Regional Diversity in Demographic and Family Patterns in Pre-industrial Japan

Until recently the population of pre-industrial Japan has been studied at the national level using bakufu estimates dating from 1721 to 1846 and at the village level using individual village and temple records extant from the mid-to late Tokugawa period. This has left us with an inadequate understanding of the population dynamics in the period. Now, from recent studies in historical demography and the history of family patterns, we have data that indicate clear regional differences in demographic patterns and family structure. However, these studies have yielded several findings that are seemingly paradoxical or at least require further study.

Demographic patterns and family structure are two very significant societal phenomena that are interrelated. For example, when a certain family structure is observed, certain corresponding demographic patterns are usually found. The opposite also holds: when certain demographic patterns are found, a corresponding family structure is expected. But in three regions of Japan, studies do not reveal what we would expect.

In the northeastern or Tohoku region where most families were stem families and a majority were multigenerational, the number of persons per family tended to be large and the age at marriage for women low, but the number of births was also low and population in the region did not increase. What explains this paradox? Ordinarily, the lower the age at marriage for women, the more children they have, and one would expect the population to increase. However, this region had a problem maintaining the population level due to its low birth rate.

A second paradox comes from Ogaki domain in the central region where the age at marriage for women was high, but the fertility rate in villages was not as low as one would expect from the age at marriage. Yet despite the high fertility rate, population did not increase in many parts of this region. Third, an ongoing study of southwestern Kyushu indicates another paradoxical pattern that differs from those found in the northeastern and central regions. In the southwest, although the age at marriage for women was high, marital fertility was relatively high and the population increased. There were also numerous premarital births.

From the accumulation of studies made over the past several decades plus the more recent analyses, we not only find these paradoxes, but we now have sufficient data from various regions in Japan to begin to draw some conclusions about population and family in the pre-industrial period, defined here as dating from the Tokugawa period when demographic data first became available until 1846.
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the mid-Meiji period when modernization, industrialization, and urbanization began to transform society.

There is a voluminous number of scholarly works on the regional characteristics of family structure in Japan. While these works have made significant contributions, none is an empirical study made using either an extensive amount of historical sources from the Tokugawa period or the statistical evidence that became available in the Meiji period. Furthermore, the northeast versus southwest dichotomy implicit in the studies made to date on Japanese family structure may require further refinement. Based on recent demographic studies, we have learned there were at least three diverse demographic patterns and patterns of family structure in pre-industrial Japan. Speaking broadly, there is no doubt that these three patterns noted above existed until the late Meiji period when the pace of modernization, industrialization, and urbanization visibly quickened and civil codes based on European legal concepts were adopted in 1898.

This article surveys these patterns, analyzing the demographic data vis-à-vis the distinctive characteristics of family structure in three regions to show how and speculate why demographic patterns and family structure differed by region. The essay starts with a discussion of approaches to family structure, followed by an introduction of historical sources and the findings of regional diversity at the macro and micro levels. It then applies a simulation analysis in order to contrast regional differences as well as to see the relationship between demographic patterns and family structure. Finally, we attempt to explain the causes of regional diversity. Our aim is not only to fill the lacunae left by the earlier studies but also to offer an overview of the demographic and family patterns of the Tokugawa and early Meiji periods, and by doing so to sketch a new image of pre-industrial Japanese society.

PATTERNS OF FAMILY STRUCTURE: CULTURAL AND STRUCTURAL PERSPECTIVES

Before discussing family structure based on empirical evidence, let us describe the following two analytic perspectives that can be adopted in researching family structure. The first views family structure as fundamental in defining the character of a society, and thus it remains unchanged over a long period. Apart from what is readily apparent on the surface, there exist substantive characteristics of family structure that stay unaltered despite changes in the environment or any external shocks. For example, those who adhere to this perspective argue that England is a society of nuclear families; they are observing a long-established historical characteristic and not an outcome of urbanization and industrialization. From this perspective, Japan is a stem family society, albeit different from that found on the European continent, and the “nuclearization” of the family structure is only a superficial and transient development that has the potential of being reversed to cause Japan’s family structure to revert back to its fundamental character: a society of stem families. This is the perspective that views family structure as a manifestation of “culture” and can be called a cultural perspective.

The second perspective holds that family structure is not constant; it changes due to changes in the environment, such as urbanization, changes in economic