CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHANGES IN FAMILY STRUCTURE

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INTRODUCTION

The form, function and composition of the family have changed over time, as have the concept and its definition. In Japan, the development of the family since the Meiji period (1868–1912) can be divided into three stages. In the first stage, the public and private spheres were not yet separate; the family was a management body or cooperative living system that was also a place of production. Stage two is the closed-off “modern family,” centred on the emotional relationships and gendered roles of its members. The third stage family is contemporary and progressive; its diversification and individualization will likely increase in the future. Traditional norms are weakening. Rather than the family regulating the life of the individual, the increasing tendency is for individuals to regulate the family life cycle.

However, these three categories are ultimately general tendencies to change. In reality, there have been periods when two different family types have coexisted. This is particularly the case for the pre-WW II period, when family structure differed greatly according to region, class, and profession of the head of household. Similarly, these changes did not happen all at once, but gradually. There are even ambiguous cases where one could say that two different stages existed simultaneously within the same family. This paper will examine transitions in the family from a sociological perspective, particularly with regard to changes in women’s labour.

1. The ie System and the “Modern Family”

No discussion of the family during Japan’s modern period can fail to mention the ie (house/lineage) system, which expressed itself in the generational inheritance and continuation of a family name, estate, and/or business. The typical ie was to be found among the samurai
class since the middle ages, but other classes too placed importance on the continuation of their houses (Ochiai 2000: 30). A civil law enacted in 1898, intended to restructure the *ie* system, institutionalized the *ie* as a group of family members governed by a head of household, thus extending the system to the entire population. Every family was required to have a head of household to whom was granted the authority to govern family affairs. Since succession to the head of household was through inheritance, one could change the head of household through the “retirement” of the senior generation, even if there were three generations of the same family present on the family register. Succession to head of household was limited to the eldest son, thus making illegal inheritance by the eldest daughter\(^1\) or the youngest child, as had sometimes been the custom prior to the 1898 law. There were regions where inheritance by the eldest daughter was common, as well as households that sent their elder children into apprenticeship, passing the household on instead to the youngest—but after the law, only the eldest son could inherit the household.

The *ie* system was abolished in 1947 with the enforcement of the new constitution, which gave equal rights to husbands and wives. A law enacted the same year fundamentally prohibited more than three generations are recorded in the same family register. These changes in family law have been considered by sociologists as representing the modernization of the family, which they contrasted with the old, feudal and patriarchal *ie* system that had prevailed before the war. In short, the common idea was that the democratic “modern family” came into being only after the war.

This is true, of course, from the perspective of legal history. However, feminist scholars have strongly criticized this viewpoint since the 1980s, arguing that designating the year 1947 as being the starting point of the modern family neither reflects contemporary thought on the family nor its actual form at the time (Sechiyama 1996: 17–21). Clearly, feminist scholars have taken a different perspective on the patriarchal family system than have traditional sociologists of the family. For traditional sociologists, the patriarchal family was a family where the head of household governed the other family members; for feminists, it was a system in which men dominated women. Therefore, the patriarchal

\(^{1}\) In cases where the eldest child was female, regardless of whether there were younger male siblings.