

Changing Family Background for Children in Contemporary Japan*

Kiyomi Morioka

Introduction

It is my great pleasure and honor to be invited to discuss some salient aspects of the contemporary Japanese family at this significant workshop. The family as a micro-environment for children may be discussed from various angles. Since I am a sociologist, I am going to discuss it from a sociological and social-psychological standpoint this morning. I will review major aspects of the changing family background for children in contemporary Japan, with a special reference to the concept of 'mother' and the image of 'father.'

The Japanese Concept of 'Mother' as a Latent Cultural Element

An actual mode of interaction between a mother and her child is fundamentally directed by the concept of 'mother' as they hold and other members of the society share. Professor Yosiaki

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Yamamura at St. Paul's University, Tokyo, tried to elucidate the Japanese concept of 'mother' by examining data from different sources, including a TV drama entitled 'Mom' or *Okāsan* in Japanese, a radio program of 'Talking about My Mother,' school textbooks used in compulsory education, and interviews with juvenile delinquents. According to his findings, the concept contains such images as one who is constantly overloaded with heavy chores but still finds her life worth living because of children, one who protects and supports her children by any means, one to whom children owe so much that they cannot remember her without a sense of remorse and compunction, and one as a source of motivation and emotional responsiveness [Yamamura 1983: 47-60].

Japanese children, at very young ages, establish an intense emotional relation with their mother, and get an original experience of unconditional acceptance and affectionate understanding from the relation. Thus, they learn the Japanese concept of 'mother.' The mother in turn depends on her children emotionally. This interdependence between a mother and children is well described by the term *amae* in the sense as developed by Dr. Takeo Doi [Doi 1971]. *Amae* has little in common with affection based on mutual recognition and respect of others' personal integrity.

The Japanese concept of 'mother' was molded in the environment where every family member had to work very hard because of extremely low economic productivity, and where the household form was a stem family type rather than a nuclear family form. A stem family household was generally composed of parents, a married son and his wife with their children, and frequently unmarried sons and daughters as well. The household headship was transferred from father to the eldest son who remained at his natal household even after marriage. Under the stem family system in prewar Japan, marriage was virilocal (patrilocal). In other words, marriage did not mean for a young woman a

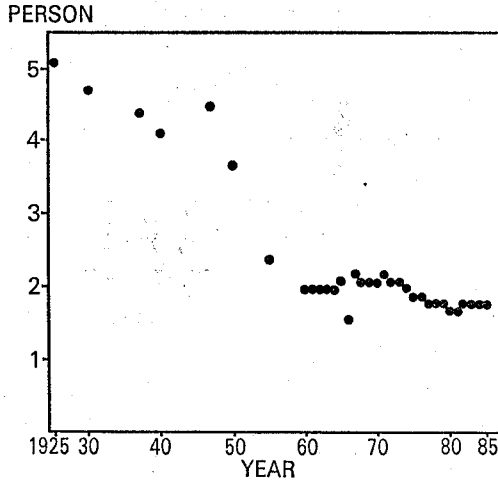
new household to be established with her husband. Instead, it meant for her an entry into an existing household as a daughter-in-law of the household head. She had to work from early in the morning till late in the evening for the household enterprise, taking upon herself various domestic tasks.

She was under the supervision of her mother-in-law, both at work and at rest, and could not expect more than sympathetic care from her husband. Very often, she was surrounded by censoring eyes of her sisters-in-law, mostly unmarried and remaining at their parents' household. Her little children were usually taken care of by their grandma during daytime so that the young mother could keep on laboring intensive work. Under this situation, young mothers were all in distress surrounded by her husband's kin who were not always friendly to her, and overwhelmed by chores that demanded her intensive work. Children came to understand that their very existence helped their mother feel her life meaningful even under such miserable conditions. The children's recognition that their mother endured the miserable life in an effort to protect and support them, awoke in them a sense of immense indebtedness to mother and made them feel even remorseful to have troubled their mother so much.

Postwar Changes in Family Environment and Shifted Concept of 'Mother'

Notable postwar changes in the Japanese family environment include a rapid decline of birth rate (Figure 1), a household transformation from the stem family type to a nuclear one (Figure 2), a change in employment status of workers from self-employed to employed (Figure 3), a remarkable rise of the level of income and hence the standard of living (Figures 4 and 5), and the reform of the school educational system which has promoted the attainment of higher level of education (Figure 6). Let me discuss each of these postwar changes in this order.

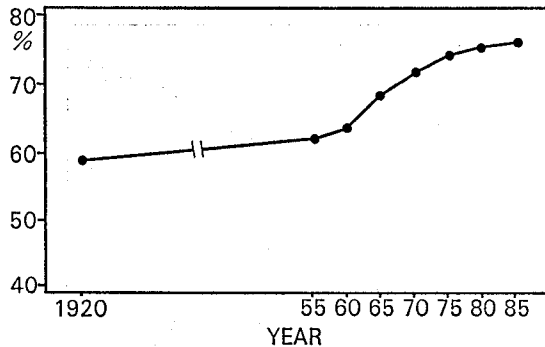
Fig. 1 Shifts of Crude Reproduction Rates
(Japan, 1925-85)



Source : Institute of Population Problems, Ministry of Health and Welfare, *Latest Demographic Statistics 1986*, Research Series, No. 248 (March 1987), p. 42.

Figure 1 shows a rapid decline of the crude reproduction rates of a Japanese woman from 4 or 5 children in the prewar period to a little over 2 in the postwar years, and to the latest figure of a little less than 2. This suggests that a middle-aged couple today has only 2 children on the average, in a sharp contrast to an average of 5 in the prewar Japan. In prewar days when the life span for women was 64 years or less, a major part of their lifetime was spent in bringing up their children. However, they could not allocate sufficient time and energy to each one of her children because many mothers were busy engaged in a household enterprise; besides, they had to take care of two or more children at the same time. Small children were often left in the caretaking assistance of grandparents or older siblings. Today, mothers have only a limited number of children, born with a greater spacing, and therefore can afford an ample time to look after each of them.

Fig. 2 Rising Ratios of Nuclear Families
(Japan, 1920-85)



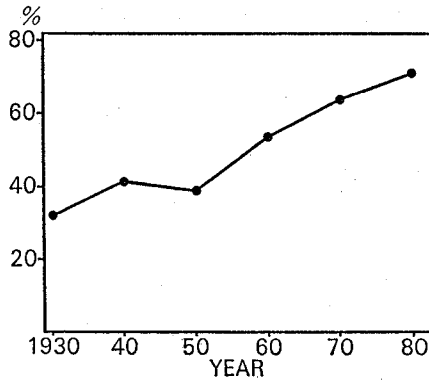
Source: *National Census Reports*.

Figure 2 demonstrates a shift of the major household type from a stem family to a nuclear one. A stem family household characteristic of the prewar Japan provided an environment where not only parents but also grandparents took part in child rearing and training. On the contrary, in a nuclear family today, child rearing and training has to be undertaken solely by parents. The ratios of nuclear family households increased sharply during the 20 years from 1960 (64%) to 1980 (75%), which coincide with the period of Japan's rapid economic growth.

Figure 3 shows that employed workers account for more than two-thirds of all gainfully employed workers today, in contrast to the prewar years when self-employed workers accounted for as many as two-thirds of the total work force. This shift has brought about an increasingly widespread spacial separation between home and working places, and has caused such trends as shortened time for father-child contact and further withdrawal of fathers from child rearing and training, thus leaving such responsibilities solely to their wives. In case the father-husband is a so-called 'company man' (*kaisha ningen* in Japanese), his wife has to fulfill virtually all the parental responsibilities.

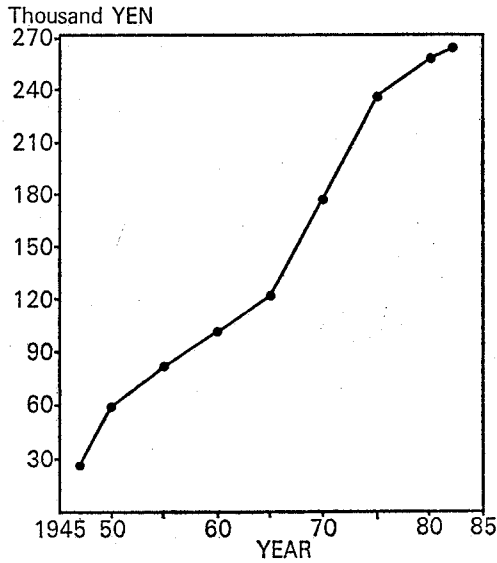
Figure 4 indicates a remarkable rise of per capita income

**Fig. 3 Rising Ratios of Employed Workers
(Japan, 1930-80)**



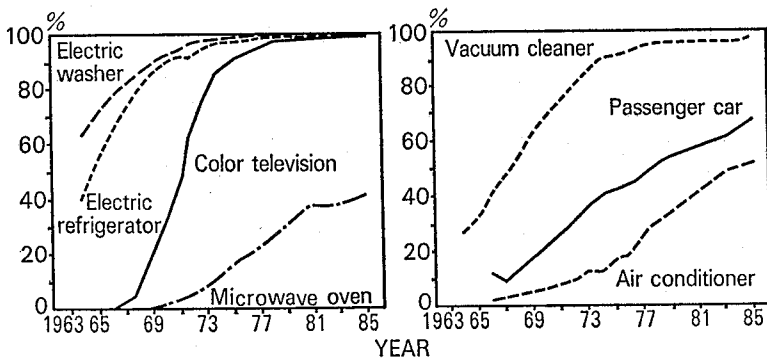
Source: *National Sensus Reports.*

**Fig. 4 Rising Levels of Per Capita Salary
(Japan, 1947-82)**



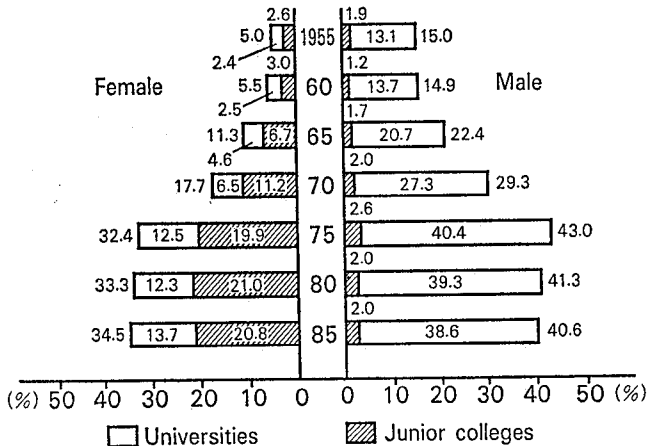
Source: Center for National Life (ed.), *Annual Statistics of National Life 1984*, p. 59.
(In terms of the price level of 1980)

Fig. 5 Rising Ratios of Households Equipped with Major Durable Consumer Goods (Japan, 1963-85)



Source: Center for National Life (ed.), *Annual Statistics of National Life 1986*.

Fig. 6 Rising Ratios of High School Graduates Who Entered Universities/Colleges (Japan, 1955-85)



Source: Ministry of Education, *Basic Surveys of Schools*.

in terms of the price level as of 1980. Figure 5 shows a subsequent rapid rise of the standard of living as substantiated by the rising ratios of households equipped with major durable consumer goods, which have relieved housewives from hard work and brought disposable time to them. Special attention is called

to such items as electric washer, electric refrigerator, microwave oven, vacuum cleaner and passenger car.

Figure 6 demonstrates the increasing quest for higher education in postwar Japan. Today, about 37% of high school graduates move on to receive a college education. The mass entry into colleges has reduced the social prestige of college education. College education itself is not so highly appreciated as before; only a first-grade college can guarantee its graduates a job at first-grade businesses or manufacturing companies. This is the present-day doctrine entertained commonly by mothers who push their children to attain an excellent school achievements so that they may succeed in an entrance exam to highly reputed schools. Figure 6 also indicates an improved level of education for women as compared with that for men, and suggests a notable enhancement of women's social status which used to be quite low and inferior to that of men.

These changes in the postwar Japanese family environment have promoted a new type of mother to emerge. She keeps an emotionally intense relation with her children and tries to do her best for their benefits just as the mother in prewar years did. The former mother did as much as possible for kids, both directly and indirectly, through hard work in making a living or through patient service to her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law. On the contrary, the present-day mother tries to do her best for children almost exclusively in direct ways. The markedly improved level of income has minimized the necessity for her to work outside of home for an additional income. The higher level of living, including the purchase of labor-saving electric machines, has reduced the manual labor in domestic work and enabled the housewife to attend to her children more intensively. In addition, the absence of parents-in-law in the same household and the smaller number of children have also prompted the mother to be more attentive to each child. In these ways, postwar changes in the family environment have witnessed the emergence of a

new type of mother who tends to be overprotective and over-attentive to children and expect them too much particularly in the area of school studies.

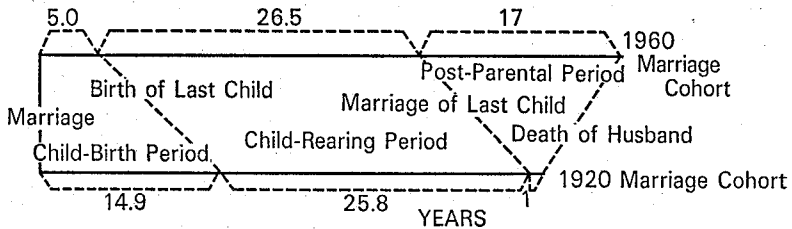
Even those who were brought up by a mother working hard and patiently enduring in the prewar period perceived her sometimes burdensome because they could not possibly do anything which might go against her desire and expectation. It is not unusual, therefore, for a Japanese child today to feel the direct intensive care by his mother as a serious intervention and an unbearable control over his spontaneous conduct. This is a general background of the domestic violence, violence by children toward parents, which became a popular topic reported in newspapers since around 1980. Behind an outburst of domestic violence lie both persistence and change of the Japanese concept of 'mother.'

Postwar Changes in Women's Life Cycle and Their Impacts on Mother-Child Relation

It is well known that the smaller number of children born to one woman and the prolonged longevity have caused a series of transformations in the life cycle of people in industrialized countries. The Americans, for example, experienced these shifts in the wake of the First World War. We, the Japanese, underwent the same changes after the Second World War.

Changes in the life cycle are more remarkable with regard to women than men, because women are the primary agent of child rearing. For the average Japanese women of the 1920 marriage cohort, as Figure 7 shows, the child-birth stage from marriage to the birth of the last child was nearly 15 years, the child-rearing stage from the birth of the last child to his marriage took nearly 26 years, and the post-parental stage from the marriage of the last child to the death of the husband was as short as only one year. The women of this cohort and probably

Fig. 7 Changes in Life Cycle Pattern (Japan)



Source: Institute of Population Problems, Ministry of Health and Welfare, *Marriage and Child-Birth of the Japanese*, The 8th Fertility Survey Report 1 (March 1983), p. 53.

of the 1920s and 30s cohorts spent virtually the whole period of their lives in child bearing and rearing as mother and then as grandmother, for the stem family system was the standard pattern of family formation of those days. Few of them enjoyed a post-parental stage of a considerable length.

In a striking contrast, the Japanese women of the 1960 marriage cohort have on the average the child-birth stage of 5 years, then the child-rearing stage of about 27 years, and finally the post-parental stage of 17 years. The two most marked historical changes observed are the contraction of the first stage from 15 to 5 years, and the expansion of the final stage from 1 to 17 years. In a word, the contemporary women spend less than half of their life time for child bearing and rearing. If they find life worth living only for the sake of their children as their mothers did, they will lose the meaning of life totally after their beloved children have grown up. They have to find out something valuable as a target for commitment in addition to children. Things regarded as worthwhile committing are varied; professional or managerial success, arts and learning, sports and tour, participation in social work as a volunteer, and for some that may be marital companionship.

Married women in Japan today are not only family-oriented but also work-oriented, and a great majority of working wives are employed outside of home. At any rate, they have started

to live their lives for themselves, not necessarily for their children. They seek to realize and fulfill the meaning of their own lives. We can observe this new trend in various phenomena. They include an increase in the number of single parent families, particularly of father-child families, left behind by the mother who fled off, such shocking cases where newly born babies were deserted by their mothers in a coin-operated locker in railroad station buildings, and the rapid increase in divorce cases brought by middle-aged women of 40-54 years old, an age group who had hardly sought a divorce until 1950s. This new development will bring about changes in the Japanese concept of 'mother,' and may encourage children to build an independent autonomous personality rather than a harmony-oriented interdependent personality which the traditional concept fostered.

Changing Image of 'Father' in the Family

The principal role the father plays in the family is to make his children get an original experience of authority. Children experience authority in their father when they find in him the model of the male, the leader of the family, and the representative of the society and its norm. This was true to a considerable extent with the fathers in prewar Japan, but hardly applies to the Japanese fathers today.

A television program invited about 20 primary school children to have them draw a picture of father. They were divided into two groups for collective performance; one for drawing a picture of the ideal father and another for that of the actual father. The children were not informed of the group task in advance. The ideal father drawn by them was a youthful-looking man going out wearing a sack suit. On the other hand, the actual father was a television-watching man of an unshaven face and a *tanzen*-clad figure lying on his side with a newspaper and an ashtray close to the pillow. These two contrasting pictures

symbolize the present-day Japanese father in an urban environment [Yamamura 1983: 151].

A commuting husband=father, who represents working men in an industrialized society like Japan, is separated from home, not only on weekdays but also often on holidays. How he is working is hidden from the eyes of his children. They do not know really what kind of tasks the nice-looking man drawn in the picture performs in his office. The short period of time when he stays home is naturally spent for tension-releasement and relief from fatigue as the picture of the actual father illustrates. Children can scarcely experience an authority in their father who is extremely idle at home. A monthly pay envelope the husband=father brings back home provides the only chance left for the demonstration of his authority. But, it is already many years since the system of payment through a bank has been established. Thus, an image of the father as a source or representative of authority has almost gone. The father today is like an uncle who concedes a request from kids rather easily, otherwise he is overshadowed by his wife.

In addition to these changes common to industrialized societies, Japanese fathers in particular have experienced the breakdown of the source of the traditional authority at the defeat in the Second World War, and have not yet succeeded in establishing a new style of authority in a democratized society where women's status has been improved so much that may compete with that of men.

Professor Hiroshi Inamura at the University of Tsukuba points out that one of the common factors found in the clinical cases of domestic violence is the combination of a father who, though ardent at work, is not responsible for his children, and seems overshadowed and lacking in self-confidence at home, and a mother who is nervous, highly aspirant, overprotective, interfering, and expects too much from her children [Inamura 1980]. We can understand that the changing image of the father also

constitutes the general background of domestic violence today.

The Japanese Family in the Process of Change

I have reviewed the major aspects of the changing family background of children in the contemporary Japan, with a special reference to the concept of 'mother' and the image of 'father.' We understand that the Japanese family has changed drastically in its form and structure as well as in the quality of human relations. A conservative may regard these changes as a process of family disorganization and the present status as a chaotic confusion. Surely, the post-war changes in the Japanese family have been so rapid that some imbalances have naturally ensued. In my opinion, the Japanese family, on the whole, has adjusted itself relatively well to the changing environment. Nevertheless, private as well as public assistances to child rearing and training will be necessary so that the family may remain as an arena of interacting personalities where children can experience the original affection from their parents.

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