

NORM STRUCTURE AND ITS CHANGE INFLUENCING THE AGED IN JAPAN*

Shuhei Yamamuro

My presentation today will focus on the discussion of the specific normative structure in Japanese society which has an impact on the life of the aged in Japan.

In every society, the life of the aged sustains significant influence from the family system in which they live. Therefore, it is critically important to clarify the family system in Japan in order to discuss the above issue. Generally, it may be appropriate to think that there exist three different types of the family system, that is the conjugal, the joint, and the stem family systems. Let us define these family systems briefly : The conjugal family system means that parents live separately from their children after the marriage of the latter ; the joint family system signifies that parents live with plural number of their married children and their several families ; and the stem family system denotes that parents live with only one of their children after his or her marriage, and the rest of the children live apart after their marriage.

In Japanese society the stem family system has been one of the most prevalent time-honored tradition. In spite of the rapid progress made in the industrialization and the extensive social changes after World War

* This is reprinted from the paper which the writer was requested to read at the symposium on 'Socio-cultural factors influencing the condition of the elderly' at the XIth International Congress of Gerontology, held in Tokyo, Japan, August, 1978.

II, the basic family system in Japan has not altered. Japanese society is quite different from such Asian societies as Chinese and Indian where the joint family system has traditionally been prevailing. In addition, the history of the stem family in Japan does not coincide with the ones found in European societies.

Then, let me point out several characteristics of the stem family system in Japan mainly on the basis of norm structure. Firstly, up until the end of World War II, the stem family system has been supported and enforced by law so that parents were legally able to secure one of their eldest son, to maintain their household and to take care of them when they become old.

Secondly, “kō” which means filial piety, had been emphasized as moral virtue under the influence of Confucianism, an ancient Chinese philosophy. Confucianism teaches that “kō” is the principle of all the human conducts. In Japan, however, Confucianism had been interpreted in somewhat different manners, and its emphasis had been placed on the virtue of “chū”, which can be interpreted as the fidelity to the Emperor and to the country. It had been taught that eventually “chū” and “kō” came to be united and they were fundamentally the identical concepts. Such normative code of virtue had been inculcated and imbued in the mind of people from childhood to death through parental socialization practices to their children at home, formal education at school, and social interactions. This normative code of virtue contributed significantly to the well-being of the Japanese people. In addition, it must be noted that the Imperial Rescript on Education played a great part in making “chū” and “kō” something sacred in people’s consciousness.

Thirdly, the “Dozoku”, and other regional and occupational sects of Japanese society resembling to the family like structure, had come into being by fictionizing the human relationship in almost all the classes and segments after the model of the family relationship mentioned above.

Under the above-mentioned condition, the aged were respected and were given such privileges as heredity, seniority, lifelong employment, and so forth. Even after the retirement, they still held the emeritus positions as councillors and advisors. Their wives were also respected as their husbands were, and they were called as "retired women". These honorable retired women engaged in such duties as their family occupations, the management of the household affairs, and the childcare.

Now what can I say about the formation of the pre-war stem family system in Japan? The pre-war Japanese stem family system had one of the roots in the modernization and the industrialization during the Meiji era. The reality of the industrialization in Japan was quite different from the one found in England. In England, for instance, farmers took an initiative of the industrialization. On the other hand, during the premature stage of the Japanese industrialization the Japanese farmers and others were placed under the menace of the Western industrial societies. Therefore, Japan had to catch up and get ahead of the stage of the Western industrialization. In order to avoid the danger of the colonization by the Western societies it was necessary for the Japanese people to receive a strong leadership of the government for the measures to enrich and strengthen the country. It was the only possible course of the action for the underdeveloped country such as Japan at that time to enrich herself by exporting cheap commodities extensively. The cheap labor cost was the essential for the production of cheap merchandise. In order to comply with these conditions the Japanese government took an action to eliminate the expenses for the social securities and the workman's compensation. Subsequently, private parties were forced to take responsibilities for these expenses. For the solution of this problem the stem family system had not been weakened but even developed in Japan. The original stem family system in Japan was organized in the following manners: one child, usually the eldest son, became the heir and inherited almost all the family properties. This son stayed at home with his parents after his marriage and took efforts to keep the family name and its prosperity as the

principal of the head family. The dispersal of the heir's brothers and sisters is inherent in the stem family system. The heir's brothers tended to migrate to the city and participated in the progress of the industrialization. They were forced to stay at the secondary positions by setting up branch families. However, in case of the crisis of the branch families such as illness, disaster, unemployment, and death, the head family extended private security support for the maintenance of their branch families. And, usually, the "Dozoku" relationship was established among the head and the branch families.

However, the "Dozoku" relationship in the Japanese stem family system had some restrictions in its private security system found in such cases as the tragic stories of the female factory workers and the sale of daughters into bondages. And, the European type of the extended family system or the kin network did not develop in the Japanese cities. The major reason for this poor development lay in the fact that the head family was kept in the village and the branch families migrated to the city. In Europe, on the contrary, in many situations there were enclosures, where all the members of the family migrated to the city to establish their new extended family and close kin network relationship.

Leaders of the Meiji restoration who were not farmers, but the members of lower status of Samurai class, directed the transformation. It is said that it took two hundreds years for England to accomplish her industrialization, whereas, it did only twenty years for Japan. And the nation's industries were continuing to grow up until the outbreak of the World War II.

Throughout the modern era of changing Japan, however, the status of the aged had been upheld with the emphasis of the moral virtue of "kō". And, therefore, in general, the aged were respected in Japanese society. The spirit of respect for the seniors was emphasized as a fine custom in the Japanese family system. Therefore, the problematic aspects

of the aged during this period were over looked.

It should be noted, however, that in most cases the status of the aged in the past was sustained at a considerable sacrifice on the part of the other members of their families. After World War II, several modifications concerning the family system had been enforced. Firstly, new and more democratic law than that of the former period was established and enforced. Secondly, "Human Declaration" was done by the Emperor, who had been honored as divine. Thirdly, there had been rapid transition of school and adult education to democratization and its pervasion. Fourthly, gross enlargement of organization and its bureaucratization were accomplished and they were followed by the innovation and the rationalization of technology. However, these social accomplishments weakened the long-lasting firm structure of the traditional family system in Japan.

In spite of the social modifications and the weakening of the family structure, the stem family system in general has been still the predominant family system in present day Japan. The coresidence rate, which shown the percentage of the aged over 65 who reside with their married children, was 76 percent in 1975. This rate is significantly high in comparison to about 30 percent in the United States and European countries.

One of the major reasons for the high coresidence rate among the aged in Japan today is that the social welfare programs such as pension plans, social securities, and social medical care, are quite poor. According to the comparative study of the aged in three industrial societies, Denmark, England, and the United States, the percentages of the aged whose income was comprised of more than half of the public welfare were as follows : In Denmark 58 for males and 67 for females ; in England 66 for males and 80 for females ; and in the United States 66 for males and 53 for females. There exists no comparable data on the Japanese aged in this respect. Nevertheless, some statistics revealed the following features of the coresidence situation of the Japanese aged.

Firstly, remarkably high proportion of the aged cannot afford to live by themselves. The percentages of such aged were 48 for males and 72 for females. Secondly, 40% of the elderly males and 61% of the elderly females coresided with their children. Thirdly, only 1.9% of the aged males and 2.4% of the aged females were supported by the public pensions. This fact reflects the poor enforcement of the social welfare programs in Japan.

It is evident that a great proportion of the Japanese aged are obliged to live on the private support from their kins and relatives. About 77 percent of the depending aged receive their financial support from only one of their children. In addition, in case of the coresiding aged even 81 percent of them depend on one of their children. However a question arises. Should they be sufficiently supported by the public, do they abolish their coresidence life-style? Then, what are the attitudes of the Japanese people toward coresidence? This question may clarify the reason for such a high rate of coresidence among the Japanese aged today. In general the preference for coresidence is dominant among the Japanese males and females across the age groups, and it is especially high among the aged. At the same time, it should be noted that the preference for the conditional coresidence rate among the Japanese of their thirties is significantly higher than the non-coresidence preference.

Now, let us discuss the situation of coresidence in the three generation extended family where the son has to support his own children as well as his parents. According to the extensive survey conducted by professors Kamiko, T. and Masuda, K. in early 70's, the percentages of the eldest son who coresided with their aged parents were 64 and 74 in the city and in the village respectively. The percentages of the aged who had been continuously coresiding with their son's families after the latter's marriage were 89 in the city and 98 in the village. These two sets of statistics reveal the existence of the traditional stem family system in

Japan today. In general, the coresidents in the village show higher rate of complete coresidence situation by sharing the facilities and the expenses than their counterparts in the city. The head of the house is predominantly represented by the father instead of the son in both the city and the village. The generational conflicts exist most frequently between the mother and the daughter-in-law in the city and between the father and the son in the village. However, the study on the daughter-in-law reveals that a considerably satisfactory human relationship exists between the mother and the daughter-in-law.

Concerning the percentages of the aged who live independently have been gradually increasing from 3.8 in 1960, to 6.8 in 1975. The majority of these aged adopted independent living styles unwillingly. In consequence, these aged do not have relatives in the neighborhood, and many of them are forced to live isolatedly from society. Even in the village the number of the independently living aged has increased suddenly because of the concentration of the population in the city. The younger generations in the village move to the city in order to participate in the highly developed Japanese industries by supplying their labor. A serious problem has emerged, that is, even the eldest son in the family who used to be the successor of the family tends to migrate to the city, and therefore, the elderly parents are obliged to live independently from their children's families.

The number of the aged who stayed in the nursing homes was about 116,000 in 1970 which was more than twice as much as the ones in 1965. According to the statistics reported in 1974 the reasons for the entry of the aged to the nursing homes were as follows : 30 percent for the family problems ; 26 percent for the financial reasons ; 23 percent for the physical problems ; 9 percent for the housing problems. It is deplorable to observe that such a high proportion of the aged stay at the nursing homes because of the family problems. This fact represents the diversity and the serious nature of the problems of the aged in Japanese society today. It clearly

signifies the situation of the loss of the dependable family on the part of the aged on one hand. On the other hand, it is a clear evidence of the anony and the struggle of the generation who is expected and supposed to take care of their old parents.

Finally, it is significant to discuss the future of the family system in Japan. Well, certainly, it is not an easy task to define the future of the Japanese family systems. However, I expect the modified stem family system would prevail in Japanese society in the days to come. Several characteristics of such family system could be stated as follows. Firstly, the modified stem family system in Japan will be formed in a similar manner as was done in the case of the modified extended family system in Western societies. This new emerging family system will be accomplished not through the constitutional regulations but through the people's living wisdoms which the Japanese learned by trial and error.

Secondary, this new modified stem family system aims at the respect for the human right of all the participants of the system.

Thirdly, there has been a custom called the "Inkyo" which means the retirement from the main family, in the stem family system in Japan. The retired elderly took an option of such semi-coresidence as maintaining separate living under one roof or on the different floors, or living in an attached house or an annex on the same premises.

It is expected, however, that a new direction of semi-coresidence would emerge in the future of the modified stem family system in Japan. There will be a trend toward a physical coresidence and a psychological independence on the part of the aged rather than a superficial and a mere physical independent living in the neighborhood. This new direction of the former type of semi-coresidence would significantly enhance the positive and constructive communication between the generations of the aged parents and their children.