

Family as a Philosophical Issue from a Japanese Perspective¹

Sakiko Kitagawa

The Japanese family has been used as a channel through which Japanese modernization has been carried out. In the process, the notion of the family state has been enforced to institute Japanese nationalism. The Japanese family in its early modern form was a social institution that coped with the state and conformed in a dubious way with Japanese nationalism. In this type of moral discourse the concept of the family has always been used as mediation between the private moral life of one's intimate circle and the public morality of social issues. The most dangerous characteristic of Japanese modernity has been that the social norms were sought mostly in the sphere of intimacy and its emotionality, and thereby people were emotionally engaged in national affairs, devoting themselves to the nation as to the family. It is necessary to rethink the meaning of the family for our moral life. And this rethinking must be based on a critical reflection of the history of the misuse of the family relationship.

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Meaning of the Modern Family

Family is a highly political issue today. The typical phenomena that characterize the family in a postindustrial society like low birth rate, increased divorce rate, and increased singles are regarded as indicators of a change in the whole social

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Myth of the Japanese Family and Feminist Criticism of the Ideology of the Family

Sociological analysis of the family in Japan has been mainly interested in the socio-historical changes in the form of the family. The main aim of prewar Japanese family ideology was to establish the modern nation state on the base of traditional communities by transforming a variety of traditional family forms to one patriarchal system. But also in the postwar period, Japanese discussion focused on the formal aspect of the family and nearly never asked philosophical questions about the concept of the family. Family was always presupposed as a stable natural form of coexistence.

To give some examples of this type of family discourse, there was an intense discussion about the formation of the typical modern nuclear family in the 1960s, the phenomenon of the separated family life between man and wife with children (*tanshin funin*) in the 1970s, and the so-called DINKS family form in the 1980s. In the background of such analysis, family was always understood as a form of natural and stable coexistence for individuals.

However, recent discussion focuses on the concept of family rather than the form of the family. The main reason for this paradigm shift is the disappearance of the family as a stable social structure. The life course of contemporary young people is not necessarily bound to marriage and family. Individual choice of lifestyle is establishing the single as a permanent life form and the long life expectancy of Japanese women makes serious consideration of 'the association after family' necessary. The collapse of the family caused by family pressures like divorce, expensive cost for children's education and for the care of old people at home is not a specific phenomenon of special social groups anymore, but a matter for every one's concern. All these developments suggest that the family is only one form of human association and not the essential one.

Nonetheless, the idea of the family has not changed so much as the reality of family life. Family as the prototype of human community, a necessary evolution from the traditional extended family to a modern nuclear family and heterosexuality as the basis for the family- such elements remain still powerful in the mainstream image of the family. The idea of the family as the natural and primordial form of coexistence is still strongly determining in our social politics and also in the 'standard average' image of successful individual life.

The essential feature of the modern family is the web of affective relations among its members. The family is founded on love between man and woman.

reality of Japanese family life. Ochiai Kumiko notices, for example, that the housewife role in Japanese society is a relatively new and limited phenomenon which emerged during Japan's rapid economic growth. Using statistical data, she argues that the housewife role is a typical female lifestyle only for women who were born between 1936 and 1950.

With the structural transformation of the economy that took place during the era of rapid growth from the late 1950s to 1973, the base of Japan's social structure shifted from the farmer and the small business operator to the white-collar company employee or 'salaryman'. Women born in the 1920s had typically married into a household which either farmed or owned a small shop or factory, where they worked alongside other members of the extended family. But since salarymen's wives generally became full-time housewives, during the high-growth era the increase in families headed by white-collar workers was accompanied by a shift for women toward full-time domestic duties. (Ochiai 1997:16)

Ochiai points out that there is no historical background for the idea of a 'traditional housewife role' and wants to warn young Japanese women of the danger of basing their lives on the idea of a 'normal housewife' or 'normal family'.

Another Japanese feminist sociologist, Ueno Chizuko, speaks of 'family consciousness', and tries to correct the general identification of the family with its social form. Modern family consciousness does not necessarily strengthen the modern nuclear family. Ueno points out that there is a gap between consciousness and form in the contemporary Japanese family. She regards the contemporary Japanese family as a queer phenomenon trapped between tradition and modernity. Many young people in a big city like Tokyo live with their parents or grandparents in the same house; they live in the form of a kind of traditional extended family. In reality, however, this extended family has nothing to do with the traditional family consciousness that understands family as an institution based on blood, sexuality, and reproduction. In many cases, young Japanese women chose this form of extended family to maintain their jobs in the expectation that the parents would help them to do the housework and take care of the children.

Such feminist analysis of the family challenges the traditional definition of family as the primal and natural form of coexistence. For example, Ueno concludes that the family is not necessarily natural and sees its identity in danger.

That peculiar sociological double role of family: on the one hand, being an extension of one's own personality, a unit which enables one to feel one's own blood circling, appears as one body against all other social units and with regard to us as an including link; on the other hand, epitomizing a complex which separates the individual from all others and developing its identity and difference in contrast to them. This double role causes inevitably a sociological ambiguity of family, now it lets family appear as a unitary entity that acts as an individual and thus takes a characteristic position in larger and in the largest circles, now as a circle of middle range (a medium-sized circle) that inserts itself between the individual and the larger circle comprising it. (Simmel 1992: 804)

Family is on one hand a private sphere the individual is emotionally identified with. It is a kind of 'extended personality'. The individual needs the 'extended personality' shared by intimate family members in order to assert her or his interest and integrity, and can therefore never abandon the feeling of belonging to a family. Especially in a modern society, this family identity works as an 'extended personality' and helps the individual to maintain her or his own independence against surrounding institutions. Yet family functions on the other hand as a public sphere where the individual establishes her or his personal independence by learning to distinguish her/himself from other members. Simmel therefore characterizes family as a social unit of middle scale and sees in the family a dynamic crossing of private and public spheres. According to him, belonging to a family is a mixture of private intimacy and public social function. It can integrate the public as well as the private.

In the history of Japanese modernization, this double role inherent in the modern family has functioned as the essential background for moral discourse. Family as an undoubted affective unit has been used as the mental background for modern moral philosophy.

Inoue Tetujiro published *The Outline of National Morals* in 1912. The aim of this 'national morality' was the education of Japanese people into a nation with clear national consciousness, especially to prepare people for nationalism and militarism. In this project of inventing a modern state, the concept of the family has played the main role. Inoue, who studied in Germany, was very conscious of the necessity of modern moral education. The project of moral modernization

the first arena in which care, respect, and deference to authority are learned, the family plays a much more principled role for Japanese moral theory.

Kyoikuchokugo is the most impressive and problematic example for such an ethical role of affectivity. A large part of this text was for ordinary Japanese people not understandable, especially for young children who were forced to read this text every day at school. The language used in *Kyoikuchokugo* reveals, however, the hidden intention of this text. Only the part describing filial piety as the basic duty is written in relatively understandable Japanese. This part played the key role to grasp the meaning of the whole text. If one reads it, one is tempted to interpret the required loyalty to the Emperor by referring to one's own family.

Ye, Our subjects, be filial to your parents, affectionate to your brothers and sisters: as husbands and wives be harmonious, as friends true; bear yourselves in modesty and moderation; extend your benevolence to all; pursue learning and cultivate arts, and thereby develop intellectual faculties and perfect moral powers; furthermore advance public good and promote common interests; always respect the Constitution and observe the laws; should an emergency arise, offer yourselves courageously to the State; and thus guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial Throne coeval with heaven and earth. (*Kyoikuchokugo*, 1890)

As this passage is written in one sentence, the Japanese morality was conceived as a consistent loyal attitude to the whole of human relationships. The strong stress on the family relationship should substitute the lacking legitimacy of the Japanese modern nation state. The concept of the public is also charged with strong affectivity. It is the primordial mother-child relationship that constitutes the basic model for this affective public sphere.

Watsuji Tetsuro who conceived an ethics of betweenness, for example, grasps the mother-child relationship as the prototype of the collective ethical body.³ In the case of the nursing mother, there is no separation between the body of the mother and that of the child. They are combined into the same identical body that feels joy and pain simultaneously. The subject of feeling is for Watsuji always this collective body. Emotion has an involving power. As a feeling person, one is always referred to as a common world with other people, and opens

3. Especially p. 65 ff. in the first volume of *Ethics*.