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The Family as a Constitutive Element of Japanese Civilization

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The Family as a Constitutive Element of Japanese Civilization

Sepp LINHART
University of Vienna

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1. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE JAPANESE FAMILY

Professor Befu defines civilization (*bunmei*) as the material and behavioral manifestations of the spirit of a culture (*bunka*). Taking this definition as a frame of reference for an analysis of Japanese civilization, special consideration must be given to the study of the Japanese family, because one of the most important behavioral manifestations of Japanese civilization is the influence, either conscious or unconscious, of familistic thought on Japanese behavior. It is my contention that the study of the Japanese family system forms the core of any understanding of Japanese society, culture or civilization. Needless to say, the family as one of the basic social institutions is important for every civilization, but the degree of importance given to this institution and the use of this specific institution for other purposes is very different in various societies. It is my hypothesis that the Japanese family system and its application in other fields—political, economic, cultural and social—is unique. I would therefore like to consider it a specific constitutive element of Japanese civilization.

Since I have only a very limited knowledge of pre-industrial Japan, I will confine myself here to the role of the Japanese family in the industrial period, relating the characteristic functions of the family system to the development of modern Japanese civilization. Let me start with an investigation of the Japanese family. Is there such a thing as a typical Japanese family? Does the Japanese family have a special structure or organization? We all know from the work of famous social anthropologists like G. P. Murdock that there are only a limited number of family structures in human society, and that in all societies family organization can be classified according to a few basic principles.

The modern Japanese family can be characterized as monogamous, patrilocal, patrilineal and as a nuclear stem family with male primogeniture succession. This is not a very unique type of family structure, although there are some variations, for example, the famous extended family structures of Shirakawa village and succession by the eldest child, regardless of its sex (*ane katoku sōzoku*). In the modern urban family neolocality has become the rule rather than the exception, while uxoricity is also a possibility. Since all the main features of the Japanese family enumerated above can also be found commonly in other societies, we ask with Professor Umesao, "Is the Japanese family a whale?" or are there characteristics hidden to the outside observer which constitute the unique Japanese family?

This is a very difficult question, especially since such features are very complicated to analyze and cannot be as easily computed as were the structural characteristics of which Murdock speaks. The difference between structural and qualitative characteristics seems similar to the difference between the family (*kazoku*) and the family system (*ie seido*) in which the family is embedded. Nevertheless, I would say that there are at least two important characteristics which distinguish the Japanese family from others. The first is the notion of the family as an eternally existing institution, with origins in the unknown past. The living members of a particular family have to unite their efforts to guarantee the continuity of the family. Of course, ancestor worship is strongly related to this idea. The other is a strong sense of functional hierarchy within the family which regulates the behavior of the family's members toward each other as well as the relations between various families with common ancestors.

These two characteristics were also incorporated into the Japanese family system as constructed in the Civil Code (*minpō*) of 1898, a system which took as its model the family of the warrior aristocracy (*bushi*). In my opinion it is only after this unification of the various family customs of the people in the form of the *bushi* family that we can truly call Japan an "ie society" as Satō Seizaburō and others have done.

2. FAMILISM IN POLITICS: THE FAMILY STATE

In the nineteenth century Japan accepted a great quantity of Western thinking including ideas related to the state and the position of the emperor. When the Japanese politicians and intellectuals first came to Europe, they observed an institution on the verge of extinction, the *Gottesgnadentum*, the last representative of which was the Russian tsar, who would be killed in 1917. European monarchs had claimed to rule over their people by the grace of God. With this claim they intended to establish their legitimacy as rulers, and this led to a very close relationship between church and state, one which can still be observed in Great Britain today. Legitimacy granted by God is the ultimate conceivable legitimacy, and it is no wonder that clever Japanese politicians wanting to create a strong unified Japan decided to utilize their *tennō's* (emperor's) claim to be a direct descendant of the Sun Goddess. In so doing the legitimacy of the *tennō* was superior even to that of the European monarchs, who

were rulers only by the grace of God, whereas the *tennō* claimed to be the descendant of a goddess! He himself was a god, a living *kami* (god). Such a tradition made it possible to lay claim to absolute power over the people and to oppose any demands raised by them. That a god always does the right thing at the right moment is self-evident. The Japanese version of *Gottesgnadentum* was not, however, sufficient to unify and inspire patriotism during rapid industrialization, modernization and Westernization. To create these attitudes in the Japanese people, political leaders and ideologues made use of the family, especially of the two above-mentioned characteristics of the *ie*.

The people were said to share a common ancestor, and the state was taken to be one big family, with millions of individual families all related to one another in a very distant past. The *tennō*-family was further seen as the original stem family (*sō honke*), the direct successor of the ancestor of all the Japanese.

This ideology held that because of this link, even the most humble Japanese individual's veins pulsed with some drops of divine blood. Hozumi Yatsuka, the chief ideologue of the family state concept, explained it in this way:

Our family state is a racial group. Our race consists of blood relatives from the same womb. The family is a small state: the state is a large family. The origin of that which links the two, and the power which unites them in the same blood relationship is belief in ancestor worship. The basic principle of ethics has its origin here. Loyalty and filial piety are the basic principles of ethics and the foundation of the hundred virtues. The great moral principle of loyalty and filial piety is the expression of ancestor worship, born in the family system and maintained in the family system. If there is no family system, there is no loyalty and filial piety [HOZUMI, Y. 1897: 16].

In the European tradition, the idea of God as the father and Holy Mary as the mother of the people might be responsible for the inability of familism to attain the strength as a political idea that it did in Japan. Of course, in Europe too, the rulers often referred to their subjects as "children" and seemed to like being called or calling themselves "Father of the Country (*Landesvater, Landesmutter*).” But such designations could never overcome the deep cleavages that existed between the ruler and the people, and the notion that ruler and people might be of the same origin or might have the same ancestors was blasphemous.

In Japan, in contrast, where all the people were made to believe that they had the same ancestors and that even the most unimportant person was related to the *tennō*, the necessary distance between the common people and the emperor was made possible by the strong element of hierarchy inherent in the Japanese family system. The family was not a group held together by diffuse emotional ties between its members but rather a group ruled by the benevolent behavior of the parents, the elder and functionally higher members or the males, and this structure was supported by filial piety or subordination of children, the younger and functionally lower members and females. The same strict order existed between related families. The main family

ruled over the others and the closer a family was to the main family the higher its status.

The concept of a family state and of the ruler as an absolute patriarchal authority was developed and instituted in Japan at the end of the nineteenth century, when similar models of thought had already become obsolete in Europe. European influence, though, must have had a certain importance, although it is difficult to furnish empirical evidence. Even if there was European influence at work, the result was rather different from comparable European nations. That the idea of the state as one big family was readily accepted by the people is evidence of the popularity of familistic thinking in Japan, which in turn might be interpreted as a consequence of Confucian ideas on the one hand and Shintō groupism on the other hand.

3. FAMILISM IN THE ECONOMY: THE FAMILISTIC COMPANY

Apart from politics, familistic thinking can perhaps most clearly be seen in the economy. Familistic management (*kazoku shugi keiei*) as a system appeared only in the Taishō period (1912–1926), but a number of specific elements may be found much earlier.

By familistic management I do not mean small family enterprises. Such enterprises had of course been in existence for centuries and the family as an economic unit is only natural in preindustrial society. Small family companies had been transferred from one generation to the next one as *kagyō* (family business). Here again the idea of unbroken succession in the same family was very important.

Some of those *kagyō*, which started in the Edo-period, like Mitsui or Sumitomo, had become rather big enterprises by the Meiji period. In fact, they grew too big to survive as family enterprises. The owners could no longer expect loyalty from their employees as a father expects from his children because they no longer knew each other. In the case of *zaibatsu*, a group of individual enterprises was organized around a holding company. These gigantic new enterprises made use of the family ideology on the one hand by comparing a company to a family, and saying that all employees should cooperate for the honor and continuation of the enterprise as family members do for their families. Like in the family, relations between management and employees were supposed to be born of positive feelings rather than by written contracts.

On the other hand, companies now began to treat their core, but not all employees like family members. It became a general practice for large enterprises in heavy industry to educate their young employees in their own “workers’ schools (*shokkō gakkō*),” and they introduced a number of welfare measures and facilities to bind the employees closely to the company.

Japan’s well known management principles, lifetime employment and the seniority system, also go back to this period. In relatively small textile establishments boys were employed after graduation from normal school and called “children

(*kodomo*)," as had been merchant apprentices in the Edo period [NAKAGAWA 1968: 185].

Familistic enterprises and patriarchal behavior can also be found commonly in Europe or in America. It is said that the example of the German entrepreneur Krupp and others greatly influenced Japanese entrepreneurs. But familistic management in Europe never became a "system," as it did in Japan. Of course familistic management never extended to the whole working class, and it might even be said that it was never relevant to the majority of Japanese workers in their occupational lives. Nevertheless it seems to be something like an ideal for Japanese management. The results of the Survey on National Character (*kokuminsei chōsa*) bear out this conclusion [TŌKEI SŪRI KENKYŪJO. KOKUMINSEI CHŌSA IINKAI (ed.) 1961: 233-39, 1970: 88-98, 1975: 101-04]. Unlike the family state, familistic management exists even today. Nowadays to compare a company with a family is no longer very popular. The company is often called a *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* (*unmei kyōdōtai*), as Hazama has convincingly shown, but even with different labels the contents have not changed very much [HAZAMA 1972: 145-151]. Paternalistic behavior on the part of management is still highly regarded by the majority of the Japanese with its well known consequences for Japanese unionism.

As in the case of the family state the idea of the company as one big family was readily available in Japan because of the rigid order and hierarchy in the Japanese family. The employer as the father was considered so far above ordinary workers that no conflicts could arise, and it was not only the employer but also those in the lesser management ranks that used the father image in social relations with their subordinates. Needless to say the pre-industrial *oyabun-kobun* (ritual kinship) system in the form of familistic management was smoothly integrated into modern industrial life, and is still an important clue in understanding Japanese behavior in the economic field.

4. THE FAMILY AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL SECURITY

Industrialization is usually accompanied by a process of defunctionalization of the family, whereby more and more functions of the family are taken over by other institutions, so that finally the family is no more than a last resort for emotional comfort for the individual. One of the many functions of the family taken over by the state in industrial civilizations is the function of providing social security. In pre-industrial times the family cared for its members in old age or times of illness, unemployment or any other catastrophe. When Japanese politicians tried for the first time to introduce state measures for protection of the aged in 1912, their opponents objected that this would lead to complete ruin of the family. Saitō Keiji said in parliament, "If we were to establish a clear law entitling the elderly to a pension from the state... the feeling would grow that the duty of supporting them lies with the state, and quite naturally this would lead to neglect and lack of respect for the aged."

Hozumi Nobushige, brother of the above-mentioned Hozumi Yatsuka, made a thorough study in the Meiji period (1868–1912) of the existing pension systems for the elderly worldwide. He summed up his findings with the words, “It is the Eastern way to take refuge in the family, and the Western way to take refuge in the state” [HOZUMI, N. 1978: 688–689]. Compared to other industrialized nations, Japan began a national pension system only in 1961, rather late compared to European welfare states.¹⁾ Care for family members can, of course, be seen as a necessity guaranteeing the continuation of the family, and it is obvious that ancestor worship has something to do with caring for the aged. What is somewhat astonishing, then, when comparing Japan to other Confucian civilizations, is the fact that in spite of Japan’s ancestor worship, the veneration of the aged is closely tied to the functional position of the old people in the household.

If they are no longer heads of the household after they have retired, they are no longer treated with that special respect which might be expected in a Confucian society. Nakane Chie says that before the War Chinese who had come to Japan had noted that the Japanese treatment of their retired elderly was terrible [NAKANE 1968: 17–18]. Japanese fathers enjoyed authority because they were heads of the family, not because they were fathers, as was the case in China. Due to the importance attached to the idea of the eternal existence of the family, the person who was responsible for and guaranteed the continued existence of the family enjoyed the highest status.

Nakane, developing this line of argument, believes that in Japan there never existed real filial piety. Japanese used to take care of their aged parents because the parents took care of them when they were children [NAKANE 1968: 18]. The family sociologist Morioka Kiyomi and others have also pointed out that the Japanese care for the elderly is based on the feeling of repaying favors that one has received earlier in life, and that caring for the elderly is nothing more than an act of exchange, repaying the care given by parents during childhood.

Apart from caring for the aged, the Japanese family was such an integrated whole that in times of emergency, it also protected all the members of the extended family, including the younger sons and their families, and cared for daughters left by their husbands through divorce or death. Unemployment, therefore, never led to social turmoil, because rural families still had the strength to absorb urban members when necessary. In Europe at the time of industrialization the family could no longer provide this service for poor urban relatives. It goes without saying that millions of Japanese were lucky that they had a family upon which they could rely. On the other hand Japanese scholars like Hoshino Eiichi hold that the *ie* system was responsible for a social security system not developing in Japan before the War [HOSHINO 1968: 272].

1) In fact, a first pension system for employees in private companies had been established already in 1941, but it was mainly intended to raise more funds for the war, and it did not have much importance.

5. THE FAMILY IN MODERN JAPANESE CIVILIZATION

After the second World War the Japanese family system was held responsible for promoting fascism and for suppression of the development of individualism and true democracy. Most of its traces were abolished in the new Civil Code. Many scholars are of the opinion that the *ie* system was extinguished with those postwar reforms. It is true that in the political realm today the idea of the state as a family with the *tennō* as its head sounds very old-fashioned and that such an idea no longer has many supporters. I wonder whether, however, the many books about the uniqueness of the Japanese, the so-called *Nihonjin-ron* literature emphasizing the homogeneity of the Japanese people, cannot be interpreted as a kind of heritage of that idea of the family state. It seems to me that declaring 70 million people to constitute one family is very similar to saying that 120 million form a homogeneous entity. In addition, familism still exists in many lesser known political spheres, although it is not so important as it used to be in politics.

In the economic field as long as there continue to exist so many small business establishments, familism in those enterprises will remain a dominant idea. However, in the bigger companies for the most part, familism is no longer stressed overtly, although there remain a few examples manifesting familism even today. But as Hazama Hiroshi has aptly analyzed, many companies today speak of themselves as a *Gemeinschaft* and avoid the usage of the word 'family.' If they do, they don't speak of the father and his children, which was general practice before the War, but instead use words like 'brothers and sisters,' thereby understating the existing hierarchy. It must not be overlooked that much of the contemporary management philosophy is nothing but familism in disguise.

Assuming that in politics and in the economy, familism remains latent, in actual family life the influence of the family system is still very important. The preservation of the same family over generations still seems to be one of the highest values attached to the family in Japan. This can be seen clearly by two observations of statistical trend, which Yuzawa Yasuhiko [1977: 57] made over the last quarter of a century:

1. The number of grown-ups who marry in to another family as adopted children (*seinen yōshi engumi*), something which is doubtless a method of maintaining the unbroken line of a certain family, showed almost no change.
2. The rate of old people living together with their children showed almost no change.

Neither of these trends can be found in the industrialized Western civilizations. There more and more young people nowadays decide to remain single or, if married, not to have children, showing that they don't give much thought to maintenance of the family line in the future. If people are adopted, they are adopted as children, because childless people want the emotional experience of being parents. As for the elderly, the high rate of the aged living with their children in Japan is unique among indu-

strialized and urbanized countries.

Since today Japan has a social security system which grants a certain economic independence to old people, we no longer can explain their living with their children as originating in the insufficiency of the Japanese pension system. Even if Japan's old people are not held in special veneration, as mentioned earlier, their need to be dependent and their wish to live with the family of the oldest son, must be explained as a characteristic feature of Japanese civilization. A worthwhile life for the elderly seems to be one constituted by closeness to offspring and the feeling that after death one continues to exist through one's children.

Summing up, it may be said that Japan's family system in spite of the much talked about Westernization and nuclearization seems to have preserved its characteristics, and that these will certainly continue to influence Japanese civilization.

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