The Japanese Family

L. Keith Brown

"The Japanese family" is as diverse and elusive as "the American family," or "the Italian family," or "the Jewish family," or whatever stereotypical family we can imagine. The 127 million Japanese live in households as varied as can be found in America. For example, there is a growing number of single occupant households, e.g., students living away from home or transferees who have moved out of the family home because of temporary job changes. As in America, there are increasing numbers of households of only a married couple, typically a newlywed couple without children who do not want to live with either set of parents, or married seniors whose children have all left, leaving them to live on their own in their retirement years. Unlike in America, the incidence of unmarried couples living together is relatively small.

The two generation nuclear family consisting of the parents and their unmarried children has become the popular model of the modern family in Japan, as it was in America decades ago. Typically, with the low fertility rate in Japan, these households are relatively small with two, or only one, child living together with the parents.

Two generation single parent households, for example an unmarried, divorced or widowed mother and her children, or a widowed grandmother and her widowed daughter, are not common. Children born of unmarried women account for about one percent of all births, compared to about one-third of all births in the United States. This low rate of illegitimacy results from an aggressive use of contraceptives, mainly the condom, and different cultural attitudes about abortion.

What is still common in Japan, and rarely seen in the United States, are three, four and occasionally even five generation households. While many American students will enjoy having a widowed grandmother live with their family for a while, it is not the expected norm that it is in Japan. There is another difference. Whereas in America the grandmother typically "goes" to live with the family of one of her children, in Japan the expectation is that one of the children with family will live in the grandmother's house, i.e., in the natal home. This difference is significant. Living in the natal home with the grandparents stands as a strong symbol of the intergenerational continuity of the stem family line, continuing from the founding ancestor to the living members of the family to an infinite number of generations in the future.

Multiple generation households, for example the great-grandparents, the grandparents, the young parents, and the small children, reflect an important feature of the concept of "the Japanese family," even though its expression in actual living arrangements, i.e., the household, has declined in the post-war years. The figure represents an actual family in the Mizusawa area of Northeast Japan, the Satō family (a pseudonym). The Satōs are close friends of the author of this article, since the days when the now great-grandfather was the new young head of his family and household forty-five years ago. Today he proudly points out that his precocious 2 ½ year old great-grandson is being groomed to become the fourteenth generation head of this

family. The family has lived at the current house site for several centuries, since the ancestors first came to this community generations ago. Of course the house itself has been rebuilt, and remodeled, many times in those years.

Intergenerational continuity clearly is important for the Satō family. Having nine people, two of them being mothers-in-law to the wives of their sons, all living in the same house, cannot be easy. However, they have ancestors that need ritual attention. Periodically during the year they go to the family grave site to pay their respects and pray before the family ancestors. They also occasionally go to the family temple where they pray before the ancestral memorial tablets (ihai), in the new, modern mortuary chapel (ihai-dō) that the parishioners see as a money-maker for the temple. In spite of the parishioners' cynicism concerning the motives of the temple priest in having it built, the new mortuary chapel is a sacred site for the ancestors. Thus the ancestral tablets in the new and very elegant chapel cannot be disregarded. Ideally on a daily basis they pray and give offerings at the Buddhist altar in the family home. The offerings are varied, but frequently consist of a cup of tea, rice or toast, fruit and maybe even the favorite canned coffee from a vending machine if that is what a recently deceased ancestor liked. The ancestral altar in the house, the butsudan, typically costs from $8,000 to $15,000 and must be replaced every fifty years because of damage from the incense smoke. However, for an established family it is an expense that is necessary to show both the ancestors and the neighbors that the living members of the family are responsible people caring for their ancestors.

Giving proper ritual attention for the ancestors is a self-interested and important activity that is seen as being obligatory for the well-being of the living members of the Satō family and for all future descendants. It is a task that is too important to entrust to neighbors and friends. Family members who themselves will someday become ancestors and will need the same kind of ritual attention are the most dependable. The seniors in the household religiously perform these rituals for the ancestors and in so doing inculcate into the younger generations the idea that this is something they too will do and ultimately will want done for themselves.

Although the Satō family lives in a rural area, within an easy commute to a nearby town, a concern about the ancestors is not just a rural survival in contemporary Japan but rather is common throughout the society, rural and urban alike. In the nearby town of Mizusawa, a former castle town, some of the descendants of the samurai can trace their descent back nearly 400 years, at the same house site, to 1629 when the castle lord first brought his entourage to the town and built his castle there.

Likewise, merchants in the town have similar concerns about family continuity. Nearly forty percent of the merchant families in one neighborhood, with their shops conveniently situated immediately outside the former castle gates at the end of the feudal period in 1868, remain at the same shop site today, five generations later. Many of course have changed the wares they sell in their shops over that century of significant change, but they continue to live in the back of the shop and in the floors above. Some of their living quarters and gardens in the back are quite elegant. What is noteworthy is that they have remained in place, sharing the same neighbors and loyal customers over the years, and generations, and caring for their ancestors.

This residential continuity is possible because this former castle town was spared the devastation of the fire bombing of 1945 during the Pacific War. Unlike Tokyo and many of the other large industrial centers of Japan leveled by the bombing, Mizusawa and similar small towns experienced only sporadic strafing in the last months of the war. The townsmen had no need to evacuate to safer areas. Rather, a number of people in Tokyo at the time of the March 1945 fire bombings escaped to Mizusawa where they had relatives willing to take them into their own wartime impoverished households.

The Satō family has an additional concern about family continuity, being a rural family, and that is the ancestral farmland that has been inherited from generation to generation. Though their average size farm generates only about ten percent of their annual household income, the feeling is strong that they cannot sell this land that they have received from the ancestors. Moving to Tokyo or some other area where jobs may pay more would have a high social and emotional cost for them. They have obligations to the ancestors and deep relationships with neighbors cultivated over generations that are not easily replaced.

The Satō family is not a survivor of past ages, but is a modern expression of some very basic, fundamental aspects of Japanese culture. There are six automobiles owned by the Satō family. Great-grandpa and great-grandma both have retired from their outside jobs and no longer drive. Their 55 year old son, however, has a family sedan that he uses to commute to his job in town. His 51 year old wife, the organizer and coordinator of family activities who makes the whole system work, has a station wagon that she uses for her own commute to a food services job in town and to chauffeur the children and great-grandpa and great-grandma to doctor's appointments, shopping trips, or festivals and other events in town. She is the Japanese equivalent of a soccer mom. The young couple each has their own car to get to their jobs in town, with the young wife/mother having the smallest/cheapest car in the family, a Honda Civic type hatchback. The 23 year old younger brother of the successor in the family will be leaving soon, once he has a stable job and gets married. He is not needed for the continuity of the family line. As could be expected with his independent, free-wheeling life style, he has a very hot muscle car. In addition to all these commuting cars, there is a small pickup for the farm work.

This car-driving life style is more like what can be found in the rural plains of mid-America than in traffic congested Tokyo, except for the fact that four generations and nine people in the Satō family live together in the same ancestral home. The family members are busy. They scatter during the day and evening, each with their own work and play schedules, with an independence made possible because all the working adults have their own individual cars. They rarely eat together, though the 51 year old grandmother works hard to have meals ready for whenever someone comes home. There are seven television sets in the house to satisfy the different generational tastes in such things, just as the 51 year old grandmother cooks foods that will be palatable to each generation in the family. Great-grandpa does not eat the meat dishes that the young people have nearly every day. The 51 year old grandma, essentially in-between the generations, eats anything, like her anthropologist friend.

It is not useful to think of the Satō family as being either traditional or modern, or transitional between traditional and modern. They are fully modern. They also are fully Japanese, with a

value and belief system that derives from basic and fundamental aspects of Japanese culture. That they are rural means that they have the space in their large house for all nine family members, and they have the space around the house to park their six cars. The apartments and condos so pervasive in the Tokyo housing scene are not conducive to such large households. Furthermore, the metropolitan regulations prohibiting buying a car if it cannot be demonstrated that there is a private place to park it do not allow for six cars in most metropolitan households. Nevertheless, the concept of a Japanese family continuing from one generation to the next, with a consciousness of the responsibilities of the living for those ancestors, is shared by rural and urban Japanese alike, no matter what the living arrangements. For many the ideal is to live close, but not with, the parents/grandparents or children/grandchildren.

Marriage arrangements reflect this concept of a continuing stem family. Once it has been decided which son or daughter will be the one to continue the family line, the decision on whom to marry typically involves the rest of the family, more so than is the case for the son or daughter who leaves the family in marriage. Arranged marriages are rare in contemporary Japan, but it is not rare to have family discussions about marriage choices. In the Satō family, for example, the decision of the young husband/father successor to marry the now twenty-six year old daughter-in-law had a much greater impact on the family than will the marriage decision of the 23 year old younger brother who will be expected to leave the household and the family when he marries. This is not a matter of the younger brother receiving less love from the family. Rather it is a matter of ensuring the continuity of the family line through the older brother.

Today, young people, through work, school or other activities may meet someone whom they may consider for marriage. Typically they will discuss the matter with their parents and other family members, though in most families it is the couple directly involved who will have the strongest voice in such decisions.

When young people are not successful in finding a prospective spouse on their own, however, they may ask family members, professional matchmakers, or dating services to help with the search. Once someone has been identified as a marriage prospect, the young couple can date for a while to see if they are compatible before making a final decision about marriage.

Employment opportunities, if not careers, for women are more plentiful than in the past, resulting in greater economic independence for young women. Many young working women continue to live with their parents, allowing them to save their wages for their own entertainment, e.g., foreign travel, fashionable clothes and accessories, and evenings out for dinner and shows with their friends. The economic and social pressures to get married once their schooling is finished have been eased in recent years, resulting in a substantial number of women who are delaying marriage into their thirties, with many of them not getting married at all. This has led one Japanese sociologist to refer to these unmarried women as "parasite singles," highlighting their dependence on their parents for their living expenses. They are blamed for the low fertility rate and for the stalled economy because they are not buying houses and raising families. In fact, however, they are contributing heavily to the consumer index in Japan and to the economy in other ways. The term "parasite singles" suggests the negative images such unmarried young women have among many older Japanese, especially males. They are seen

as selfish, hedonistic, and exploitative of their parents, especially their mothers. However, frequently a mother is delighted to have a daughter at home and is pleased that her daughter can pursue a lifestyle that was not available to women just a generation ago.

The lifestyle that the unmarried daughter is pursuing frequently is less the accomplishment of a grand design, a large plan, or a deliberate choice for a particular life style. Rather the life style happens as an unintended and to certain extent inevitable result of other decisions that the young woman has made, e.g., work decisions, or her rejection of the marriage proposals from her boyfriend thinking that he is not quite right for her. Recent surveys, e.g., one by Tamiko Noll, who did a Ph.D. dissertation in 2004 titled Pragmatic Singles: Being an Unmarried Woman in Contemporary Japan, found that many of these women are not making an explicit decision to avoid marriage and remain single. They are not rejecting marriage and family life. Rather they have not gotten married, yet, because the right circumstances or the right man have not appeared. For many of them, their families worry that the right circumstances, or the right man, may never appear.

The economic independence of these young women means that they can be more choosy about whom they marry and when. Several decades ago it was considered by many to be an advantage for a young woman to live with her husband's family so that her mother-in-law could provide built-in babysitting and domestic services while the young wife works at her outside job. Today, however, with fewer children and somewhat improved daycare facilities, most young women do not want to live with their in-laws. Consequently, many young men who want to get married are having a difficult time in finding a wife. Even if a young bachelor promises his girlfriend that once they get married they will live in their own apartment and that he will help with the domestic chores, many young women remain unconvinced.

As a consequence, in recent years the fertility rate in Japan has declined significantly, to an average of only 1.3 children per woman during her childbearing years, compared to 2.1 children per woman in the United States. This low fertility rate has led to much worrying in Japan about the prospects of a population that will begin to decline in this decade, a work force that is too small to sustain the Japanese economy, a rapidly aging society with the associated heavy costs for medical and social services that the elderly require, and the fear that a new generation will grow up without siblings and the social skills that come from the give and take of daily family life.

Pocket World in Figures, 2005 Edition. London: The Economist Newspaper Ltd., 2004.

An increasing pattern for the young married couple, if they are going to live with either set of parents, is to live with the wife's rather than the husband's family. The groom may or may not be adopted into his wife's family, taking her family name and becoming the successor in his wife's family line. Care of the aging parents may be the reason for moving in with her parents. It is assumed that multiple generation co-residence and elder care giving is more harmonious if the primary caretaker is a daughter rather than a daughter-in-law. The fact that Japan has the greatest longevity in the world and universal health insurance means that the elderly frequently are able to care for themselves well into advanced ages. Nevertheless, it is assumed that

ultimately they will need care, and it is for that inevitable condition that they look to one of their children for support and ritual attention once they become ancestors.

If the daughter is the designated care giver, her husband may become an adopted husband, muko-yōshi, in which case he will be entered into his wife's family register, the koseki, and his name will be stricken from his own natal family's register. He then becomes the successor to his wife's father as family head, and together with his wife the couple becomes the primary inheritor of the family estate.

There is a long history in Japan of adopted husbands marrying into their wives' families. With the low fertility rate and the chances of having a son decreasing, the adopted-husband phenomenon has become more frequent. The advantages of this practice for the adopted husband include living conditions better than what a newly married couple normally could afford on their own, the wife's family connections that may be useful for career advancement, and in some cases the adopted husband may succeed his wife's father in a prestigious position such as representing the local district in the national Diet, becoming president of the family business, or carrying on the family position in an artistic or theatrical tradition. The disadvantages of becoming an adopted husband are in the power relationships within the family where even though he is a male he is weaker because he is the newcomer coming from the outside. Also he must give up his family name, just as a young woman must give up her family name when she marries into her husband's family.

The direction of the marriage, i.e., marrying into the husband's family, into the wife's family, or establishing a new independent family consisting of non-succeeding children, is important in the later social relationships of the family. With the responsibility of caring for the aging parents and the ancestors, the person who marries into the family also is in line for control over the family estate. Those siblings who leave the family in marriage or to establish new independent families normally do not receive the benefits and responsibilities that come with following the parents in the continuing stem family line.

Because marriage is more of a family affair for the son or daughter who is designated to continue the family line, weddings for them can be very expensive. Wedding costs exceeding $60,000 or $70,000 are not unusual. Expenses include renting the wedding hall, renting the bridal gowns (normally more than one gown of different levels of formality are worn at different stages during the event), the wedding banquet, gifts (all guests at a wedding banquet receive a gift), and the honeymoon. Some couples try to limit their expenses by joining a chartered tour to Hawaii where they have a wedding ceremony in a small scenic chapel with only close family members in attendance. They cannot avoid the social obligations to neighbors, work colleagues and friends, however, and there will be pressure for the couple and their families to have a reception at some point after their return from Hawaii. Nevertheless, such a reception can be much smaller, and cheaper, than holding the entire wedding event with the ceremony and banquet in Japan.

Family involvement and the heavy expenses for the wedding contribute to a relative low divorce rate in Japan, though the rate has been increasing in recent years. The divorce rate in Japan still is less than half that of the United States.

Comparative Divorce Rates in Selected Countries

Divorces per 1,000 Population

- Mexico 0.5 Japan 1.9 Canada 2.3
- China 0.8 France 1.9 U.K. 3.1
- Italy 0.8 Germany 2.3 United States 4.7

Pocket World in Figures, 2005 Edition. London: The Economist Newspaper Ltd., 2005.

Income earning opportunities for divorced women, though not good, have improved significantly in recent years. Consequently, more women are unwilling to put up with what they consider to be bad marriages. Women entrepreneurs are an increasing phenomenon in Japan, and not infrequently they are divorced women trying to support themselves. If they had married into their husband's family, any children born of that marriage typically would stay with his family and not go with the mother in the divorce. Conversely, if her husband married into her family, the divorced husband is sent out and the children stay with her and her family. In either case, alimony is likely to be minimal, if it is paid at all. The courts may be called in to settle property disputes for couples not tied to either side in the marriage.

The stem family, the ie, is a concept that is important in making such decisions. It is a concept that has a variety of meanings for the Japanese people. For those young people who find caring for aging parents and ancestors to be burdensome, the stem family concept is a relic surviving from a traditional age no longer appropriate for modern day Japan. It is seen by some as an oppressive system placing family responsibilities, and especially obedience towards the father, over individual freedoms and rights. The occupying Allied Forces after the Pacific War saw the stem family system as undemocratic and eliminated it in the legal system of the postwar Constitution and Civil Code.

In its place, the vital registration and other legal codes highlighted the nuclear family that by then had become common in America. Some Japanese today see the stem family ideology existing only in the provinces, primarily in the rural and mountain areas.

On the other hand, for many older people the stem family is the proper, moral, and caring family system that should be respected in contemporary Japan. They decry the selfish approach to family matters that they see as pervasive in the United States and other parts of the West. In many cases, the stem family, the ie, is seen as quintessentially Japanese. Japanese academics generally prefer not to translate the term ie, assuming that it has core Japanese meanings that cannot be expressed in English. To many Japanese, the ie is the "way we Japanese think about

our family identity, our place in the family, and our responsibilities to our most intimate others." The family patterns suggested by the term ie are seen, especially by older Japanese, as part of the goodness of Japanese culture, no matter how diverse the realities of family arrangements these days may be.

L. Keith Brown

L. Keith Brown is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh. His lifelong research interests have centered on the town of Mizusawa in the Tohoku region, and the changes in lives of the inhabitants since the early 1960s.

Suggested Reading

Edwards, Walter. *Modern Japan Through Its Weddings: Gender, Person, and Society in Ritual Portrayal*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1989.

Hamabata, Matthews Masayuki. *Crested Kimono: Power and Love in the Japanese Business Family*. Ithaca, New York. Cornell University Press, 1990.

Hashimoto, Akiko. *The Gift of Generations: Japanese and American Perspectives on Aging and the Social Contract.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Hendry, Joy. *Understanding Japanese Society,* Third Edition. New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003.