Chapter 7


Yoshimi Kataoka
Shimane University, Japan

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).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-5031-2.ch007
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).

However, these discussions fundamentally refer to urban families; families in rural areas of Japan appear to have a different style of family life. The _Ie_ system was abolished and the model of the nuclear family was introduced in Japan following World War II, however, rural village residents regarded _Ie_ as essential. _Ie_ refers to the patriarchal lineal family system in which the first-born son exclusively succeeds to the family property (a house and farming land) and the family’s lineage from generation to generation. The head of the family has authority over the other family members within the _Ie_ family paradigm and must represent them to the village community. The village community consisted of the unions of various _Ie_ groups, in order for _Ie_ to be maintained based on cooperation with other _Ie_ groups (Hosoya, 1993). Furthermore, there is still an emphasis on the traditional _Ie_ system in rural areas of Japan. When a family makes a decision, the _yome_ (daughter-in-law) is given some input. Also the local traditions and customs create difficulties for residents (Mitsuoka, 1996; Watanabe, 2002; Nagano, 2004; Hosoya, 2005). Many Japanese today, therefore, perceive that life in rural farming villages involves having less freedom than in urban areas since the rural family system and territorial connections maintain that individuals’ duties to the family and local groups are more important than individual freedom.

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
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