Chapter 7


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ABSTRACT

Many Japanese researchers have suggested that both Japanese and Western societies are experiencing individualization of the family; whether or not this is the case in Japanese rural farming villages remains unclear. The purpose of this chapter is to investigate this question using a case study. The research involves interviews of families living in rural areas within the Shimane Prefecture, each engaged in agriculture, forestry, and/or fishery. The emerging picture is that it is increasingly difficult to find traditional Ie in rural farming villages today. For the rural farming family, individual freedom is important. However, respecting individuals seems to occur for the purposes of maintaining unity of the family as a group rather than for the purpose of individual self-realization. Therefore, emphasizing individual freedom does not mean conflict among family members (i.e., enforcement of competition with other family members or compromises by them).

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1. INTRODUCTION

Beck and his colleagues argue that the individualization of the family during the second modernity is now taking place in Western societies (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001). Since the rise of modernization, people have pursued freedom. The pursuit of freedom (e.g., freedom from kinship in marriage and family life, and freedom to choose an occupation) resulted in the “isolated (autonomous) nuclear family.” Nevertheless, in nuclear families, there have still been contradictions, such as dependence and authority. For example, children must depend upon their parents and, as a result, parents possess power over their children. Today, societies have entered into second modernity, in which the pursuit of freedom has reached a new phase. Nuclear families are unstable, which has adversely affected dependence and authority in the family unit (Beck, 1998). Family has become a risky undertaking in which individuals must maintain their autonomy in order to choose his/her family life.

Japan also experienced the spread of the nuclear family through industrialization following World War II. However, as many researchers suggested, nuclear families have declined in Japan since the 1990s. Furthermore, Japanese families have diversified. There has been an increase in the numbers of women in the workforce, a trend for remaining single, and a tendency toward having fewer children, resulting in nuclear families being but one option. In addition, researchers have reported that Japanese society is experiencing the individualization of family (Yamada, 2004). Thus, a new approach to family in which it is regarded as a lifestyle based on individual independent choices was proposed (Nonoyama, 2007).

Although many Japanese researchers have suggested that both Japanese and Western societies are experiencing individualization of the family, whether or not this is the case in Japanese rural farming villages remains unclear. The purpose of this article is to investigate this question using a case study.

2. JAPANESE RURAL FAMILIES

According to Kizaemon Aruga, in traditional rural farming neighborhoods, the *Ie* system functioned to protect the livelihoods of individuals. Aruga proposed that, during periods in which it was difficult for individuals to obtain economic independence and the social security system was insufficient, survival was dependent upon people living together based on the assets accumulated by their family ancestors. If a family exhausted