Two kinds of stem-family system?
Traditional Japan and Europe compared

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I

In 1935 John Embree, an American student of Radcliffe-Brown, entered Suye mura, a village in the Kyushu island of Japan. He was to live in that village for a year and a half to conduct a field survey for his Ph.D. dissertation. During his stay there he determined that ‘The primary social unit in buraku [hamlet] life is the household’, and that ‘This household includes the small family, perhaps a retired grandfather or grandmother, and one or two servants to help in the household and farm labor.’ Since by the ‘small family’ he meant a group of ‘master, wife, eldest son (own or adopted), eldest son’s wife, any unmarried children of the master, and eldest son’s children (own or adopted)’, what he described is a stem family household.

Being a Radcliffe-Brownian anthropologist, Embree was more interested in the functions of various forms of interaction between households than in statistical analysis of the size and composition of the households of the village. His published monograph includes no table showing a classification of the households there, nor does it contain any information from which we can calculate, for example, the mean number of a particular kin group living within the households of Suye. Nonetheless, his account merits attention for two reasons.

In the first place, Embree argued that the village community was built upon the stem family system. His conclusion was not based simply on the fact that some sizeable proportion of the villagers happened to choose

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167
stem-family living arrangements; rather he noted that members of the
community were perceived not as individuals but as parts of households
which were supposed to take a stem-family form. Thus he concluded:
The size of a buraku is reckoned by the number of households, not by
the number of people, and participation in buraku co-operative affairs
such as funerals or bridge-building is per household, not per capita.
People and things of the house are referred to as uchi no (of the
house), as, for instance mother of the house, bicycle of the house, cow
of the house.

Second, Embree's account suggests that the stem family in the
countryside had hardly been altered despite all the legal, social and
economic changes that took place after the Meiji Restoration of 1868.
Thanks to efforts made by historians to utilize village population
registers in the days of Tokugawa, the era before Meiji, it is now widely
recognized that the predominant form of family household in the
Tokugawa period was a stem-family one whose household-formation
rules were different from either the English simple or the Russian joint
family system. Reforms and economic growth in the half-century or so after 1868
may not have affected family structure in the peasant village.

Embree's sketch of the family composition in Suye reminds us of the
classical model that Frédéric Le Play described. Le Play believed that,
historically, the stem family occupied a transitional stage from the joint
to the nuclear family. The stem family emerged ‘spontaneously’ among
agriculturalists who had ‘the good sense to defend their private lives
against the domination of lawyers, the inroads of bureaucracy, and the
excesses of the modern manufacturing system’. Structurally, however, he
believed that the stem family was a much less unstable system than the
modern, simple, nuclear family type. His statement implies that the stem
family was a variant of the extended type of the family and existed in
many cultures.

Many anthropologists and sociologists adopt this view. For example,
an extensive survey of ethnographic evidence published in 1971 classified
Japan as a stem-family peasant society, together with several European
countries. Historical evidence is more complicated and sometimes
conflicting, especially for Europe. Yet historians like Lutz Berkner argue
that, despite empirical studies of population statistics indicating little
evidence of extended or stem families, the stem family did exist as ‘an
important part of the social structure in many parts of rural Western
Europe’ if the developmental cycle of the peasant household is taken into
consideration.

More recent studies of historic European families, however, seem to
point to the opposition conclusion. Indeed, some scholars explicitly
express the view that the stem family is more akin to the simple family
system. For west and central European areas, where Berkner tried to
identify a stem-family life-cycle pattern among populations in which simple family forms were statistically predominant, Michael Mitterauer argues that most of the three-generational families so far observed were not genuine stem families. They simply took the form of *Ausgedingefamilie* (‘retirement family’), under which headship was handed over to the heir at the time of his marriage. Such an arrangement was ‘spread all over Central and Western Europe – from Ireland to the Sudeten, from Norway to the Alps’, and ‘Soweit beim derzeitigen Forschungsstand darüber eine Aussage gemacht werden kann, dürfte die durch das Ausgedinge bedingte komplexe Dreigenerationenfamilie viel weiter verbreitet gewesen sein als die eigentliche Stammfamilie’ (‘In so far as present research allows us to draw a conclusion about the three-generational family involving the retirement of the parental generation, it would appear that such a pattern was more widespread than the ordinary stem family’). Although he does not use separate names, John Hajnal distinguishes these two forms of stem family, and maintains that the *Ausgedingefamilie* type was ‘compatible with the general north-west European household formation rules’ since the heir was in control of his new household upon marriage.\(^8\) In other words, both Mitterauer and Hajnal see the so-called stem family as more akin to the simple, nuclear family. Here, the decisive factors are how retirement was arranged within the peasant family and when control over production and the family economy was relinquished to the younger generation.

In considering other families in which the father did not relinquish control over production at the time of the heir’s marriage, Michel Verdon also reckons that ‘there is nowhere any kind of evidence to the effect that stem families were once extended families’.\(^9\) He sees the stem form as a product of a combination of several economic forces. Having surveyed the ethnographic literature on Europe and one of its offshoots, that is to say Quebec, he contends that while the private ownership of land was a necessary condition for the emergence of the stem family, impartible inheritance was not. Instead the degree of market integration in the area in question is important. Stem families are found, according to Verdon, in ‘populations which were regarded as backward pockets of subsistence production in regions where most of if not all of the agricultural and/or animal production was otherwise marketed’.\(^10\) Basque, Irish and Quebec cases all fit this pattern. Verdon’s research allows historians to relate the stem family to a specific set of economic circumstances. However, in order to have a better understanding of a particular form of the stem family within a particular cultural-historical context, more variables must be considered.

Two historical factors are suggested by Mitterauer in relation to central
and western European family structures in pre-industrial times. Although his remarks are concerned with the contrast between central Europe’s Ausgedingefamilie system and east European joint-family structures, the factors that he considers may be relevant for understanding the place of a different kind of stem family in other historical contexts. One such factor is agrarian structures. Mitterauer draws attention to the so-called Hufenverfassung (land allocated to peasant households), whose origins can be traced back to the age of Carolingian colonization, a period when market forces were relatively weak. The Hufe, supposed to be occupied by one peasant family, was an agrarian unit on which the whole manorial economy and lord–peasant relations were based. The lord’s own interest, legal provisions for landholding and succession and the way in which the lord secured the supply of ‘service’ for his estate all gave rise to neolocalism. ‘Life-cycle service’, described by Peter Laslett, as well as a particular kind of retirement arrangements in central Europe, were also evident.

The second factor posited by Mitterauer is cultural traditions. In tribal societies such as those found in medieval eastern and south-eastern Europe and in many other places, family and kin groups were structured around the idea of lineage and ancestor-worship. In the east, unlike in the west, these tribal traditions were tolerated by the Orthodox Church. Mitterauer believes that these cultural traditions helped to shape the pattern that characterized east-European marriage and family structures, and he suggests that the influence of religious and other cultural forces in earlier periods on the pattern of ‘family developments’ in later days of any other cultures should not be underestimated.

This article attempts to set the Japanese stem family in this perspective. First, we shall consider whether the Japanese family represents another kind of stem-family system: a separate, third type of family system which has affinity with neither the joint type nor the simple type. Several differences in household composition will be identified in the two seemingly ‘stem’ areas, that is, Japan and north-central Europe. The second question to be asked is what factors may have contributed to preserving this type of family system, which retained an important place throughout Japan’s traditional period and up to the second world war. Both cultural and socio-economic factors will be taken into consideration. Special attention, however, will be given to the internal division of labour in the peasant family economy, as well as the division of work tasks by generation and sex. Finally, whether this kind of stem family was bound to disappear as the self-employed agrarian family economy gave way to a modern ‘family consumer economy’ in the course of accelerating market integration and economic growth is an issue that will be addressed.
It appears that almost all the scholars who write about the stem family assume that it corresponds either to a particular phase in history or to a particular mode of family economy, that is, the peasant family economy. Verdon believes that in Europe the stem family began to disintegrate with the introduction of welfare measures such as old-age pensions as well as the growing influence of the market economy; Mitterauer, on the other hand, argues that it was the separation of place of work and residence, the establishment of a school system and, above all, the expansion of the state’s functions that were particularly important in shaping the ‘modern’ family. As John Embree noted, however, the Japanese stem family seems to have been particularly resilient. It will be interesting, therefore, to see what has changed and what remains unaltered with respect to workings of the stem-family household in a present-day affluent consumer society.

II

A conventional method of classifying family structure is to categorize households in a given community according to a set of family types. However, a mere percentage figure for multiple families or three-generational households is too crude a measure to identify the appearance of the stem family in the community in question. The size and structure of co-resident kin should be examined. Recently, Richard Wall has demonstrated that a detailed tabulation of composition of the kin group in the household in terms of the number of co-resident people other than the conjugal family unit per 100 households can provide us with a good measure for comparative research. He sets out five European cases, of which three – Iceland, Norway and Austria – cover areas where either genuine or Ausgedingefamilie-type stem forms should have existed in the past. Statistics from these three countries are summarized in Table 1. Two series of figures are used for Europe; and the Norwegian pattern is reflected most strongly in the weight of figures, while the unweighted ones are relatively more influenced by the Icelandic and Austrian populations.

The corresponding Japanese figures in Table 1 are derived from a sample of the first national census of population. The first census was taken in 1920 and its original returns no longer exist. However, Teizo Toda, then Professor of Sociology in the Imperial University of Tokyo, had access to the original census returns and by permission of the authorities made a one-in-one-thousand sample to conduct, for the first time in the history of Japanese social sciences, a ‘scientific’ analysis of the country’s family and household structures. Toda’s worksheets have also been lost, but his analysis of the 1920 sample was published in 1937. His interpretations of the results have invited much attention from
Composition of the kin group within the household: Japan and Europe
(Number of relatives per 100 households)\(^a\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship to household head(^b)</th>
<th>Whole</th>
<th>Rural only</th>
<th>Urban only</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Unweighted</th>
<th>Weighted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent(s)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Son/daughter-in-law</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nephew/niece</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandchild</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N (thousands)</td>
<td>11,119</td>
<td>8,989</td>
<td>2,130</td>
<td>189</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) ‘0’ indicates that a calculated figure is less than half the unity.

\(^b\) Spouses (in-laws) are included under the headings ‘Siblings’, ‘Nephew/niece’ and ‘Grandchild’.


Sociologists, both contemporary and present-day, but curiously enough his detailed tabulations have not been scrutinized.

Derived from a sample of the earliest national census, Toda’s published tables are the only surviving source material for the comprehensive study of household structures in the traditional period. Japan in 1920 was perhaps slightly more urbanized and industrialized than were Iceland, Norway and Austria in the eighteenth century. However, 82 per cent of the Japanese population still lived in the countryside,\(^{37}\) and there, as Embree’s description of Suye mura showed us, the prevalence of the stem family remained intact even in the 1930s. Thus the columns in Table 1 under the heading ‘Japan 1920’, which summarize Toda’s invaluable statistics, enable us to make an exact comparison with the figures for historic north-central Europe. Table 2 sets out the differences in the composition of the kin group up between the eastern and western regions of Japan (fewer kin in the western regions apart from the parent(s) of the head of the household).

The first point to note is the prevalence of the kin group within the Japanese household: 81 out of 100 households contained kin, and the
Composition of the kin group within the rural household: a comparison between regions in Japan (number of relatives per 100 households)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship to household head</th>
<th>Eastern regions incl. Tohoku</th>
<th>Tohoku</th>
<th>Western regions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent(s)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Son/daughter-in-law</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nephew/niece</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandchild</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N (thousands)</td>
<td>4,935</td>
<td>910</td>
<td>4,054</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


number increases to 90 if attention is focused on the countryside. The proportion was much larger than that for the European past where the ratio was less than one in three. In Japanese cities, the proportion was much smaller – 45 per 100 households – but even this substantially exceeded the north-central European average.

Secondly, the composition of the kin group also differed between the two cultures. In the European household, it was parents and siblings who predominated within the family, and few households contained other relatives. On the other hand, the parent and grandchild sub-groups were conspicuous in the Japanese case. The number of parents in the Japanese household was twice as large as that in its European counterpart, but that of grandchildren was six to eight times larger. Siblings and sons/daughters-in-law were not negligible, but the latter should be given more attention, as only 6 per cent of the former were married, while all in the latter category had married into the household in which they were resident. They were the wives of sons who were heirs (or the adopted husbands of daughters heirs), a group which was not found in European societies. Indeed, it is likely that one in seven families in Japan in 1920 contained a married heir with two grandchildren while another one-seventh of households included retired parents. This pattern was a little more clear-cut in rural areas.

From these observations, it may be concluded that the family household in traditional north-central Europe could extend both upwards and, to a limited extent, laterally, but that it rarely extended downwards. In contrast, the Japanese household extended laterally to a more limited
extent but could expand both upwards and downwards. The fact that both the
Japanese and European households contained a sizeable number of parents indicates that their heir continued to live in the parents’ house even after his succession to headship. On the other hand, the absence of grandchildren in the European case suggests that it was unusual for the elderly to live with their heir’s wife and children without giving up the headship of their households. In other words, although both European and Japanese households had a propensity to become three-generational in composition, and hence to enter the stem-family life-cycle pattern, their structures were different. The Japanese stem family was more conspicuously vertically structured. It is, therefore, probably safe to assume that the concept of descent line carried more weight in traditional Japan than in the European past.

III

In a 1960 article on divorce in Japan, Takeyoshi Kawashima and Kurt Steiner contrasted a family pattern in which marriage is sanctified by religion with another where ‘sanctification takes the form of ancestor worship’. With a methodology using types similar to Mitterauer’s for a European comparison, Kawashima and Steiner tried to decode Japanese marriage behaviour under an institution called *ie* (house or household). According to their exposition, the *ie* system is ‘characterized by an absence of the concept of sanctity of the marital ties…The family is not built around the horizontal axis husband–wife, but around the vertical axis ascendant–descendant.’

A cursory look at ethnographical accounts of family life in Japan reveals that the continuation of the family line is celebrated by Shintoism, Buddhism and Confucianism, and by any combination thereof. It appears that Buddhism in its very early history had made a compromise with indigenous cultural norms while ancestor-worship was encouraged by Confucian teachings in an elaborate manner. However, it is evident that this religious factor alone cannot explain the Japanese preference for stem forms over joint-family arrangements, for the idea of lineage and ancestor-worship, as Mitterauer has shown us, also had an affinity with a laterally extended family system. To what extent East Asian religious institutions played a part in the formative stages of the Japanese family pattern is not at all clear.

What is evident, however, is that the perpetuation of the family name was always desired. Kunio Yanagita, father of Japanese ethnology, began a chapter entitled ‘A wish to perpetuate the *ie*’ with a newspaper story about a 95-year-old homeless man who was discovered carrying as many as 45 memorial tablets of the deceased. Most of the 45 were his ancestors
including, presumably, remote ones. The story was interpreted by Yanagita as indicating that even for the homeless the extinction of the family line was to be avoided at all costs.¹⁹

Perhaps the best indicator of this ‘wish to perpetuate the ie’ is adoption. In Japan, adoption has been widely practised in order to create an heir in a childless marriage. As a university professor of law in the Meiji period noted, ‘adoption had its origin in Ancestor-worship’.²⁰ To acquire a son by adoption was thus the ‘duty’ of any household head should no natural heir be produced. When the Meiji government, prior to the drafting of a new civil code, took a survey of regional variations of civil customs under the old regime, the compilers thought it sufficient to note simply that ‘The procedure in adopting a son or marrying him to the daughter of the family, etc. is the same as is described in the various sections in the Chapter on Marriage.’²¹ In other words, it was so commonplace that no one needed to ask why and in what circumstances adoption took place.

Since adoption could be used to create heirs, the frequency of adoption should have been governed by demographic factors since the number of families that included no sons was affected by fertility and survival rates. A recent study of 2,121 household registers of a district west of Tokyo in the 1870s suggests that this was indeed the case. Satomi Kurosu and Emiko Ochiai show, first, that of the 20–69-year-old males in the sample, 18 per cent were adopted while 20 per cent of current households were headed by adopted sons. On the other hand, the probability of a family’s bearing no sons for the same population is estimated at 23 per cent. The latter percentage is based on 1,228 households whose head was in the 15–49-year-old age group, and is based upon the assumption that no family had become extinct between the previous and the current generation. Given that this assumption is unlikely to hold, the actual proportion of ‘no son’ cases may have been somewhat lower. Taking this possibility into account in conjunction with Kurosu and Ochiai’s third findings, that the adoption market was a little smaller than the marriage market, it seems likely that the frequency of adoption in this district was determined primarily by how many families produced no heirs.²²

Vital statistics in the 1920s and 30s are also suggestive in this respect. Table 3 shows that in 1920 8.4 per cent of the country’s marriages involved an adoption. This percentage is not quite comparable to those provided by Kurosu and Ochiai, not only because the totals in Table 3 include re-marriages, but also, and more importantly, because a substantial proportion of adoption contracts were made before marriage. It should be noted that the proportion of adoptive marriages declined to 7.4 per cent in 1935 as infant mortality fell from 166 to 107 per 1,000, raising the rate
of survival to age 20 from 693 to 762. Moreover, in 1920 the proportion of adoptive marriages in western regions was about two points lower than in the eastern half of the country.

Since mortality was always lower in the warmer west than in the climatically harsher east, the data are consistent with the above interpretation. The pattern holds in 1935 as well. Adoption, therefore, took place in heirless families, which in turn may be taken to imply that the popular wish to perpetuate the ie persisted up to and including the post-first world war period.

Let us turn to social and economic factors influencing household composition, especially in an agrarian setting, beginning with the timing of retirement. In Japan no written contracts exist concerning retirement arrangements. But we have already seen from Table 1 that a substantial proportion of the households in 1920 were at a stage in which a married couple with children co-resided with the heir’s parents while the father retained control over his household economy. According to studies of Tokugawa villages, the mean length of time between the heir’s marriage and his succession to headship varied from three to nine years. All this suggests that a parent’s retirement from and hence an heir’s succession to headship took place after the latter’s marriage, a custom which is not compatible with neo-local, simple-family-formation rules.

However implicit the contract was, and at whatever point in time the father retired, care for the elderly was undoubtedly one of the functions that, from the older generation’s point of view, the stem family was expected to fulfil. An interesting village study by Laurel Cornell of aged women born in the third quarter of the eighteenth century demonstrates that co-residence with grandchildren and even with her daughter-in-law enhanced an old women’s prospect of survival. Although the role the daughter-in-law was to assume was not clearly defined, living with her

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**Table 3**

Adoptive marriages in Japan, 1920 and 1935*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Whole country</th>
<th>Eastern regions</th>
<th>Western regions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Total marriages include re-marriages.

children had a beneficial impact on an elderly woman’s life-expectancy – she could live three times longer than a woman with no grandchildren. A more recent analysis by Noriko Tsuya and Satomi Kurosu of two north-eastern village registers finds that, for elderly women, the larger the size of the household they lived in the better the chance of their survival, which may be taken to point out the same conclusion as Cornell’s.25

However, the elderly may not have spent a leisurely life completely withdrawn from the world of work. Detailed studies of peasant households in the Tokugawa period have suggested that the amount of family labour available was critically important if the family was to continue.26 While studies often focus on the contribution of younger members of the family, the elderly in the household also had a prominent role to play.

The Japanese farm was, and still is, a family farm. It is characterized by its smallness and intensive use of human resources. Such a mode of farming can be traced back to the early Tokugawa period or even earlier. A vast number of lowland rice paddies were created in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. That made cultivation intensive, which in turn enabled peasants to make a living on a small farm. All the improvements in farming methods that developed thereafter, and the introduction of new cash crops, increased rather than decreased the intensity of farming. Much of this change had already been completed before the Meiji Restoration, but even after the early Meiji years it is estimated that the aggregate input of work hours increased up to the period of the First World War. As a result of this, the mean size of farms was as small as one hectare, into which a family might put well over 2,000 hours of labour annually.27 According to the Imperial Agricultural Association’s survey of 292 farms in 1933, the mean family size was 6.1 persons, of whom 3.0 were engaged in agriculture. Owner-farmers had larger farms, hence larger workforces (3.1 persons) than tenant cultivators (2.8 persons), but the difference was very slight. Men in the age group 31–50, most of whom headed their household, worked on average 2,156 hours a year in farming plus 492 hours in other employment. In addition, 746 hours were devoted to household and other chores, which made the total number of working hours 3,394 a year. Men aged 51–60 did slightly less productive work, and those over the age of 60, when a majority of family members started to retire, spent even less time on productive activities. However, in their 60s men still worked as many as 1,829 hours a year with 585 hours for domestic activities, and even those aged 70 or over spent in total 1,860 hours a year.28 Clearly their withdrawal from the world of productive work began after they gave up headship, in contrast to their counterparts in the European past who generally began to ‘lay down their tools’ long before retirement.29 In Japan, the process of the withdrawal was gradual.
Another feature of this mode of intensive farming is that women also worked hard. Unlike in the north-west and central European pattern, hired labour represented only a tiny fraction of the total work input in the Japanese household, and the ‘non-emergence of a class of landless agricultural workers’ made Japan’s historical experience almost unique even in an Asian context of rice production. As Embree noted, live-in servants did exist. However, according to the 1933 farm survey, for example, only 7 out of 272 farm households employed farm servants on a yearly basis, and the contribution of servants and day labourers to the total input of work hours amounted to merely 4 per cent. Instead, it was the women who supplied labour in response to changing work requirements in farming. Take the 31–50 age group, for example. The total hours spent by farm women in productive and domestic activities exceeded 3,000 a year and overstepped, although only marginally, their husbands’ working hours. Of course this figure includes hours spent on their domestic duties. However, what is striking is that the number of hours worked for production purposes exceeded such domestic work hours. As is shown in Figure 1, the former was some 140 hours longer than the latter for women aged 31–40. In sharp contrast with the pattern of male employment, women over the age of 50 devoted far less time to production activities. Correspondingly, however, the hours they spent on domestic activities increased, so that the two lines in Figure 1 cross between ages 50 and 60: 1,700 to 1,800 hours were allocated exclusively to domestic and other tasks by women aged 50–70, who were likely to
have co-resident grandchildren, which made their total work hours exceed 2,500. Even women over the age of 70 worked on average 1,400 hours annually.

It seems that such a work pattern, observed in relation to women’s life cycle, was not confined to the farm sector. The same pattern was inherent in the urban family economy too, unless it had lost its business and production functions. Even in the cities of 1920, as we have seen in Table 1, the probability of forming a three-generational family household was higher than in traditional north-central Europe. This difference is principally the result of the presence in urban commerce in Japan of numerous family shops and enterprises: the self-employed and family workers represented 77 per cent of the total gainfully employed in commerce in the whole country in 1920. In such shopkeepers’ households too, women’s work hours were long. The Japan Broadcasting Corporation’s first time-budget survey, conducted in 1941–1942, was tabulated for four occupational groups: shopkeepers, factory workers and salaried clerical workers as well as farm households. It indicated that the wives of shopkeepers worked 5.1 hours a day on business-related tasks and 6.7 hours on domestic duties. This pattern was similar to that for farm women, but stood in sharp contrast to that for the wives of factory and clerical workers who had virtually no production jobs. Unfortunately no age-specific tables are provided in this time-budget report, but it is not implausible to suppose that, for the urban family economy too, a graph similar to Figure 1 could probably be drawn if data would permit.

Clearly, in both rural and urban Japan, divisions of labour operated between the generations as well as between the sexes in the microcosm of the household economy. This accounts for the economic aspect of the question as to why stem-family arrangements were preferred by people who wanted to ‘perpetuate their ie’.

Finally, one more factor should be examined. Just as the Hufe was a foundation stone of the agrarian system in medieval central Europe, the small farm became the basis of a village community when the Tokugawa regime was established in Japan in the seventeenth century. Only the farm household (the ie), presumably represented by its head (called the honbyakusho), could hold office in a village’s administration while no other individuals were entitled to carry out transactions such as buying and selling assets. Reforms that followed the Restoration changed the nature of these transactions and other civil affairs. But the house (the ie) kept its legal status even under the new Meiji civil code. When a draft code was completed by a French adviser, provisions set out in the draft provoked fierce criticisms from traditionalists. One legal expert blasted it, saying that ‘Loyalty and filial piety will perish with the enactment of the
civil code!’ As a result of the uproar, the French-type civil code was suspended, and its section on the family was eventually replaced by a new one structured around the notion of the ‘house system’. It is, therefore, not surprising that in the 1930s Embree found that the size of a hamlet was ‘reckoned by the number of households, not by the number of people’, and that participation in hamlet affairs was ‘per household, not per capita’. Thus a legal aspect of the ie was altered by post-Second World War reforms. Nevertheless Ronald Dore, who lived in a village called Shinohata immediately after the postwar reform, encountered a strong sentiment among the villagers that it was ‘one’s duty to pass on the trust to the next generation, to keep, and if possible raise, the position of the “ie” in the community’. When a man inherited the family’s assets, the package must have included not only farmland, other tangible assets and the memorial tablets of the ancestors but also an invisible asset, the position of the ie in society.

All this, therefore, suggests that the Japanese stem family was not the type expected to be found in ‘backward pockets’ of a subsistence economy, nor was it a product of contractual arrangements concerning provision for the retired in an age before the welfare state. To put it differently, the Japanese family pattern was neither a variant of the joint family nor compatible with the simple-family system. It represents a separate third type of family system.

IV

The whole fabric of a family system does not necessarily change with either industrialization or urbanization. The Japanese stem family fared well in the early phases of modern economic growth. However, this does not imply that the ie would never change. In the west, it is suggested that much of the change in family relationships was brought about in a period after the classic industrial revolution. In Japan, it was after the second world war that a genuine transformation is said to have begun. With the postwar reforms the household (the ie) lost its legal status. This reform and a fall in infant and child mortality in the 1950s drastically reduced the incidence of adoption. In the 1960s and 70s, economic growth and massive urbanization shattered close-knit village and neighbourhood communities. The whole process was associated with an increasing separation between workplace and residence, which led to the weakening of the notion of the ie in the social hierarchy, on the one hand, and to an emergence of what Louise Tilly and Joan Scott call the ‘family consumer economy’, on the other. In the meantime, the proportion of nuclear families increased from 54 per cent at the time of the first national census
in 1920 to 64 per cent in 1975, while the percentage of over-65-year-olds living with their children and other kin decreased from 87 per cent in 1960 to 50 per cent in 1990. Thus, it is no surprise that in journalism, and even in sociology circles, ‘nuclearization’ of the family became almost synonymous with ‘modernization’ of the family.

However, the fact remains that in an age in which as many as three out of four people live in ‘cities’, still half of the elderly choose to live in either extended or multiple-family households. There are several pieces of evidence which may explain this tendency. Tables 4 and 5 summarize a detailed tabulation in a recent labour force survey. Four points may be made from the data in these tables. First, more women from three-generational households than from two-generational households worked in the self-employed sector in 1994, a fact which we could expect from the foregoing analysis for prewar times. Secondly, however, the same relationship between the generational depth of the family and women’s workforce participation holds in the employed sector as well. Thirdly, intergenerational co-operation within the household seems particularly effective when the wife of the head goes out to work, when her children are still very young. The latter two findings do indicate that the inter-

Table 4
Men’s employment status, their wives’ labour-force participation and co-residence of parents, Japan (1994)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Husband’s employment status</th>
<th>Two-generational</th>
<th>Three-generational</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) Percentage of wives in the labour force</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Percentage of wives in paid employment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Number of cases (thousands)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>1,990</td>
<td>780</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>13,710</td>
<td>4,010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The sample excludes households whose heads are unemployed, or otherwise not in the labour force.

A ‘two-generational household’ consists of a married couple and their child(ren); a ‘three-generational household’ includes the parent(s) of the head.

‘Self-employed’ includes family workers in non-agricultural occupations.

Source: Calculated from Sōritu Tōkei-kyoku, Rōdōryoku chōsa tokubetsu chōsa hōoku, rōdō chōsa shiryo no. 58 (Tokyo, 1994), 152–9, Table 20.
Mothers' participation in paid employment, the age of their youngest child and the co-residence of parents, Japan (1994)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of youngest child</th>
<th>Two-generational household</th>
<th>Three-generational household</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0–6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7–14</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15+</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The definition of the household types is the same as in Table 4, and the sample includes households whose heads are unemployed, or otherwise not in the labour force.

Source: Calculated from Sōrifū Tōkei-kyoku, Rōdōryoku chōsa tokubetsu chōsa hōkoku, rōdō chōsa shiryō no. 58 (Tokyo, 1994), 160–3, Table 21.

* Generational division of labour operates even in the family consumer economy.

Admittedly, the number of three-generational families is comparatively small (see Section (c) of Table 4). However, co-residence may not be completely on the way out as an ideal family form. A government agency’s recent (1994) white paper on ageing draws attention to the results of one survey on this topic conducted by the same agency, the Economic Planning Agency, in 1994. It shows that of 2,440 people aged 20 or over who were surveyed nearly a half wanted to live close to their parents. Those preferring ‘large families’ represent 33 per cent while ‘nuclear family’ forms attract only 14 per cent support. Any interpretation of this result depends on what exactly ‘close’ means: it may mean when the two generations live in the same neighbourhood, the same housing estate, or even in the same house while keeping ‘households’ separate.

Unfortunately the survey report does not distinguish these differences, but there is another piece of suggestive evidence of intergenerational interactions. Figure 2 is derived from the 1994 household expenditure survey, which shows how expenditure on children’s clothing varies with the age of the household head. Two sorts of commodity are chosen here, both showing a two-peak pattern. One is for purchases of the kimono, a traditional but expensive kind of dress. It is so expensive that not much is spent on them annually by parents, but more by grandparents no matter where they live. The other group of commodities is baby goods, which we would not expect to be bought by grandparents. Included in this group are clothes (excluding the expensive dress), underwear and nappies. Nevertheless, the expenditure on baby goods increases again after age 55. Since
the age groups in this chart are those of the head of the household, and hence grandchildren born to any person aged 55 or over are likely to reside in a separate household, this consumption pattern seems to suggest that there exists some kind of financial co-operation between the two generations, more particularly between an older woman and her daughter-in-law or her own daughter, even though they each live in their own household. Moreover, when parents want to send their school-age children to fee-paying schools, the grandparents sometimes help. The same household expenditure survey shows that private-school fees paid by heads of household have a similar two-peak pattern with the second peak appearing in the over-65 age group. Investments their descendants come from grandparents whether or not they were living in the same household as their grandchildren.

What is suggested here, therefore, is that some of the ingredients of the Japanese stem-family system have undoubtedly changed, but some others have not. In economic terms the family is no longer a ‘going concern’. It is a consumption unit. The old ie has shed much of its economic function as well as its legal foundation, and is no longer the building block of the present-day Japanese social and political system. The transformation may ultimately cause the importance of the patrilineal family line to fade out. However, at micro levels, interactions which we tend to expect to operate within the traditional stem-family household may continue to operate. In other words, the transformed stem family may be able to function even in an urbanized but ageing society, with far more flexible living arrangements
such as two-household housing and matrilocality marriage. Such a process would in effect be an attractive proposition for policy-makers. Yet it should be remembered that whether such ‘flexible’ stem-family forms will actually increase in numbers in the near future depends on a subtle balance between changes in demographic and economic as well as cultural factors.

ENDNOTES


2 Embree, *Suye mura*, 79.


10 Ibid., 97.


12 The neo-local principle (heading one’s own household after marriage) and the existence of life-cycle servants are two of the ingredients of Hajnal’s north-west European family-
formation system. See also Peter Laslett, *Family life and illicit love in earlier generations* (Cambridge, 1977), ch. 1.


17 The proportion of people living in administration districts other than ‘cities’, calculated from the census report.


23 The infant mortality rates are from Naikaku Tōkei-kyoku, *Nihon teikoku jinkōdō taikei, Taisho 9-nen* (Tokyo, 1924), 62–3 and 98, and *Tokyō, 1936*, 52 and 82; and life-table survival rates are from 1930 (pp. 4–5), and 1941 (pp. 5–6). The latter rates cover 1921–1925 and 1935–1936 respectively.


Based on estimates in Mataji Umemura et al., *Manpower: estimates of long-term economic statistics of Japan since 1868*, vol. 2 (Tokyo, 1988), 258. No separate figures are available for urban and rural sectors.


For a brief account of this civil code issue in the 1890s, see Sukehiro Hirakawa, ‘Japan’s turn to the west’, in Marius Jansen ed., *The Cambridge history of Japan*, vol. 5 (Cambridge, 1989), 472–7.


