

Comments on Papers on the "Logic of Female Succession"

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COMMENTS ON PAPERS ON THE “LOGIC OF FEMALE SUCCESSION”

Tamara K. Hareven

Congratulations to Emiko Ochiai for organizing such an interesting conference. I wish I could be here to see old friends and meet new ones.

This rich assortment of papers on a very important and much neglected topic provides a great array of patterns of “female succession” in Europe and Asia, as well as one paper on North America. In this commentary it is very difficult to do justice to all of the themes in the papers. I am only able, therefore, to offer some general reflections: The papers provide a great range of patterns of female succession, from complete matrilineal patterns in Kerala to strict patrilinearity in China, including the co-existence of various “mixes” in Thailand, and regional variations in Japan. Similarly, on the European side, the papers present considerable variations among countries, within countries between regions and within regions.

In some of the papers, female succession means inheritance of property; in other cases, it means succession to household headship; and in still other cases, it means both. There are, of course, significant theoretical and empirical differences between inheriting property and becoming a household head. Moreover as Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux, Marie-Pierre Arrizabalaga, Martin Dribe and Christer Lundh, and Peter Baskerville point out, respectively, household headship and/or inheritance of property have different meanings under different circumstances in terms of how women inheritors or female household heads can dispose of the property or appoint their own heirs.

As befitting an historical conference, many of the papers discuss legal, social and economic changes over time and within specific time periods as explanations for different patterns of succession and inheritance, and for historical changes in these patterns.

The most interesting patterns are those citing legal changes, such as the Code Civil in France, legal changes in Thailand and the new inheritance laws in Canada. What emerges as particularly significant is the contrast between the prescriptions of new laws and people’s perseverance in following traditional customs governing family practices. These are excellent examples of human agency at work. Several of the papers, for example by Mary Louise Nagata, by Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux and by Dribe and Lundh emphasize the importance of family strategies.

Another common theme in the papers, particularly in those on Asia and the Pyrenees, is that women were given succession to household headship in order to preserve the lineage, or on a more modest scale, to preserve continuity in the family.

MAIN THEMES DISCUSSED

1. Comparisons across cultures: The national and cultural diversity of these papers provide a great opportunity for comparisons. Perhaps there is time in this meeting to pursue such a comparative discussion. In doing so, one must keep in mind, though, that what may appear similar on the surface is not the same underneath. Thus, for example, as Li Zhuo points out that the case of bringing a *muko* into the household, in China, had a very different function and status than a *muko* in Japan. And why is it that the pattern of female succession was so different in Thailand? Why did social change in Korea bring forth more flexible patterns, while it rendered them more rigid in Thailand in the 20th Century? In terms of comparisons within the SAME country, it would be helpful if Nagata and Jun Yamamoto compared their findings on urban artisans in Kyoto with a Tohoku village. How different was the pattern of *ane katoku* among urban artisans and merchants from that in rural society? Why was *ane katoku* not widespread in other Japanese villages with similar economic circumstances?

The comparison between the Baronees of the Pyrenees and the Basque country which Fauve-Chamoux presents is also of great significance, as is Arrizabalaga's discussions of differences among villages in the Basque country. What is the explanation for these differences?

2. Family strategies: As I mentioned above, family strategies appear as an important explanation for the function of female succession in several papers. For example: The recurring theme is that an heiress would bring in a husband, who would make possible the continuation of the family line. The persistent question, though, is one that we have asked repeatedly in the methodological discussion about family strategies: Whose strategies are they? Who has actually made these decisions about succession? As Arrizabalaga pointed out, Basque heads of households had very little power over the appointment of a successor. So, instead, they controlled the timing of marriage of potential successors. This is a pattern that Fauve-Chamoux also pointed out on several occasions for the Pyrenees. Dribe and Lundh also briefly mention family strategies as an explanation for the great variety of inheritance patterns in Scania, despite the overall pattern of primogenitor but those need to be more detailed.

3. Demographic factors: The absence of demographic explanations is striking. Only one paper mentions the age gap between older heads of households and their heirs as an important factor in determining succession, and one paper mentions indirectly the timing of marriage. Are other demographic factors such as life expectancy of household heads, household or family composition, changes in age configurations of the family of any significance?

4. Cultural factors: The role of culture also requires a systematic examination. In addition to the impact of Confucianism mentioned in some of the papers, cultural

variables and explanations need to be spelled out. For example, Arrizabalaga needs to spell out what she means by family culture and by culture in general. The paper by Ravindran Gopinath makes contradictory statements in the conclusion: The author criticizes the anthropologists for failure to provide an explanation for Nayar marriage patterns, but the author himself returns to socio-economic explanations and does not attempt to provide cultural explanations.

5. Women's equality: A topic such as women's succession could provide temptation to interpret or misinterpret some of these patterns of succession as evidence of women's equality. The issue of equality could, however, become a trap. Baskerville in his paper rejects the feminist idealization of women's equality in Canada, even though women at the turn of the 19th century in Canada may have experienced greater equality than their Korean counterparts. Similarly, Yamamoto rejects the theory of equality as an explanation for ane katoku. What emerges from most of these papers is that when women succeeded to household headship, it was either as a result of economic need, male out-migrations or as a strategy to continue the line. In this context, perhaps Fauve-Chamoux could explain what she means by "power" that female household heads held in the Pyrenees. Of course, power can involve symmetrical rather than egalitarian relationships. Hiroko Hashimoto's paper also suggests that the empowerment of women in Thailand was for their protection rather than for equality.

In conclusion, this very interesting collection of papers opens many new avenues for continued explorations. I wish I could be present for the discussions.