

The Japanese family system: continuity and change in the twentieth century

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Introduction

The number of nuclear family households doubled during the postwar years of spectacular economic growth (1955-75), because of the marriage boom among the young people who were born in the 1930s and the 1940s and had many siblings (an average of 5 to 6) under the demographic condition of high fertility and low mortality. Based on the typical traditional Japanese stem family system, the first born son lives together with their parents at marriage and inherits his father's house and land sooner or later. But the other sons must leave parental home and achieve economic independence to get married and make a new home on their own. A large quantity of second or third sons and daughters born in the 1930s and the 1940s had migrated from ancestral home village to the city in accordance with the practice of the stem family. The steep economic growth made it possible for them to get married and establish neo-local households easily. Consequently, census data show that about two-thirds of Japanese households have been categorized as the nuclear family type since then.

Many sociologists and demographers have regarded the proliferation of nuclear households as the nuclearization of the family. That is, the Japanese family system changes from the traditional stem family into the conjugal family type (Morioka 1993). But the numerical predominance of nuclear family households presented in the cross-sectional data does not necessarily mean the system change of family formation. Because second or third sons seldom co-reside with their own parents under the stem family principle as mentioned above. It is natural that the marriage boom should bring about a large amount of nuclear family households. Indeed, many of first born sons have formed stem family households, the number of which is almost constant during years of economic growth, however, the proportion has declined from about 35% to 20%. Therefore, we have to observe family formation behavior (e.g. co-residence with parents) of the younger generation born in the 1950s and the 1960s, and compare it with the one of the parental generation born in the 1930s and the 1940s to confirm whether the Japanese family system has changed or not.

Data

In testing the family nuclearization hypothesis, the data taken from National Family Research of Japan in 2001 special (NFRJ-S01) are used. NFRJ-S01 is a nationwide Japanese family life course survey with cluster random sampling performed in December 2001. The survey was implemented in January and February 2002. Respondents are women between 28 and 77 years of age (born in 1920-69). They were asked retrospectively life event experiences

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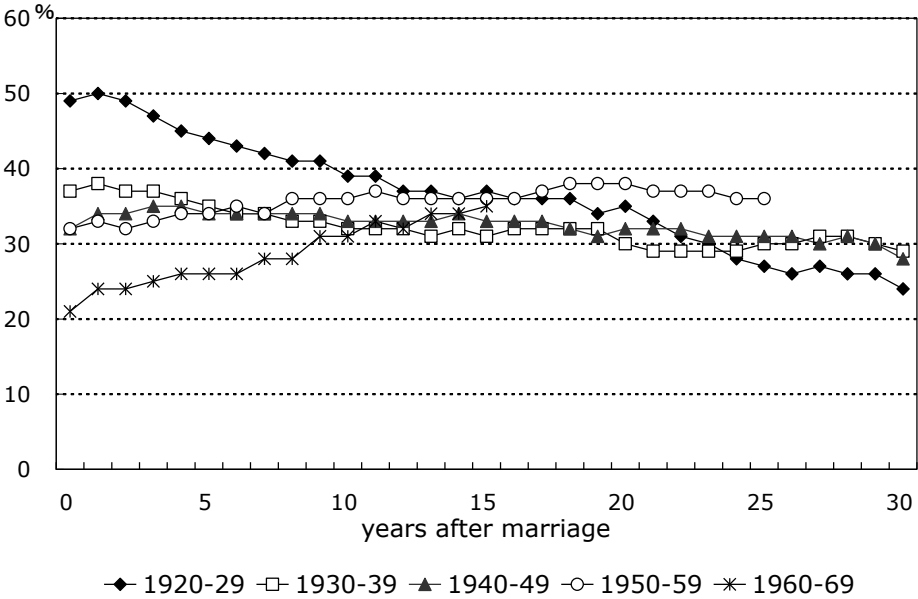
such as marriage, childbearing, co-residence with parents, house ownership, employment, and elderly care, with detailed information on living arrangements and socio-economic status of the family. The sample size is 5,000 and the total number of questionnaires completed is 3,475.

Co-residence with parent(s)

Figure 1 shows proportions of wives living with husband’s parent(s) or their own parent(s) by birth cohort. The sample is restricted to wives who have at least one parent alive at each year. About 50% of those born in the 1920s co-reside with any parent at the time of marriage, while only 20% of those born in the 1960s do. In spite of relative spread of neo-localism at marriage, the couples of the youngest cohort start to live with their parents soon after marriage, and then over 30% of those co-reside after 10 years. Consequently, the levels of co-residence are not so different between cohorts in the middle years of marriage.

Under the stem family principle, the eldest son normally lives with his parents as stated above. Although proportions of wives living with parent-in-law(s) at the time of marriage when husbands are the eldest sons decline from about 70% for the 1920s cohort to 25% for the 1960s, the tendency toward co-residence some time after marriage becomes stronger the younger the cohort. Then, the rate for the 1960s cohort reaches 40% about ten years after marriage (the rate for the 1950s cohort dose 50% twenty years after marriage). On the other hand, wives whose husbands are the second or third sons have a weak tendency to live with parent-in-law(s).

Figure 1 Proportion of Wives Living with Husbands’ or Their Own Parent(s) by Birth Cohort



Note: The sample is restricted to wives who have at least one parent of both sides alive.

Multivariate analysis

The family nuclearization hypothesis is tested by conducting a discrete-time logistic regression analysis for co-residence with parent-in-law(s). According to the classical theory of family sociology, industrialization and urbanization are the main causes of nuclearization of the family (Ogburn and Nimkoff 1955; Nimkoff and Middleton, R. 1960). William J. Goode also recognized that the nuclear family was suited to the industrial economy with flexible labor markets demanding geographic mobility, however, he argued that the ideology of the conjugal family played a crucial role in the process of nuclearization (Goode 1963). Thus, he implied that industrialization and urbanization could be background factors rather than central causes. The conjugal family ideology generally includes idealized views of individual choice of spouse, romantic love, privacy of the home, and the sentimental nuclear family. As measures of it, two variables in the dataset can be utilized. That is, experience of romantic marriage and types of go-between in the wedding ceremony. And occupation of husband at the time of marriage and rural/urban residence in the early years of marriage are used for measures of industrialization and urbanization respectively.

The stem family system is defined by rules of inheritance (or succession) and residence. That is, only one child (usually the first born son) inherits his father's house and land, and the heir often lives with his parent(s) to take care. On the other hand, other sons are expected to leave the parental home and make a new home on their own. Therefore, birth order of husband and inheritance of house and land at year t would be crucial factors of co-residence. Furthermore, background variables, including number of years since marriage, age of wife at marriage, marriage cohort, number of siblings (of husband and wife respectively), educational attainment of husband, occupation of wife at year t , and having a child under school age at year t , are controlled.

In this study two kinds of models are estimated: one for co-residence at the time of marriage, and one for co-residence after marriage, as the effects of the variables would change over time.

Two variables measuring the conjugal family ideology show strong negative effects on co-residence at marriage as expected. Japanese women who married romantically are about 50% less likely to live with parent-in-law(s) at marriage than those married by arrangement. Likewise, women who get married without a go-between or even without a wedding ceremony are less likely to co-reside at marriage (34% or 58%, respectively) than those with the go-between of kin or neighbor. But these factors have weak or no impact on co-residing after marriage. The effect of the conjugal family ideology vanishes away with the passing of time.

The measures of industrialization and urbanization also related negatively to living with parent-in-law(s) at marriage. Wives whose husbands are employed full time are about 60% less likely to co-reside at marriage than those who are married to husbands self-employed in agriculture. But there is no significant relationship between occupation of husband and

co-residence after marriage. And the rural/urban residence in the early years of marriage has strong impact on co-residence at marriage and has some influence after marriage.

Whereas the conjugal family ideology works only at the time of marriage, variables postulated as causes of co-residence show strong and enduring effects after marriage. Women married to the eldest sons are about six times more likely to live with parent-in-law(s) both at and after marriage than those married to second or third sons. Acquiring house and land by inheritance is strongly related to co-residence after marriage as well as at the time of marriage. Furthermore, the death of one parent increases the likelihood of living with and supporting the remaining parent. Thus the traditional factors, like the first born son, inheritance and care of old parents, are still active in the stem family formation in the beginning of twenty first century.

Conclusion

The decline of co-residence at the time of marriage means that the neo-local marital residence has become popular among younger cohorts with the spread of the conjugal family ideology, even though this kind of nuclearization is very limited to early years of marriage. So it can be called “popularization of temporal neo-local residence” or “postponement of co-residence.” On the other hand, birth order of husband and inheritance of residential house and land have strong enduring effects on co-residence over years, and thus cause the upward tendency of co-residence after marriage among younger cohorts. Therefore, most nuclear families which proliferated in the period of rapid economic growth are regarded as those emerged in the process of reproducing stem families. The Japanese family formation is still based on the stem family principles in spite of the rapid industrialization and Westernization of the second half of the twentieth century.

References

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