Changing Family in Japan Today

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1. Introduction

Traditionally, strongly tight-knitted family system as the whole unit was of fundamental importance to Japanese life, therefore the definition of the family was obvious and the existence of the family in stable had been regarded to be taken for granted. However, the family life in change has been affected by a range of social, economic, legal, attitudinal and various other changes. And the recent compelling questions upon the family and the discussions they give rise crucially depend on interpretations about family patterns and family life are changing, and then how family today is defined.

It is no doubt that changes are taking place, but how significant are they? Swept by the currents of change, the family exists in a variety of forms, and seems to be mainly characterized as “in transition”. Some changes might signify a departing from traditional patterns and to some represent a menace to the family life and family itself.

This paper has no intention to give a view about such questions, but rather it searches for presenting some available and reliable evidences about the family in Japan today. The main purpose of this paper is therefore to review and to sketch out the prominent demographic changes and present a picture of what family patterns and family life are like in Japanese society today. Some of the paper’s main findings can be briefly stated. Not only have been a dramatic decrease in the average size of households and the increase in nucleation of family, but there are growing numbers of single person household, the aged-couple only and of the aged-single households. Marriage is still most popular with a rising typical age at marriage for both sexes. The increasing divorce rates are bringing about substantial rise in the
number of single-parent families. Along with rapid decrease in the ratio of fertility, mortality and morbidity, there have been a dramatic upward in life expectancy for short term especially for women, the decrease in the level of fertility bringing about fewer children, closer spacing of birth and a shortening of the child bearing period, and the being upward at the age of first marriage for both sexes though remain strong marriage oriented attitude. Some of the changes are distressing only to a small proportion if individual families, but other have widespread consequences to be viewed seriuos problem.

2. Changes in Family Pattern

Over the last decades Japanese people have experienced the shifts of two major types of family system: (I) Institutionalized patrilineal stem family syatem, which is called the Ie. That is constituted of three generation extended family with a lot of kinship members. (2) The relative democratic and individualistic conjugal family, which is now generally called nuclear family. After World War II, the first type was legally abolished by amendment of Civil Code, which introduced some democratic ideas to the family, and transfered to the conjugal family system with legal equality of both spouses. The shift then brought about various changes in the overall Japanese family life experiences, and it has been accelerated with the tremendous industrialization, modernization and urbanization. There have been a marked decrease of family size, a simplification of family components and a increasing number of single person households and of conjugal or nuclear families which especially formed in accordance with a breakdown of the large sized traditional extended family system.

The definitions of households and family types somewhat depend upon socio-economical, cultural, regional and historical backgrounds. However, the distribution of families or households, which are employed for census or general purposes, and its recent trend in Japan can be seen as follows.

The basic models of family household types are usually divided into four main categories: (1) Single person household; (2) Nuclear (conjugal) family; (3) Three generation extended family; (4) One-parent family.
According to the population and housing census, average number of household members has dramatically decreased over the past 30 years from 4.97 members in 1955 to 3.25 members in 1983 paralleling with the decline of the large family household. The increase trend in the nucleation of family component also has occurred.

Therefore, the nuclear household increased in its number from 59.6% in 1955, to 60.2% in 1960, to 62.6% in 1965, to 63.9% in 1975, in 63.3% in 1980. On other side, the decrease of the number and proportion of extended family has occured, especially for years prior to 1970. The characteristics and the trend of each type of family in recent Japan is as follows.

(1) Single person household

The remarkable increase of single person households was a significant phenomenon which occured after World War II in Japan, which has accompanied by the great industrialization, modernization and urbanization.

The single person households within the 1956-1976 period had a remarkable increase in amount and in proportion of all households, that is in amount about 2.5 fold from 2,520,000 to 7,000,000 (12.7% to 20.4%). That trend was more evident in the great cities than the rural areas, that is 37.5% in great cities and 13.1% in rural areas in 1976. Since around 1977, the proportion of single person households of all households has been slightly decreasing and levelling off (18.1% in 1983). The flowing of the single younger generation into the large cities from the rural areas has been stagnant along with a slight de-centralization of population. That phenomenon has been brought about by the returning to the countrysides of provincial cities by younger generation after finishing higher educational attainment to seek jobs and living places without staying in large cities any more in recent Japan. That has been owing to the poor housing and living conditions in the large cities, and lessening the differences of living standards or life styles between rural and great cities.

Nevertheless, single persons in younger age are still in large numbers in the large cities where they can study or take a job. Living in the large cities makes it possible for younger single people to enjoy
getting more chances and possibilities in higher educational attainment, better skills, careers and sophisticated behaviour or living styles, thereby inducing later marriage especially for younger women, more younger single person households, which come gather from countrysides and remain in the great cities.

There are (within single person households) the biggest proportion of young male heads with under 30 years of age which decreased from 61% in 1975 to 44.9% in 1983 and a increasing proportion of single elderly person heads with over 65 years of age which composes over 1 million in numbers, and 80% of them are females. The former group, therefore, live apart from their parents families for the sake of some reasons until making new families.

In general, they are still regarded as one of members of their family of orientation in fact. While, for the single households the most probably obvious point to note is that almost one third of them with old aged females are gradually increasing in number. These old females are mostly widowed whose children have moved away to the cities. In general, a great number of young male and female single households are in the cities and old female households are to stay alone in the countrysides. The number of the single households composed by females after middle age and especially over 65 years of age has recently steadily increased, according to the dramatical increase in the expectation of life of especially female.

(2) Nuclear family

The nuclear family household is the largest type of all family households (60.9% in 1983), and there are two basic models of nuclear family households which are (1) Married couple only, and (2) Married couple and children. They have some characteristics with respect to their age stages.

Within the nuclear family households, the married couple only have steadily increased from 8.3% in 1960 to 13.1% in 1980 of all families. This type of household peaks in the late 20s age periods and is lowest in the early 40s age periods, while increasing with respect to those of 50 years or more. Therefore, within this category, the largest group is the rather older married couple with the head aged 45 years or
more (29.6%) and especially with the head aged 60 years or more is on the significant increase accompanied with aging at a good pace for a short term. The 60 years or more period (42.4%) is the time of the empty-nest or empty-shell in terms of the experiences of the family in that the children’s leaving home.

Accordingly, the proportion of households consisted of a Married couple only has steadily increased, that was 2-fold for the last one decade in Japan, that caused of the increase in the number of the elderly couple with the dramatic increase of expectation of life and children’s leaving home.

Households with Married couple and children is the largest category on composing 43.1% of all family households, and the rate of that has been relatively stable for decades. Within this category the largest proportion is the 30-44 age group, and then the 45-49 age group.

In the middle aged period, people have plenty of activities such as rearing their children, constructing a house for the family, and being vital in their jobs. Furthermore, this period is prior to the stages of constructing extended family or household with couple only.

Even if there will be a slight rise upwards hereafter, the nucleation of family and the increase in proportion of nuclear families seem to have already reached the peak of them for their growing in Japan today.

(3) Extended family (co-residence of three generation)

Following the decreasing trend prior to 1971, the percent of three generation family households has levelled off, and reached 16.2% in 1980 (between 1972 and 1980 declining by only 0.2%). While the total number of extended families has not changed very much up today. These phenomena are not always likely to occur in a strong direct correspondence with the increase of nuclear families and single person households. Extended families in recent Japan have considerable characteristics which are as follows:

1. In the overall decline in proportion of extended families, there are many differences on the formation of extended families related to the regions, ages, jobs, or classes. The extended family, in general, consists of two household units (child’s couple and old parent’s couple)
or three generations. However there are varieties to take the form of the extended families in Japan today.

Constructing extended families are divided into two main types generally, that is (1) Stem patrilineal-family which one of children in general the eldest son remains to the parents and constitutes his family in the co-residencial extended family household with his parents, and (2) after the some duration of living apart, two couples begin to live together. These variations of the family experiences have much influence on the life cycle.

2. The modern co-residential extended family is not all the same as the former stem-family or patrimonial lineal-family, but it has still left a traditional moral consciousness or feeling and value more or less and latent influences. For example, quite a few people want to live in extended family system especially in the old age period. Furthermore, the child’s family living together with old parents is not only the first born son’s, but also any other child’s who can live with their parents owing to the needs and the existing circumstances from both sides.

3. According to the census, the proportion of elderly people living with children and grandchildren was 87.3% in 1960, 79.9% in 1970 and 69.8% in 1980.

At the age over the 65 years, the rate of living together with their unmarried child was 16.2% and with child’s family was 51.8% in 1982. Within this old age group there is a larger population of people without spouses than people with spouses. In general, the children's family actually live separate from their parents, especially in their younger age of stages, then afterwards older parents especially lone widowed mothers are more often become included into their families.

4. The reason in the stagnant decrease of co-residential three generation families in very recent after a long decreasing period is not only due to the increase in single households and nuclear families, but also to the many variations. They have arisen within the category of extended families which have been called quasi-extended or modified-extended families by E. Litwak. For instance, three generations constitute one extended family and live in the same site, but to live in different houses, or sometimes three generations live in the same house
as a one extended family or joint household with separate living spaces and separate “housekeeping” for the child’s family unit and the old parent’s unit.

These living styles seem to be more functional, convenient or advantageous for both units not only for the sake of making free from conflict among the generations, but also for the sake of getting a good living standard, emotional sustain, taking care of old parents and baby-sitting, housing purchase, and economic support, etc. Like these contrived or modified variations of extended families are steadily prevailing even in the city area, and they will keep remain in future.

(4) Single-parent family

Recent Japan, there has been a gradual rise in the number of single-parent families. The national survey of the Welfare Ministry in 1983 estimated that there were in 1983 some 885,000 single-parent families with almost one and a half million children under 20 years of age. The 2.5% of all Japanese families with children were single-parent families with 2.0% for a female-headed and 0.5% for a male-headed. There were about 718,000 female-headed families and 167,000 male-headed families. Nearly 80% of all single-parent families is headed by women. The very notable fact was that the number of the divorced families has been increasing more and more in taking place of the bereaved families mainly.

Female-head family

In the past five years, female-headed families with children have increased almost by 13% (increased 84,000 in number). The head of these families are primarily divorced women (49.1% of the families, over doubled in number these ten years); the percentage of unmarried mothers has increased to the highest ever (5.3% of the families), also, while, the proportion of widows has declined (36.1% of the families). The increased proportion of divorced lone mothers reflects the substantial increase in the number of divorces. And it would be wrong to view single-parent families as a homogeneous group, and the circumstances or causes through which parents and children constitute a single-parent family can have an important impact on their experiences of life in single-parent. The median age of lone mothers was 41.5
years of age.

The average numbers of the children under 20 years of age per family are 1.61. Over 14% of lone mothers have the minor age children. About 84% of lone mothers live by labour. Overwhelmingly, most people's concern over single-parent families is focused on the problems of families headed by women. The heart of the problems is the fact that the incomes of single-parent families headed by women are less half of the incomes (45%) of two-parent families and such families as divorced-head and unmarried-head are much lower than those of widowed-head. Or to put it another way, just 10% of the divorced mothers were paid for support of children by ex-husbands and evidences show that the majority of men do not continue to provide support to their ex-wives and children.

Most of divorcees with children frequently in the past lived with some relatives when they were hard to maintain separate households. With the changes in social attitudes most of divorced women are likely to work for the reason why they can't get enough money from their husbands or they receive little welfare support that allows them to live alone. But the other side of this situation brings about to be hard to access to their labour and to manage comprehensive housework. Although the rate of divorcees remarrying is very high in Western Societies, most of lone mothers in Japan are not very often remarried, even if they want to remarry.

Male-head family

There has been an increase in the number of divorced father families, but the actual proportion as well as percentage of fathers to be given custody have been lessened since the midst 1960s. Much more attention has to be directed toward the single-father families in recent days, however, where men are found to suffer some of the same problems as single mothers. Most of the single-fathers with children in the past Japan lived in extended families. Only very small proportion of single fathers maintained separate households.

Because they could get remarry easier in the past than that today, and their problems were invisible when they were comprised in extended families to get some help or care for children. When the grandmo-
ther and maiden aunt lived with the family they could care for the children and managed household tasks while the single father worked. But now, the disappearance from the many homes of the grandmother and maiden aunt has much contributed to come appear the single father head family visible and to the increased larger demand for home adaptation and convenience for foods.

Among the 167,300 single father families (in 1983), 69% were the divorced, while the rate of bereaved as 40%. Almost 90% of lone fathers work. The median age of lone fathers was 43.2 years of age which is 1.7 years higher than that of lone mothers. The average numbers of the children under 20 years per family are 1.54 and with smaller sized families than lone mothers. The income of lone fathers is 1.5 times of lone mothers and as a third of two parent families. Their notable problems are, the need for financial help or support to get daily care, childrearing and household tasks, conflicts in loyalty between job and family, problems of loneliness, fear of prejudice from other people, and general overload. The role of the single father seems deviant and is not yet institutionalized in the society, nor are men as likely to look for help, support or advice outside family.

3. Marriage

Marriage is still very popular among Japanese people. In Japan, 98% of people get married at least one time by their age of 50. However, the general trend of marriage has shifted along with many changes in sociocultural or economical factors in recent Japan. In general, there is a very strong correlation between the rising median age of marriage and higher educational attainment level especially with respect women. However, there is rather strong social pressure to marry among the youth and not to remain single. Remaining single for both sexes until the middle aged period is not welcomed and there are still some disadvantages, prejudices and discriminations in occupational and social life.

For last years, the younger females marry around 25 years or at the latest by 30 years old, and the younger generation of males at the latest by the mid 30s. Marriage pattern and sexual behavior
are still today strongly influenced by implicit social moralistic attitudes and social agreements. Thus, premarital living together or cohabitation without marry and illegitimacy are not welcomed or frowned upon until the couple marries sooner or later.

In general, marriage is a legal one which starts from the time of registration of the marriage to a registrar in the authorities. After World War II, the average age at marriage has been gradually increasing in Japan. Japanese marriage rates are among the highest in the world, and most people are married at least one time in their life (only 1% with never married).

There has been in the middle-class Japanese family less belief in marriage being a relationship of togetherness, marital satisfaction and durability have been next to child rearing, family lineage functions and whole household management for stability. But in accordance with the shift to the nuclear or conjugal family, its companionship and partnership have gradually become a more important concern.

The patterns of age at first marriage especially for women have gone up for many years and have promptly risen in recent. It increased from 26.1 to 27.9 years for males and from 22.9 to 25.3 years for females between 1947-1981. The differences of the ages of spouses have steadily diminished because of the considerable increase of ages at marriage for females. It shifted from 3.2 years in 1947 to 2.6 years in 1981. In 1979, the age group in which occurred the most frequency of married is in the 25-29 years for males and 20-24 years for females. Most males (95%) are married by 35 years of age and most women (91.9%) by 30 years of age. There seemed to be an implicitly established social agreement to be married within short and intensive period and typical age of marriage especially for females up to recent in Japan. For instance, up to early 1977, nearly half of all women are married within 20-24 years of age and 36.6% within 25-29 years of age. This means that about 88.8% of the first marriage for females was concentrated within the 20-29 years age group, whereas 53% of the first marriage for males was 25-29 years, and most was being married by 35 years. However, since the last decade there has been a trend towards gradual increasing the ratio of unmarried women within 20-24
years of age from 69.2% in 1975, to 77.7% in 1980 and 81.1% in 1985. The upward trend in the average age at marriage or towards later marriage, and the decrease in the difference of ages of spouses are very outstanding and they have been due to the high education for advancing emancipation of the women in society. A lot of highly educated women work only for a couple of years from after college until marriage. They want also to do much for themselves within this short unmarried period, because after getting married or from the time of the first child bearing most of women want to stay intensively at home together with the children as a just housewife.

Therefore, quite a few married women, especially in nuclear families in the working middle class in the city, want to be good mothers without works outside home. Besides, in Japan today, there are some other undesirable factors to make younger mothers apt to confine to the family households with respect to the lots of limitations in labour market and still bad social security system for child care. With respect to women labour forces, in 1955, almost 70% of employed women were at below 30 years and 65% were unmarried. However, the average age of working women increaseed from 25.4 in 1954 to 35.0 in 1982.

One in three households, the wife, mostly as a part-time worker, works outside home for the sake of supporting household finance, whose average amount of earnings is one-fourth of household income.

4. Divorce

Traditionally, Japanese divorce was as male dominated as marriage itself. The right of divorce was mainly given to the husband. There common histrical grounds used by the male in divorcing his wife were "barrenness", lack of adaptation to the family customs or being disagreeable to the parents and other kins, and aduity. In general, if the wife did not bear children (as the successor of the stem family) the fault was assumed to be hers. The great value was attached to the continuity of the family line through offspring especially the first born son, the failure to reproduce was viewed with great concern.

Therefore, the husband who was often pressured by his parents or kin networks which often had the initiative to divorce his wife and get
a new one. As a rule, most divorced mothers were not given custody of the child, so their children had to stay with fathers.

In Japanese patriarchal and patrilineal society, the double standard of sexual morality operated strictly around adultery. The husband was usually tolerated and not punished for adultery or concubinage, but the wife was often subject to not only a strict moralistic criticism but also to criminal stigma, and this often took the form of divorce. Around the time of the mid-stage of the Meiji era (from 1882 to 1898) the divorce rate per 1,000 population was on average 2.82. In 1883, the divorce rate was 3.34 and it hit an all-time peak. It then, after the Civil Code enacted in 1898, declined steadily until the right before World War II when the lowest divorce rate set a record of 0.63. The divorce rate right after World War II was 1.00 at a peak followed by a gradual fall in the early 1960s. Since the mid 1960s the rates of first marriages ending in divorce have turned to upward trend until mid 1970s, the high divorce rate among the younger age group in 20 years has contributed to this trend.

The trend in divorce in the before World War II provided a sharp contrast with divorce in Japan today, where a marriage is absolutely terminated by both spouses notifying the registrar of their agreement on their marital disruption, of which proportion is about 90% of all divorces. A rapid increase in the number of divorces has been particularly marked very recent Japan. In 1983, there were 178,000 divorces and annulments, which was 14,000 more numbers than that of in 1982, the largest numbers in the history and almost more than double that of in 1968. Besides, one of the most notable trends in divorce very recent in Japan is the increasing number of divorces in middle aged at over 40 years age and couples after a long duration of marriage. One in three divorced husbands and one in four divorced wives in 1983 were in middle aged at over 40 years. Divorce rates had generally been peak at the age of 20s and for below 20. The proportion of first marriages ending in divorce for men at age 20s has decreased from 48.1% in 1950, to 38.1% in 1975 and to 24.7% in 1980. The proportion of first marriage ending in divorce for women at age 20s has also decreased from 61.7% in 1950, to 52.2% in 1975 and to 37.6% in 1980. However,
in recent years there has been an rapid upswing in the proportion of divorces with involved children and with years duration of marriage. The proportion of divorces for couples who had been married for 15 years or more, has rapidly increased from 12.7% in 1975, to 17.7% in 1980 and to 21.5% in 1982.

In Japan, traditionally, it has said that the child is the pledge of affection between husband and wife, while today the child is not always viewed as such. It seems no doubt that the process as well as after divorce have traumatic effects on the children of a divorcing parents, and there is considerable debate about whether parents divorce, or should stay together for the sake of the children. Only quantitative studies are really impossible to get answer this question, although a few indication on the number of children involved in divorce can be collected from fewer official statistics.

The proportion of divorces involving children at age below 20 has steadily increased from 57.3% in 1950, to 67.6% in 1980, to 68.8% in 1981, to 69.4% in 1982 and to 70% in 1983. In 1983 about 7 out of ten divorces involved couples with children. The total number of children involved in parents' divorces has risen in recent years, from about 80,000 in 1950 to 202,000 in 1982, but the average number of children per divorcing couples has fallen slightly, reflecting the increasing number of couples having one or two children, and the decline in the number with three or more children. It seems to be undoubted that the presence of children is not necessarily a deterrent to divorce, although lots of couples do still stay together "for the sake of the children" and as a result some unpleasant or unhappy marriages are not terminated until after the children grow up. The fact means that there would be a rise in divorce rates at longer durations of marriage and at middle-aged. It seems probable that when couples avoid the divorce for the sake of the children, or for other reasons, they wouldn't be any more try really get a divorce when the time of postponement ends. This may be because they have worked out their serious problems or it may be that after kept enduring their marriage until the children grew up, many get to a point of accommodation where they no longer need get divorce. Like these attitudes had been widely prevailed for
long years in Japanese society mostly through the wives' submission to their bitter marriage.

In most Western societies, as a rule, in the great majority of divorce cases which involve minor children, the mother is given custody. In Japan, the percentage of parental authority or custody was higher with respect to fathers than to mothers up until around 1960s, because there was, in patrilineal or man-dominated society, the notion that the children were happier and of greater socio-economical advantages to stay with the father than with mother, who had no ability to become self-supporting. But this notion has the gradually changed, and the percentage of custody to be given to the mothers has increased to almost 70% in 1983. In addition, there have been more and more mothers who initiated the action for divorce or offered to get divorce. However, in the majority of divorces in Japan, the poorer the family with serious problems the more likely the parents are to be divorced. Divorce might be both a great cause and an serious effect of poverty especially upon female-head single parent family.

Alimony and child support generally refer to the continued support of them by the husband or father after divorce. The amount of alimony have to be determined by the standard of living that existed during the marriage, but usually the divorced mothers actually receive very small amount of alimony and little payments for the support of the children from their ex-husbands.

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