workplace. Typical assumptions reflected traditional gender roles, with men receiving praise and support for doing what was considered "only natural" for women to do. Care for the aged, a responsibility that cannot be avoided or postponed, may provide the best insight into change and continuity in the Japanese family, gender roles, and the role of the family versus the state.

CONCLUSION

—At present, young people quietly but firmly reject many assumptions of the generation ruling Japan. They look for greater flexibility in work and family, including care for the elderly. The economic doldrums in which Japan finds itself certainly impact the possibilities, solutions, and decisions of this generation. Japan is changing in other ways, its minorities are seeking linkages with minorities in other countries, and its labor force includes people of Japanese ancestry who have "returned" from Latin America.

What we are seeing is a diversification of patterns, from a sin-gle desirable model to a range of socially acceptable choices. At the same time, Japan clearly has not developed solutions that ade-quately meet goals set by its own government: to focus on men's and women's roles and how to balance child care and work.

Finally, choices the Japanese make and the patterns of behav-ior that emerge will take place in the context of domestic needs and global affairs, just as previous choices reflected the climate of their times. ■

NOTES

1. For a discussion of this, see Liddle, Joanna, and Sachiko Nakajima, *Rising Suns, Rising Daughters*. (London and New York: Zed Books, 2000).
2. Liddle and Nakajima, op.cit., 32–39.
3. See Vogel, Suzanne H., "Professional Housewife: The Career of Urban Middle Class Japanese Women." *Japan Interpreter* 12 (1) 1978: 16–43.
4. See Brinton, Mary C., *Women and the Economic Miracle: Gender and Work in Postwar Japan*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993)
5. English words written in Japanese phonetic script.
6. See Imamura, Anne E., *Urban Japanese Housewives at Home and in the Community*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987).
7. Young women viewed these men as providing transportation, sources of dinner invitations, and the like, rather than as potential spouses.
8. For men, the age at first marriage rose from 28.7 in 1980 to 29 in 2001.
9. Curtin, J. Sean. "Japanese Marriage Trends in 2002: Later Unions and More Diverse Families" October 3, 2002, GLO-COM Platform, www.glocom.org.
10. White, Merry Isaacs, *Perfectly Japanese: Making Families in an Era of Upheaval*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 39.
11. Nihon Keizai Shinbun, "Shigoto to Ikiru," (Japan Economic News) January 6, 2003.
12. Schoppa, Leonard J., "Japan, the Reluctant Reformer." *For-eign Affairs* (September/October, 2001): 76–90.
13. White, op.cit., 84
14. Rosenberger, Nancy R., "Fragile Resistance, Signs of Status, Women between the State and Media in Japan," in Anne E. Imamura, ed., *Re-Imaging Japanese Women* (Berkeley: Uni-versity of California Press, 1996)
15. There continue to be attempts to romanticize traditional roles. Recent television dramas glorifying the traditional family such as Honke no Yome (Bride of the Main household) and manga such as Yome to Shutome (Bride and Mother-in-Law) are examples.
16. Kelskey, Karen. *Women on the Verge: Japanese Women, Western Dreams*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001).
17. It is difficult to distinguish what percentage of "Freeters" are people who could not find other work, and what percentage choose this lifestyle rather than seek more traditional employ-ment.
18. For a discussion of this, see Traphagan, John W., *Taming Oblivion: Aging bodies and the Fear of Senility in Japan*. (SUNY Series in Japan in Transition, State University of New York, 2000).
19. Long, Susan Orpett, and Phyllis Braudy Harris "Gender and Elder Care: Social Change and the Role of the Caregiver in Japan." *Social Science Japan Journal*, 3, no. 1(April 2000): 21–36.

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