Maternal Authority in the Japanese Family

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INTRODUCTION

Casual observers of Japanese society may form the impression that Japanese women are passive and obedient to men, and that they are relatively content to play secondary roles in a male-dominated society. At the same time I have frequently encountered just the opposite characterization, according to which Japanese women are said to be quite strong despite their surface meekness. So strong are they in fact that they not only manage their households with little or no help (or interference) from the men, but are said to "move the world from behind the scenes", for men are heavily dependent emotionally on their women, specifically on their wives and/or mothers. Men are thus considered to be firmly controlled by women. This second view seems to be willingly shared by some Japanese males, who fondly insist that whether a man succeeds or not in his enterprise depends on his woman, saying that because *uchi no kaachan* ("my wife" [lit. "the mother of my house"]) is strong he cannot do a thing without her permission. Where lies the truth?

This paper examines the Japanese woman's status and roles in the family through a study of the pattern of her normative behavior vis-à-vis other members of the household, particularly the husband and son. These interpersonal relationships seem to be supported by, or closely correlated with, certain kinship ideology, the characteristic features of which are described here and compared with those of the American system prevalent among the middle-class White Anglo-Saxon Protestant families.

Put simply, the Japanese woman's expected roles at home can be summarized as those of the family care-giver, even in her capacity as daughter or sister, if the family lacks a mother or wife. That this, particularly for the mother-wife, should be so might appear as a worn and redundant truism, but what is peculiar about the Japanese woman's case is that be she a wife, mother, sister, or daughter, she could, unless too young, assume the role of the *sole* care-giver vis-à-vis all other members of the household, including not only her children and husband but also aged parents (or parents-in-law) and ritually the ancestors. She is the *shufu*, or "the woman" of the household (the word *shufu* consists of two characters meaning "main" and "adult woman". The *shufu* is ideally and most often the wife of the household head, but could be any other adult woman of the house). The important point is that in this capacity her relationship to her husband, or to her adult son, as well as to the aged parents (-in-law) and ancestors is not essentially different from her relationship to her

young children. Everyone in the family is totally dependent on her for his/her comfortable daily existence at home.

The prototypical relationship between the care-giving woman and the care-receiving members of the household is undoubtedly that of the mother and her infant child. That, of course, seems to be a universal characteristic of the mother-child relationship anywhere while the child is young and dependent. What is unique in the Japanese case, though, is that such a dependency relationship is often maintained even after the child becomes an adult, especially when the child is male, and that when he marries, the mother's role is taken up by his wife, whom he symbolically begins to address and refer to as "mother" as soon as a child is born. Because of this overlap of mother and wife roles, there often develops an emotional conflict between the two women vying for the position of the sole care-giver, a situation which could become critical in a traditional stem-type household where a young couple lives with the husband's parents. Hence the notorious "mother-in-law problems" (conflict between a man's mother and his wife) which are themes of so much Japanese fiction and essays in the family column of newspapers.

Mother or wife, the mature Japanese woman's authority appears to be derived from her role as the sole care-giver of the family. As the sole care-giver vis-à-vis all the other family members, living and dead, she is the unifying force in the family. She also epitomizes the continuity of the family by producing and raising children, as well as through caring for aged parents and ancestors. In this sense, she is the custodian of the family's past and future.

JURAL VS. MORAL AUTHORITY

The Japanese woman's position as the sole care-giver of the family is formidable. This, however, does not mean that she has jural and/or legal authority over other members of the household, nor does it imply that she can maintain an independent identity in society at large. Though legally independent under the present Civil Code, an ordinary Japanese woman's jural status is still largely defined in Confucianist terms by the status of her father while she is single, and by that of her husband after marriage. At birth a woman automatically acquires the family name of her father, and she assumes her husband's name upon marriage, unless her husband is an adopted son-in-law (*mukoyōshi*). She is always a daughter, wife, or mother of somebody. Her status in society is largely defined and determined by the status and career of her father, husband, or son. Even today only few Japanese women succeed in establishing their own social identity. Thus, it may be said that jurally the Japanese kinship system continues to exhibit a marked "patrilineal" bias. Outside the family context the Japanese woman's status is even lower, despite Article 14 of the Constitution, which stipulates that no one shall be discriminated against on the basis of, *inter alia*, race, creed, or sex. Japanese society remains a staunchly male-dominated world, where women are expected to be either "pretty flowers" or handy but inconspicuous and polite assistants to men who alone manage the world. Clearly such a

male-female relationship results from the general pattern of sexual division of labor in the society, as shown below.

However, it is important to emphasize that the jurally dependent status in and outside the household does not necessarily mean that the Japanese woman has only low moral or spiritual authority (Chapter 4). In a sense the situation is just the opposite. Since family members are totally dependent on her for a comfortable existence, and males cannot replace her in this capacity owing to the general division of labor, the woman is truly indispensable. It is perhaps not accidental that the mother should be regarded as the very incarnation of the family (*ie*) and the "*furusato*", or one's birthplace. The *furusato*, ("old village") however, is more than just a birthplace for most Japanese, since it is also where their parents and ancestors are, and where to a person can always return and be accepted without condition. Japanese seem to feel that the person who lacks a *furusato* is rootless. In this sense, the mother may be said to be the very root of one's existence. But before examining the nature of the Japanese woman's moral authority, a glance at the general pattern of sexual division of labor in society is necessary.

SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOR

In traditional Confucianist Japanese ideology man and woman are thought to have distinct, heaven-sent, complementary and sex-determined roles. Man works to earn the living while the woman takes care of the family, including children, aged parents and deceased ancestors. A competent woman is expected to keep the household in perfect order both physically and emotionally without the help of her husband. In fact, she should not even bother him by mentioning family problems. On the other hand, a truly manly husband is supposed to concentrate on his work, completely free of domestic cares. Neither man nor woman is supposed to interfere with the other's business. Thus the typical Japanese man will not "meddle" in the kitchen, nor will he say much about the children's socialization. And many a Japanese wife is quite ignorant about her husband's job.

Such a strict division of labor may have been worked out first among the salaried *samurai* class during the Edo Period, and adopted later by other classes when urban growth and industrialization after the Meiji Restoration transformed farmers and peasants into wage-earners and housewives. Whatever the origin, the tradition persists. Higher education for women (as well as for men) and the women's liberation movement have made some inroads in changing the general pattern, but compared with other industrialized societies, change in the status of a Japanese woman has been minimal. So much so that many a working woman today still exerts herself to do a "perfect" job of house-keeping, just like the housewife who stays home, and feels guilty for not being able to do so. In short, the two sexes are supposed to belong to two complementary but distinct domains, where they perform interrelated but separate roles as follows:

Male domain	Female domain
society (outside)	home (inside)
public	private
job or profession	house-keeping
	child rearing
	care of the aged parents (-in-law)
	care of the ancestors
care-receiver at home	care-giver
(dependent on woman)	(emotionally or morally dominant)
jurally independent and dominant	jurally dependent

HUSBAND-WIFE AND MOTHER-SON RELATIONSHIPS

One of the biggest social changes undergone by Japanese society after World War II is said to be the *kakukazoku-ka*, or break-up of the large extended family (more precisely, "multi-generational stem family") into nuclear families. Indeed, nearly 75 percent of families today are nuclear, or incomplete nuclear type of households. According to the New Family Registar Act (*kosekiho*) introduced after the War, a new family is created when a man and woman marry. The family grows as children are born, and shrinks when children leave upon marriage to establish their own families. It shrinks further when one of the spouses dies, and disappears with the death of the other.

On the surface such a nuclear family is structurally no different from the typical family of any Western society. But is it really so? For example, is the Japanese nuclear family comparable with a typical middle class WASP American family, as described by Schneider [1968] and Parsons [1943, 1954], in terms of the husband-wife or the mother-son relationship?

In American kinship the husband-wife and mother-son relationship are structurally distinct in that among all the so-called kinship relationships only the former can be established by the will of the two concerned individuals and it is based on mutual personal love, "erotic" or "sexual" love as Schneider terms it. Consideration of any other factor in initiating the relationship (such as family background, wealth, religious affiliation, class,) is regarded as "calculation", and therefore not "right". The resulting family may be said to be conjugal in the true sense of the word.

Needless to say, this ideology, or the myth of "true love" marriage, does not prevent most Americans from marrying homogamously, but the ideology is there all the same. This conjugal love ("sexual love") contrasts sharply with all other kinds of love, which Schneider calls "cognatic" because it derives from the partners sharing of something (such as "blood") in common. According to this distinction, the husband-wife relationship is based on "sexual love" whereas "cognatic love" occurs in the mother-son and any other parent-child relationship. The two love relationships are thus entirely different. In other words, when an American male marries he contracts an entirely new love relationship with a new woman, which should not compete with his "cognatic love" for his mother.

Not so in Japan. Many young people today say that they prefer a "love marriage" (*renai kekkon*) to a traditional arranged marriage (*miai kekkon*). However, I would say that a true "love marriage" comparable to an American love marriage is rare [De Vos 1973: Chapter 5]. Even when partners declare theirs to be a "love marriage", there are always some elements of the arranged marriage. Parental consent is regarded as very important, if not essential. Parents of both sides weigh (Americans might say "calculate") meticulously various extraneous factors, such as social ranking and income of the family, educational background, profession, age and personalities, among other things, of family members as well as the partner him/herself. The wedding will be very much an affair of the two families rather than of two independent individuals. It is normally the groom's family which "takes" (*morau*) the bride from her family. And even though the new couple establishes a new household neolocally, it is usually expected that when the husband's parents grow old, or if one of them dies, the couple should take care of the parent(s) along with the ancestors, sometimes even at the expense of the couple's career. Aged parents and ancestors, ancestral land and a house, if any, are symbols of the continuity of the Japanese family, and few Japanese will feel free to dispose of them. Many people still consider it a *sacred* duty to produce children for the continuation of the family line. All this remains despite the new Civil Code and the new Household Register. In a sense many Japanese nuclear families may be seen as a temporary arrangement, or rather a condition which it really should not be, unless parents and the other symbols of continuity are already properly taken care of by one of the husband's siblings.

Compared to those weighty matters, it is not surprising that some Japanese consider personal affection not vital for a good marriage. In fact, love is not regarded as a necessary condition for a marriage to be contracted. Instead, conjugal love is expected to develop "naturally" as the couple grow old together and share many experiences.

In such a husband-wife relationship, sexuality is much downplayed, or even repressed, and a decent couple should not express mutual affection in public, including family members. Unlike an American couple which sleeps in the master bedroom undisturbed, the Japanese husband and wife often sleep with their child(ren) between them, largely because it is considered "natural" and "good" to do so. From a very early age an American child is expected to become aware of the special relationship between his parents by the existence of the master bedroom with its double bed, by watching their intimate interaction, and by knowing that after a certain hour in the evening he is sent to his own room so that the adults can spend time together. Japanese children experience nothing of the sort, and mother and her young child are often thought to be inseparable twenty-four hours a day.

The two different sleeping arrangements seem to me to symbolize the difference of the husband-wife and parent-child relationships in America and Japan. In the American family children are, at least in certain contexts, definitely separated from the parents, who can retire to the best and largest private room of the house, the master bedroom. No such sharp division between adults and children exists in the Japanese

family. As stated already, in many families parents and children sleep in the same room, with the children between the adults. Even when children become somewhat older and sleep separately, rooms are often separated only by thin paper screens. There is simply no space in a traditional Japanese house which is comparable to the American master bedroom. Any room can be used for any purpose during the day (e.g., for eating, entertaining guests, family relaxation) and at night can serve as a bedroom for any member of the family. In short, sexuality of the married couple is explicitly recognized neither in the room organization nor in the sleeping arrangement in Japan. Of course every adult Japanese recognizes sex as an essential component of a marital relationship, but the Japanese couple is expected to manage it unrecognized. In other words, sexuality between husband and wife is regarded as a strictly private matter and some people even consider it frivolous.

In contrast parenthood is essential for most Japanese. This is quite understandable since parenthood alone assures an indisputable position in the society—particulary for the woman—because the family is regarded as the basic social unit and the continuity of the family line was (and still is by some people) regarded as a sacred duty to the ancestors. Many Japanese also seem to feel that only by becoming a parent can a person be properly cared for after death, an important consideration since, according to a recent opinion poll, 60 percent of the sample believes that souls remain in this world after death [ASAHI SHINBUN May 5, 1981]. Because the soul of a person who died without issue is believed to become a ghost instead of a contented, respectable ancestor, it may be said that only parenthood enables an individual to achieve a sort of immortality in the everlasting chain of human existence. Few Japanese today will admit this openly, but their quite meticulous observance of memorial services for ancestors and their strong desire to produce offspring seem to reveal their unconscious preoccupation with this question.

In American ideology, on the other hand, children can be seen as transient members of a family who leave the parents when they grow up, whereas love as the basis of marital relationship should be "eternal". Maturity and independence from parents are thus synonymous in America. Neither the parents nor the children should, when the latter become adult, be dependent on each other. In the American nuclear family the "dominant dyad", to use Hsu's terminology [HSU 1971], is the husband-wife relationship.

In Japan, it is the parent-child relationship which is dominant. Moreover, of the four possible parent-child dyads (father-son, father-daughter, mother-son, and mother-daughter), it is, as Sofue correctly noted [SOFUE 1971: 285], the mother-son dyad which is morally or emotionally ("implicitly" in Sofue's word) dominant, although the father-son dyad is the jurally ("explicitly") critical one.

The dominance of the mother-son dyad in Japanese kinship may, at least partially, be the result of the general sexual division of labor, by which child rearing is assigned to the mother almost exclusively. It is also related to the marriage system in which daughters are "given away" (*yaru*) in marriage, whereas sons, particularly the eldest son, remain in the parental household "taking" or "getting" (*morau* or

toru) wives from outside. That few married Japanese women could be economically independent, and the general expectation that aged parents should be taken care of by sons, may also be relevant in this connection.

The Japanese mother-son dyad displays four of the attributes pointed out by Hsu: inclusiveness, dependence, diffuseness, and libidinality [HSU 1971: 11, 15–17]. The American mother-son dyad also shows the same characteristics. But I consider the mother-son relationships in the two societies are markedly different in terms of dependence and libidinality.

The newborn child everywhere starts life completely dependent on its mother or on her substitute. In America, however, the child is expected to become less dependent as he grows older, until he should be completely free from his mother's protection (and/or interference) by the time he marries. Neither son nor mother, for instance, expects to live together in the same house after the son's marriage. And though the mother-son relationship is by no means terminated by his marriage, everybody knows that his first loyalty and responsibility is to his wife and children, not to his mother. As discussed above "cognatic" mother-son love and "erotic" husband-wife love are structurally distinct, and therefore should not compete with each other. Libidinality in the mother-son relationship, if it existed at all, ought to have been healthily dissolved by that time.

The Japanese mother-son relationship does not go through a comparable transformation. A good mother is believed to care for and worry about her son eternally. It matters not at all that he has become a vigorous middle-aged man with social responsibilities and she a feeble old lady, since the relationship between mother and son as the care-giver and the care-receiver should last as long as they live. In a sense it may even be said that the relationship continues well after the mother's death, since she continues to watch over him and his family as an ancestress.

Such a dependency relationship is no doubt related, at least partially, to the sexual division of labor. A Japanese male who at home is completely dependent on his mother for satisfying his basic needs is not an autonomous person. He will never be as long as the current division of labor is maintained.

At the same time, though it may sound paradoxical, the mother is dependent on the son. For it is only through bearing and raising him that she acquires an unchallengeable status in the household into which she married and that the husband-wife relationship, however intimate, cannot bestow upon her. Thus, mother and son are mutually dependent. The son is dependent on the mother for his birth, and for personal care which he himself cannot perform by the division of labor, and the mother is dependent on the son in many ways. For motherhood alone can legitimatize a woman, who otherwise can not be an autonomous person; motherhood bestows on her a respectable status both in the household and society at large, it furnishes her with a deeply satisfying though demanding life-work of caring for the child, it guarantees her support in old age, and it enables her to fulfill her duty to the household and the society. In short, she can become a complete person only by becoming a mother.

The strong bond binding mother and son is often tinged with libidinality or unresolved sexuality. The way in which a typical Japanese mother tends her adolescent or adult son, helping him change clothes and fastidiously looking after his belonging and person, might shock an American observer by its intimacy and by her almost servile attitude. But the Japanese interprets it as an "natural" and "beautiful" expression of affectionate motherly love.

Here I think Doi's concept of *amae* [DOI 1971] and Okonogi's analysis of the Ajase complex [OKONOGI 1978] are quite relevant. The mutual dependency relationship between mother and son is convincingly presented by Okonogi. Contrasting such a dependency relationship between an ancient Indian prince, Ajase, and his queen mother with that of Oedipus and his parents, Okonogi sheds light on the Japanese mother-son relationship as well as on the Japanese personality in general. But what is important in the present context is the implication that this mutually dependent mother-son relationship could be seen as the prototype or model of all male-female relationships in the Japanese society, including the husband-wife relationship. In any case, the existence of libidinality and the never-ending dependency relationship in the mother-son dyad, and the repression of sexuality in the husband-wife dyad, make the two male-female relationships structurally quite similar in certain aspects.

What, then, are the basic ingredients of the Japanese mother-son relationship? The following premises seem to be generally present:

1) That the mother is the bearer (=creator) of the son. The feeling that the mother is the life-giver is enhanced by the absence in the Japanese religious system of a creator god on the one hand and by the now generally accepted family planning on the other. The two factors together have made the decision to have or not to have children a personal and controllable choice of the parents, thereby considerably magnifying parental authority;

2) that she assumes the role of a devoted giver of care, the only active role she is permitted to play in traditional Japanese society without inviting reproach; and

3) that the mother's devotion is conceived as the "perfect" act of perpetual selfless sacrifice, which in turn induces in the son a deep feeling of guilt and indebtedness sometimes tinged with resentment [De Vos 1973: Chapter 5].

The "motherly" care is symbolized, among other things, in the act of preparing and serving food. It is therefore understandable that in many parts of Japan the transmission of the housewife's status (from the adult male's point of view, from his mother to his wife) is symbolically acted out by ceremonially handing over a rice scoop (*shakushi, shamoji,* or *hera*). It is also noteworthy that the National Housewives Association (*Shufuren*), which is active for various social causes from better education of children to clean election, chose the rice scoop as its symbol. The Japanese male's persistent longing for the "mother's taste" or "mother's foods" (*ofukuro no aji*) seems to signify the symbolic nature of this act of feeding. Maybe this is an expression of his unconscious wish to be fed and otherwise taken care of in the complete dependency state of *amae*.

Regardless of who plays the role of the care-giver, a man must always depend on a woman for necessary personal care, owing to the sexual division of labor. In a typical Japanese household he receives it first from his mother, who is then replaced by his wife in this role. But since Japanese society rarely permits a mature woman to play any other respectable role, it is only natural that she should resist or resent, at least unconsciously, the handing over of the status of chief care-giver to her daughter-in-law. In any case, she continues to care about her son emotionally, if not physically, even after he has taken a wife.

The conflict arising from such a situation is explicit in the traditional multi-generational stem family where the household head's mother and wife live under the same roof. But even in a manifestly nuclear type of family, conflict and tension can be observed. This should be expected since the suppression of sexuality in the marital relationship, the continuous maternal interest in her son, and the conceptualization of the wifely care after the model of maternal care, all make the wife-husband relationship and the mother-son relationship dangerously similar. In Japan there is simply no distinction between "cognatic" maternal love and the explicitly "erotic" conjugal love, as it is supposed to exist in America. And if there is to be only one care-giver for a man "mother-in-law problems" are bound to arise. It may even be said that the conflict and tension between a man's mother and wife are structurally inevitable.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The Japanese woman's status at home seems low at first sight. On closer examination, however, it is found that despite her relatively lower jural status and surface meekness, her moral authority, which she wields as mother and wife, is considerably higher. I have argued that her high moral standing vis-à-vis her son and husband should derive from her being the sole care-giver of the family. Owing to the rather strict sexual division of labor, an adult female's place is said to be in the home, the affairs of which she manages almost single-handedly without interference (or help) from the men. As a result, the Japanese male, whatever he may do outside, is a helpless dependent at home, since he is supposed not to be able to, and normally does not, perform any of the household chores. The Japanese wife-husband relationship is, in this respect, an asymmetrical one between a female care-giver and a passive male care-receiver. As such, the nature of the relationship does not substantially differ from that of a mother and her infant child. The suppression or unrecognition of sexuality in the marital relationship on the one hand and the continuous presence of unresolved libidinality in the mother-son relationship on the other make the two cross sex relationships almost identical in certain aspects. In fact, the mother-son relationship may be said to be the model of all female-male relationships in Japanese society. Thus, Japanese women are said to feel a "maternal instinct" towards males of all ages, because all men are helpless in satisfying their basic personal needs. In effect, of

course, the dependency relationship is mutual because the existence of a woman would be devoid of meaning without taking care of males.

Such a male-female relationship is obviously correlated with the general sexual division of labor and the traditional family and marriage systems. But what keeps this system really working may be the sacred quasi-religious myth of motherhood, according to which the woman is created to perform the sacred role of life-giver and care-giver, without whom no one can live. As a mother she is supposed to be always "perfect", sacrificing all her personal ("egoistic") pleasures for the sake of her children. No wonder that the man should be perpetually bound to her in eternal indebtedness, for who can get even with someone who is "perfect" and "selfless"? Her moral authority is also likely to be related to the structural position she occupies in the household connecting the past and future, by taking care of the aged parents and ancestors and by bearing and raising the children.

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