Japanese Individualized Family as a Form of Risk Protection and Adaptation to Rural Life: Study Based on Analysis of Changing Meanings of Family in Shimane Prefecture

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses “individualization within families” in a rural area by using the qualitative data from a case study in the hilly and mountainous areas of Shimane Prefecture. In most families in this case study, an individual’s freedom was respected by the other family members. When “individualization within families” is defined as increasingly free discretion of each family member, such a tendency is often found. On the other hand, each family member considered the family group important. The data suggested that family group is regarded as a means of risk protection and adaptation to rural life, and each family member may have a sense of obligation to maintain the family group. This obligation is fulfilled by considering the freedom of other family members. To discuss the dynamics and a good balance between respecting individual freedom and maintaining the family group, this study found that additional studies of families in rural areas are necessary. Furthermore, this research adds to an understanding on the roles of family and individual in the context of changing Japanese society and different risks facing both the individuals and the whole way of life in rural areas.

Keywords: Family Risk, Family as a Group, Individualization, Roles of Families and Individuals, Rural Family

1. INTRODUCTION

Studies of Japanese rural farming villages of the past showed that, though the traditional ‘ie system’ (family system) was abolished following the end of World War II, many citizens of such villages stagnantly regarded ‘ie’ (family) as very important. As a result of this insistence on the traditional family system, when a family made a decision, its ‘yome ’ (daughter-in-law) had a small say. Also the local tradition and custom held the residents in a strong bind (Mitsuoka, 1996; Watanabe, 2002; Nagano, 2004; Hosoya, 2005). Many Japanese today, therefore, have a prevalent image about life in a rural farming village that individuals have less freedom than in urban areas since the rural family system and territorial connections hold individuals’ duties to the family and local groups more important than their freedom.

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Yet at the same time, the non-farming labour market has grown up in those rural areas of the nation and many farmers are actually part-time farmers today. There are reports, therefore, of individuals enjoying greater, expanding freedom while living in farming families (Kumagai, 1991, 1995). Also in recent years, there have been some moves to promote “household management agreements”, in which the members of a family negotiate and reach an agreement over the house chores and family business, with a view to more respect to the will and rights of each member of the family. Those “agreements” are part of agricultural policies and intended to help farming households get over the traditional reign of local custom (Gojô, 2003; Shinozaki, 2003). Another recent, gradually expanding trend is called “I-turn” families, who move into rural areas from urban neighbourhoods. These families might also be spreading more respect to individual freedom and lifestyles among farming families.

What do those trends to respect individual freedom more mean to farming families of Japan and what does this all tell about the Japanese society? This article considers and discusses this question, based on results from interviews conducted with people living in farming villages of Shimane Prefecture in 2005 and 2006. The intention is to obtain some new opinions and ideas concerning the relationship between individuals and the group called a “family”, by means of considering “individualization”, or the moves to seek for more individual freedom, from the viewpoint of the farming village family.

2. EARLIER STUDIES

2.1. Rural Farming Families and the ‘ie’ (Family) System

Kizaemon Aruga suggested that, in the traditional rural farming neighbourhood, the ‘ie’ system used to function to protect individuals’ livelihood. He said that, in those years when it was hard for individuals to obtain economic independence and the social security system was insufficient, the only way for people to survive was to live together depending on the assets accumulated by their family ancestors. If a family exhausted such inherited assets, all its members would soon be exposed to danger to their livelihood. Thus, all the members of a family were obliged to maintain the family assets, and were held responsible for such assets, and everyone understood the risks facing them. Also in most families, the family assets were not large enough to satisfy all the family members. As a result, there was unavoidable inequality among the members in terms of distribution of such assets (Aruga, 1972). We can assume that, in a traditional ‘ie’ family, those backgrounds suppressed individual freedom of its members.

In this sense, we can say that the ‘ie’ family was the principle uniting a (direct-line) family, securing livelihood of the family members and assigning them with their responsibilities. Post-war Japan abolished the ‘ie’ system legally and gained more and more economic affluence. Then, says a researcher, some principles other than ‘ie’, such as affection, child raising, something to live for, etc. Took over as the factors to keep a family together (Yamada, 2005). Still, in farming villages of Japan, the ‘ie’ system did not necessarily lose its influence as a major principle of uniting and maintaining a family. In this respect, Masatoshi Ôuchi, observing women of farming families, gave the following explanation: while many males of farming families took jobs other than farming and became part-time farmers amid the post-war economic expansion, many females, occupying lower statuses within the ‘ie’ family, remained in their bondage to the family even after the war. They, therefore, worked in farms to maintain them in place of their husbands, took care of aged family members, and did many other things to keep the ‘ie’ system alive, according to the researcher (Ôuchi, 2004). Thus, the duty called ‘ie’ has survived in rural Japan.

During the last decade or so, however, those situations have been changing. The Basic Plan for Gender Equality, set up by the Japanese Government in 2000, called for improvement of social statuses of farming family women. The Plan emphasized “independence of individuals”
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