

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*The Modern Japanese Family System:
Unique or Universal?*

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Introduction

Before the Second World War Japan declared itself a family state and most Japanese people believed that the family state was unique to Japan. This chapter, however, takes the view that all nation states are family states, with the modern family as their basic unit. It is for this reason that modern Japan was forced to invent its own traditions of family state, centred around the imperial family.

It is important to compare the various forms of the modern family in all nations. The model of the modern family has been influenced more by the nation state than by the developmental level of capitalism. As power relations among nation states altered the internal state structure, modern family models changed. This chapter traces historical change in models of the family and of the physical structures that contained it. The Japanese family has been based on a dual structure made up of the *ie* (household) and *katei* (family) institutions. Through historical analysis of family models, Japanese society deserves cross-cultural comparison. The concept of *ie* and its identity within the Japanese version of the modern family has been discussed by Ueno Chizuko in the previous chapter.

Ie/katei Institutions

The *ie* institution has been regarded as that family system which is distinctive to Japan. The word itself means literally 'house'. After the Second World War the *ie* was regarded as a relic of the feudal patriarchal family system headed by a father and succeeded by his eldest son, and was therefore abolished by the post-war Japanese

Constitution. The *katei*, on the other hand, was regarded as a Japanese equivalent to the English word 'home', based on the marital relationship. Thus, the term *ie* was assumed to refer to a feudalistic kind of family, while *katei* meant a modern family. *Katei* became popular and was widely in use in the process of constructing a modern state in Japan.

Both were either neologisms or at least commonly used words after the Meiji Revolution and they were used either in opposition or as complementary terms. The Meiji civil code (1898) established the core of the *ie* institution, granting the head of the household (the patriarch) the right to control family members and the duty to worship ancestors, and establishing the principle of succession by the eldest son.

The *ie* was the basic unit of the nation state and the state was regarded as a higher organisation above the *ie*. The fact that Japan was a late participant in the nation-state system forced the government to form an absolute state system headed by the emperor. The Imperial Rescript on Education (1890) represented the nation as an enlarged form of family. The concept of *ie* referred not only to a contemporary household but incorporated all the members on a family registration in the *hoseki* (household register).

The word *katei* (literally 'house-garden') was known in ancient Japan, and has Chinese roots. It became widely used in periodicals and novels in the 1880s, and entered into mass usage as a term contrasting with *ie* from the 1920s. *Katei* referred to the nuclear family, while the emphasis in *ie* was on ancestor worship and parent-children relations. The two words did not stand in a simple relationship of contradiction but comprised a dual structure, constituting in sum the abstract framework for the Japanese version of the modern family.

Magazines which included the word *katei* in their title came into circulation from the late nineteenth century. These journals emphasised the construction of *katei* based on the marital relationship, and therefore sharply different from the *ie*. The expected readers of these enlightening journals were urban male intellectuals and their wives, who were high school graduates. Yet, the number of housewives reading these journals who actually did housekeeping was very small. The term *katei* became truly popular after women's commercial magazines had attracted a mass readership. *Shufunotomo* (The Housewife's Friend) defined *katei* as a consumption unit separated from production, and recommended household book-keeping and practical child-rearing. The purpose was to provide housewives with an opportunity to reflect on their daily life in order to facilitate practical house management. As these magazines became popular, the opposition between *katei* and *ie* gradually became less clear. One of the most heated issues discussed

in these magazines was the conflict between a wife and her in-laws, especially her mother-in-law, which came into being precisely because of the dual family structure under which wives were forced to give service not only to the *katei* but also to the *ie*.

The Industrial Revolution brought a flow of youth into the cities as labourers. The majority of those from farming areas were not eldest sons, but second or third sons who belonged to the *ie* merely by family registration. They frequently married in cities and remained there. This fact indicated that a dual family system operated: those who were still on the same family registration but who, in practice, formed separate nuclear families – *katei* – in the cities. The foundation of these urban new families was so fragile that when they encountered recession and war they went back to their home town, seeking assistance from their *ie*. Soldiers returning from wars were also accepted by the *ie*.

The dual structure of the modern family was the strategy of the Meiji government for forcing entry into the modern world-system of nation states as a latecomer and of catching up in the world-wide capitalist competition: the rule of eldest-son-inheritance prevented the dispersal of capital; second and third sons could become factory or white-collar workers between or within a dual family system in which they remained on the *ie* register but actually ran urban *katei*; daughters of poor families were sold by their families as cheap labour to the factories; when urban *katei* were crushed by depression or war, members could return to their village *ie*, minimising state welfare provisions.

From *Iroribata* Home to *Chanoma* Home

Ie and *katei* signify abstract containers of the modern Japanese family. But houses as the concrete containers of the modern family have also changed greatly. After the Meiji Revolution there were two types of house in farming areas. A few people lived in large and comfortable houses with *iroribata* (traditional open fire-place) hearths. In such houses the patriarch held sovereign power and was entrusted with the worship of the ancestors. (To have been born in such a house a person would today need to be about eighty years old.) The majority, however, lived in shanties called *koya*, which originally meant a space designed exclusively for sleeping. The poor who lived in *koya* went to cities to work and settled in urban *koya*, equivalent to communal lodging (or doss) houses and known as *kishukusha*, *naya* or *nagaya*. A survey in 1899 showed that membership of these lodging houses was very fluid; regular marriages were few and commonly did not last long; rooms were tiny, with two or three families to a four- or six-tatami mat space, with only one window (or none) and a communal bathroom.¹

Surveys conducted up to the time of the great Kantō earthquake of 1923 showed little change in these conditions; the beginnings of indoor kitchens and toilets were noted, but families had grown in size, space was commonly restricted to one person to a tatami mat, and there were few windows. Rent was being paid monthly rather than daily.² The housing type changed greatly after the 1923 earthquake, when many houses were destroyed. The number of housing units (*heya*) in the communal lodging houses decreased from twenty to eight, or even two. A number of separate shanties became available for rent.

During the Taisho period (1912–1926), a new-style urban house with a *chanoma* (Japanese-style dining room) was introduced. An ideal middle-class family, consisting of husband and wife, two children and a housemaid, lived in such a house. The layout was based on demarcation providing public space for maids and guests and private space for the family members. Guests were restricted to public space. The lifestyle where families used to kneel and sleep on the floor changed to one where they sat on chairs and slept in beds. This model represented the core of a housing plan for those who lived on monthly salaries and put emphasis on their family life as *katei*. The *chanoma* was the venue for materialising the ideal family of the *katei*.

The difference between *ie* and *katei* was clearly represented in their housing layout. At a house with *iroribata* (*ie*), seating order was hierarchical, with the father-patriarch at the head, and each member having his or her individual small meal place. By contrast, at a house with a *chanoma* a single round table provided the locus for meals for all the household, representing symbolic equality among the members. However, the seat for the father was clearly designated in front of the family altar with a photo of the emperor. A clock regulating universal time and a radio conveying world information were placed near his seat. These symbols associated a *chanoma* with ancestors and the state beyond this nuclear family.

The common feature linking a house with an open hearth *iroribata* (*ie*) and that with a *chanoma* (*katei*) was the patriarchal authority and power which controlled space in both.

From *Chanoma* House to Western-style House

The new Constitution and revised Civil Family Code (1947) abolished the *ie* institution, but the family registration and a family name remained in use. A married couple was required to register the surname either of the husband or wife. Where the couple took the wife's family name, the household was registered as headed by the wife. In this sense, family registration demarcated the family members and

governed individuals as a corporate entity. The pre-war dual family structure which had consisted of *ie* and *katei* institutions was altered, but the end of the *ie* did not mean the complete disappearance of *ie* elements, some of which were transferred to the *katei*.

After the Second World War there was an immense housing shortage and people craved to have their own houses. They dreamed of realising an ideal *katei* by possessing their own house. The market for books on housing grew. The architect, Hamaguchi Miho, advocated a relocation and redesign of the kitchen, which had long been despised as a work place for housemaids and was traditionally located below the living room. She suggested that the kitchen should be put on the same level as the *chanoma* and be situated in the south, facing the sun. She foresaw that renovation of the kitchen would lead to the improvement in the status of women.³

On the day on which the Commander-in-Chief of the Occupation Forces, General MacArthur, departed from Japan, the American cartoon 'Blondie' which had introduced modern American family living to Japanese readers was replaced in the *Asahi* by 'Sazae-san', whose heroine was a full-time housewife who lived with her husband, a son, and her siblings at her parents' place. The popularity of this comic revealed that the *chanoma*-type house was no longer governed by a patriarch, but rather was centred on a woman – the housewife.

The partition between the kitchen and the *chanoma* was also removed to make a Western-style living room for the family and guests. A studio for the father was also incorporated into this unique living room as the husband/father worked outside and spent little time at home. A house with this living room was obviously under the control of women. But, at that same time, as husbands began to feel a sense of alienation in these 'woman houses' (*onna no ie*), and male architects referred disparagingly to trend-chasing and over-decoration, housewives began to feel enclosed and isolated in their domestic space.

From Urban Development Corporation Flats (1950s) to One-Room Studios (1975–)

In the 1950s the Japanese government emphasised housing problems. It set up the Housing Loan Corporation in 1951 and provided financial assistance for building houses for the middle class. It also built a lot of public apartments (*kōdan jūtaku*) to cope with the housing shortage. By constructing standardised housing, it eventually regulated the size of the family and instituted a unique lifestyle.

The history of these public apartments may be divided into three periods. The first (1955–1964) was one of probation. All public

apartments were made of concrete, with a dining-kitchen facing south, and an inside bathroom. These modern public apartments were regarded as progressive compared with wooden houses without a bathroom. Residents were eager to purchase newly introduced electric appliances, for example, washing machines, vacuum cleaners and fridges.⁴ The public apartment units abolished the feudalistic features of the *ie*, yet at the same time they confined the size of the family to a nuclear family due to the absence of a guest room for grandparents. Shortage of space also restricted the number of children.

In the second phase (1965–1974), the emphasis was on the quality of the apartments and this was supported by rapid economic growth. A living room was introduced and the popular size of each unit became '3LDK' – a housing unit with three bedrooms and one space used for living, dining and cooking (kitchen).

In the third phase (1975 onwards), people lost interest in standardised public apartment units because they did not meet with the diversity of their needs. The apartment became more luxurious and several types of units, including even 5 or 6 LDK, suitable for extended families or the disabled, became available.

Looking at the history of public apartments, 1975 appears to be a milestone in terms of Japanese families and their housing. From this year onward, *katei* and its housing model started to go hand-in-hand. The most popular size, 3LDK, was suitable for a nuclear family with one or two children. Eligibility was restricted to those with a certain amount of income. Temporary foreigners, single families and bachelors, who did not fit the image of *katei*, were all excluded from these public flats. 3LDK became an appropriate residence for only a good *katei*.

Due to the restricted space in public apartment units, wedding ceremonies, births and funerals were undertaken outside the residence. This lifestyle also penetrated into Japanese society through the private real estate industry.

However, immediately after the 3LDK units became prevalent, a new type of residence, the *wan rīmu manshon* or one-room studio, came into existence. These rooms were initially meant for university students who had been brought up in a house with a Western-style living room and had come to the city for higher education. Financed by their parents, they took up residence in these single studios. After graduation they frequently started living in an apartment provided by the company that employed them. Husbands who commuted long distances also found it convenient to take up temporary residence in such a unit. The wealthy, and those who had given up buying a house in a city because

of rising land prices, also started to buy second homes (*bessō*) in rural areas.

In the 1970s housewives started to work part-time to compensate for their tight house budget. The burden of education costs for their children and high housing rent brought them into the labour market.

The 3LDK and the house with a Western-style living room marked the completion of the modern Japanese family, and has been followed by a further change in the form of the modern family. Thereafter, not only the husband but also the wife spent little time at home. In a house with a Western-style living room, each member started living in his or her own room as if they were living in one-room studios in a city. Therefore, the government started introducing a new family policy to strengthen the bonds of the *katei*. The introduction of the government family policy has had a long history, but what was new this time was that it was the first time the government had followed the people in presenting an ideal model for their family and housing.

Conclusions

Heya, meaning 'a room', was long used as a pejorative word.⁵ The maid's room, for example, was clearly demarcated to show her lower status within the family. The *ie*, where a patriarch controlled the whole space, was a container for all the family members, and there was no single space reserved for any individual member except the head of the household. Yet the meaning of *heya* has been transformed recently. 'One-room studio' has a neutral connotation in terms of function, compared with the masculine *iroribata*-type or *chanoma*-type house, or with the feminine house with its Western-style living room. Magazines began to appear with articles headed by titles such as 'My Room' or 'Beautiful Room'. Changes in the model of the modern Japanese family have been profound, and these changes were characterised by the rapidity and thoroughness with which they spread through the society as the people were mobilised through school education, print, radio and electronic media.

Now we can foresee a new dual family structure comprising a house with a Western-style living room and one-room studio. University students who reside in one-room studios refer to their parents' houses as *jikka*, a term traditionally used by a woman after marriage to refer to her parents' house. These students regard their parents' house as a 'real house', while their studio is a temporary residence. If this is correct, it reveals the dual family structure continuing in this modern era. Furthermore, the term *katei* recently seems to have been given a new meaning as representing an ideal family life, although the reality

no longer correlates with the ideal. The word *katei* is essentially a bureaucratic tool, but one with a powerful normative value.

At the same time that Joan Scott was stressing the political content of the concepts of gender, and Lynn Hunt was revealing the workings of 'family romance' in the images and rituals of the world's first modern revolution,⁶ we in Japan were attempting to rewrite the history of everyday life, and discovering that the pre-war imperial house had subtly modulated within a dual system of *ie* and *katei*, functioning not only through rituals of ancestor worship and the creation of a myth of an eternal blood line, but through images of imperial domestic life displayed in the pages of glossy, new, women's magazines. When put in comparative perspective, the standard schema of pre-war Japanese society based on a unique 'emperor-system family state' has to be reversed. The Japanese system was not in the least peculiar; all modern states have been 'family states'. That is precisely why modern Japan was pressed to invent its own traditions of family state centred on its imperial house.

A further new trend is foreshadowed. Individuals who reside in a *heya* seek new forms of co-habitation. The *shiruba* housing plan (housing plan for seniors) illustrates one new style of co-habitation. Female writers and cartoonists, such as Tomioka Taeko, began to write about a form of living where co-habitation would not be limited to conjugal or blood ties, but where an individual could pursue the maximum achievement of life's objectives.⁷ The male household and the female household were both receptacles for families for society, where the family was the basic unit of the nation state, but in experimental or futuristic novels we can see a groping towards a family of the future (and the housing in which it will live). The neutral *heya* rooms which once had been scattered would be gathered into places which would serve as supports for the fulfilment of the individual, including a relevance not only for how to live but also how to die, rather than as receptacles of the family for society.

Notes

- 1 Yokoyama Gennosuke, *Nihon no kasō shakai* (Japan's Low Society), 1899, Tokyo, Iwanami bunko edn, 1949, p. 57.
- 2 Shakai fukushi chōsa kenkyūkai (ed.), *Senzen Nihon shakai jigyōchōsa shiryō shūsei* (Collected Materials of Investigation into Pre-war Japanese Social Enterprises), 3 vols, Tokyo, Keisō Shobō, 1989.
- 3 Hamaguchi Miho, *Nihon jūtaku no hōkensei* (The Feudal Quality of Japanese Housing), Tokyo, Sogami Shobō, 1949.

- 4 *Nihon jūtaku kōdanshi* (*History of the Japan Housing Corporation*), Tokyo, Nihon Jutaku Kodan, 1981.
- 5 See, for example, Yanagida Kunio's *Meiji Taishōshi sesōhen* (*Meiji and Taisho History from the Perspective of Social Change*), Tokyo, Nihon Jutaku Kodan, 1931.
- 6 See Joan W. Scott and Judith Butler (eds), *Feminists Theorize the Political*, New York, Routledge, 1992, and Lynn Avery Hunt (ed.), *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the origins of the modern*, New York, Zone Books, 1993, and by the same author, *Eroticism and the Body Politic*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.
- 7 See Nishikawa Yūko, 'Three kinds of *ie* houses in modern Japanese literature', *Intercultural Communication Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, Fall 1991.

PART FIVE

Culture and Ideology