

AJ Forum 7

The Reality of Parent-child Relationship in Japan: through Comparison with China

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For a long time, I have conducted research on communication between internationally married couples. At the same time, I have developed a profound interest in the styles of Japanese families. Based on data from a national survey, I would like to analyze the characteristics of current Japanese family systems by comparing them with those in China and Korea.

The core discussion of the parent-child relationship is based on two theories: the “changing theory” and the “continuing theory”. The changing theory argues that the basis of the parent-child relationship in Japan has changed radically from the “house”, which used to be dominant, to the nuclear family; and from the stem family system to the couple-oriented family system. The number of extended families and three-generation families living in the same household has decreased, suggesting that the changing theory is correct. Also, the actual parent-child relationship is said to have shifted from paternal to bilateral. On the other hand, if we take the parents who live with their married sons as an example, the continuing theory insists that they are most likely to live with their first son and his wife. The theory states that, although the total number of parents who live with their sons has decreased, it does not mean that there has been an increase in the number of parents living with their second or third son. The continuing theory also argues that the first son is not only most likely to live with his parents but also most likely to inherit the family property, and thus there is no change in the lineal family system.

Another factor that affects the parent-child relationship is the transition in demography. The rates of birth and infant mortality used to be high, but both rates have declined and now the number of brothers and sisters has fallen to half that of the past. We must consider how the parent-child relationship has been transformed through these changes in the number of children. The changing theory emphasizes equality; the fewer brothers and sisters a child has, the more he/she inherits. It also states that he/she can receive more support from his/her parents when he/she has a child. On the other hand, in the continuing theory, only one child inherits the property and thus the problem of an heir may occur when the number of brothers and sisters decreases. If a family has a son, then there will be no problem, but if there are only daughters, a son-in-law is required as an heir. However, a family with only one son would not allow him to leave the house and become the heir of another family. In the lineal family system, a family without a son would have a serious problem because they must find and retain an heir. I have been studying such matters. My resource data is from a national survey undertaken by the Japan Society of Family Sociology. The focus of the

analysis is the birth cohort, which stresses the difference between the generations of the subjects. It also focuses on the brotherhood attribution of the married couple; namely whether the husband is the first or second or third son, and whether the wife has brothers.

When we look at the data for parents living with their married sons and daughters, the total number has certainly decreased, however, the constitution has remained unchanged. In most cases, the parents live with the first son and his wife. In the majority of cases where the parents live with their married daughter, she has no brothers and her husband is a second or third son. The same can be said for support from the parents, and the priority is given to the first son. Wives without brothers who marry a second or third son receive support from their parents. This result matches the rate for parents living with their sons and daughters. The support provided for a new mother is almost the same. However, the figure increases for the younger generation. This is the only example where the support from parents increased as the number of brothers and sisters decreased.

We can also look at this from a sociological viewpoint and analyze other attributes such as the economic situation or residential area. For example, one of the major factors influencing the rate for sons/daughters living with their parents is the number of brothers and/or the birth order of the husband. The rate is high when the family is self-employed and low for company employees. The size of the city in which the family resides also affects this tendency.

From this analysis, people tend to live with the first son, provide him with financial support, and help with his children. As for a girl without brothers, when she marries a second or third son, and even when the husband retains his family name, the girl's parents substantially regard her husband as an adopted son, let the married couple live in their house, and provide financial support. The "house" is to be inherited by only one child. The family property is not divided equally but mostly handed down to the first son, or otherwise to the daughter who married a second or third son. It seems that the lineal family system as well as the adoption system still remains substantially intact.

In China and Korea, if a house does not have a son, then they will ask for a boy from the father's kin for adoption, rather than accepting a son-in-law from another family. If this system is defined as paternal, then the Japanese system is non-paternal.

To summarize, the changing theory, which stresses less difference and equal opportunities among children, seems to be inapplicable, and the continuing theory, which maintains that priority is given to the first son, is somewhat supported. In this theory, priority is given to sons over daughters and to the first son over the other sons. The data also supports this theory. Therefore, I favor the continuing theory. According to the changing theory, the change in the parent-child relationship caused by the reduction in the number of brothers could imply an increase in the chance of receiving financial and child-rearing support through living with one's parents. In reality, however, as the continuing theory stresses, all these benefits seem to be concentrated on one child. If a house has no son, then a daughter and her husband, who is the second or third son of another family, become substantive heirs. In conclusion, the number of brothers has certainly decreased, and so has the rate for parents living with their married sons, however, the basic structure of the lineal

family system still remains.