

RESTORING ORDER TO THE HOUSE OF JAPAN

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by Margaret Lock

In a study conducted six years ago, a team of Japanese researchers asked children in Korea, Taiwan, and Japan to draw a picture of a typical evening meal. Although most of the children depicted a family sitting together around a dinner table, a significant number of the Japanese children drew a single child holding a bowl of noodles while seated in front of the television set. These results reinforced a concern already voiced by influential commentators in Japan, including government officials, that the modern family was in trouble, its individual members too occupied with their own activities to find time for each other.

Not everyone shares this concern, of course. Nor does it conform with what many Japanese, from farmers to small business owners, see in their own daily lives. Nevertheless, the sentiment that Japan may be paying too high a human price for its economic "miracle" is certainly in the air.

If, for example, one scans the headlines of newspapers and popular magazines published during the past 15 years or so, one is left with a distinct impression of unease: "More Girls, Housewives Becoming Drug Addicts"; "Schools Reverting to Corporal

Punishment"; "The Dying Family"; "More Family Suicides"; "More Middle-Aged Men Killing Themselves"; "Housewife Anxiety Rate Rises to 98%." In one article that appeared in a 1984 edition of the influential *Asahi* newspaper, "Japanese Youth Unhappiest, Despite Economic Growth," the author worried that young people were part of "a floating generation, without any sense of purpose. And the real problem lies in the family."

Yasuhiko Yuzawa, a sociologist of the family at Tokyo's Ochanomizu University, cautions that the media frequently take statistics out of context, creating the mistaken impression that the family is developing along pathological lines. He claims that the incidence of serious family disorders, including infanticide, parricide, family suicide, illegitimacy, and divorce, has not increased in absolute terms. In his view, the modern Japanese family is not in crisis.

But such voices of moderation are increasingly drowned out by a chorus of high-placed worriers—government bureaucrats, leaders of the long-reigning Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), commentators from various academic disciplines and professions known collectively as *hyōronka* (social critics). In official documents and



Painting of a traditional family scene by Miyagawa Chōshun (1682–1752).

the media, these commentators, mostly conservative, tend to advance a common critique. They charge that the social and psychological maladies that accompany modernization—alienation, depression, assorted neuroses, anti-social and even criminal behavior—have been aggravated, if not caused, by the disappearance of the traditional “extended” family and its replacement by the modern “nuclear” family: a household restricted to parents and children. According to the *hyōronka*, the modern family, by failing to cultivate traditional values, has allowed selfish individualism to erode concern for the well-being of the family group. And without strong group loyalties, the commentators caution, the health of the nation is itself at risk.

Not surprisingly, Japanese mothers receive much of the blame for the family crisis. Social critic Jun Etō offered what may be described as the typical conservative diagnosis in his widely discussed 1979 article, “The Breakdown of Motherhood is Wrecking Our Children.” Etō argued that danger-

ous “ideologues” had encouraged people to think that women who devote their lives to raising children are victims of a “feudalistic, slavish, and humiliating” patriarchal system. If too many women come to accept this ideology, he warned, Japanese children would inevitably suffer.

Critics of the reactionaries, including Yasuhiko Yuzawa, say that the contemporary family deserves praise not blame. In addition to playing a crucial role in Japan’s postwar recovery, it reduced the exploitation and abuse of women and children. Yet other commentators, particularly women critics such as Keiko Higuchi, believe that while the structure of the family has changed, the old gender inequities persist. They endure, they say, because traditional values, particularly notions about women’s “natural” inferiority and subordination, have not significantly changed.

Debate over the family—and women’s role in it—has intensified during the last decade, but it is not new. In some respects, the most recent round began as early as

1868, at the beginning of the Meiji Restoration. Setting out to create a modern nation-state, a process already set in motion by the preceding Tokugawa regime, the Meiji leaders at first appeared to commit themselves to certain liberal reforms. The inferior position of women immediately became a bone of contention, and a number of influential Meiji politicians such as Yukichi Fukuzawa and Arinori Mori called for fairer treatment of women and the abandonment of such practices as the keeping of concubines.

Masanao Nakamura, another prominent Meiji statesman and a Christian convert who traveled extensively in the West, helped popularize in Japan the contemporary European notion of "the affectionate wife, wise mother." Translated as *ryōsai kenbo*, the phrase was used by Nakamura much as it was used in 19th-century Europe: to promote the idea that education would make women better able to nurture and educate their children at home. Nakamura made his position more palatable to conservatives by arguing that such education would emphasize moral values and domestic science. Partly in response to foreign pressure, the Meiji government took steps to implement some of Nakamura's suggestions.

Modest though it may seem, the status accorded the *ryōsai kenbo* represented a vast improvement over that of women in most pre-Meiji samurai and merchant households, a status crudely summed up in the epithet "borrowed womb." At the very least, the good wife and wise mother was able to exercise authority in her own household. She did not exist simply to produce offspring for the paternal line.

Encouraged by such progress, women themselves began to campaign for their

rights, but their efforts soon came up against a rising tide of criticism directed against liberalism and the "unsettling" influences of the West. Conservatives, particularly discontented samurai, gained greater influence within the Meiji leadership, and when the Meiji Civil Code was instituted in 1898, it stripped women of almost all of their gains. Despite liberal-sounding language and certain concessions to the *ryōsai kenbo* ideal, the code effectively denied women any legal standing, relegating them to the same category as the deformed and mentally incompetent. Furthermore, the code imposed on all of Japanese society the family order of the warrior samurai class, an arrangement that gave the male head of the household all power and left women with virtually no control over their lives, property, or families.

Above all, the Meiji Civil Code reflected the regime's growing concern for standardization and social control. Before its adoption, family arrangements had been quite flexible in Japan. Inheritance practices were loose enough to provide for the needs of individual families, and marriage and courtship customs were subject to local variations. People living in some rural areas were allowed to choose their own marriage partners, for example.

But various as Japanese family arrangements had been, all of them could be broadly subsumed under the concept of the *ie* (pronounced *ee-ay*), which roughly translates as "household." Referring both to the house and its residents, the *ie* emphasized the ties of the living family, a property-owning corporate group, both to its ancestors and to the generations to come. The *ie* did not extend lat-

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erally. Only the married couple, their children (biological and adopted), and grandparents lived under one roof. All children except the one designated as heir were expected to marry out of the *ie* and become incorporated into other households, often at some distance from their birthplaces. (Modern Japanese cities are largely populated by descendants of sons who could not expect to inherit property.) Unlike the peasant families of China, in which the division of patrimony gave rise to large, extended clans, Japanese families tended to be small, self-contained economic units. But, again, the make-up of the *ie* varied considerably according to region and class.

To eliminate such variety, the Meiji leaders imposed the rigid discipline and formality of the samurai class on the families of farmers, artisans, and merchants. Inheritance was formally restricted to the eldest son, who, unless he was mentally incompetent, assumed complete responsibility for the stewardship of the family fortune and for the well-being, behavior, and marriages of other family members. Women were no longer allowed any say in choosing a spouse, and were not even secure within a marriage until they had successfully produced a male heir. The Confucian tenets of filial piety and unquestioning loyalty governed family relationships, and the primary obligation of all family members was to preserve the continuity of the *ie*.

Thus organized, the *ie* served as a highly effective tool for the promotion of loyalty and patriotism. By fusing the ethos of emperor worship with the new household ideal, the Meiji rulers fostered the concept of a family-state (*kazoku kokka*). Each *ie* became a microcosm of the nation, the all-encompassing family unit of which the Emperor was the parent figure.

The Meiji strategy of state-building, with the highly formalized *ie* at its center, sur-

vived up until the end of World War II. Not all Japanese families conformed to the samurai *ie*, despite the wide influence of the Meiji bureaucracy, but it is this arrangement that most people have in mind when they talk about the traditional family.

The end of World War II was the beginning of the end of the Meiji *ie*. Among the many reforms the Allied Occupation forced the Japanese to adopt were laws and codes affecting the family order and women's rights. The Revised Voting Law of 1945 gave women the right to vote and run for electoral office, and subsequent legislation established the principle (if not the reality) of equal education and equal pay for equal work. The Revised Civil Code of 1947 dealt directly with family matters. It dismantled the legal foundation of the Meiji *ie* by assuring women the right to marry whom they chose, to sue for divorce, and to inherit, own, and control property.

It would be naive to assume that the traditional family disappeared overnight, but change was under way. In certain respects, however, the nuclear family was nothing new. Households had begun to shrink well before World War II. During the 1920s, only about 30 percent of all families had three or more generations living under one roof, compared with 20 percent today. The mean size of households went from five in 1930 to three by the early 1980s, in part because of the growing number of single-family households. As such figures suggest, the transformation of the prewar extended family into the postwar nuclear family was far less dramatic, at least demographically, than conservative rhetoric would lead one to believe.

The "nuclearization" of the family during the postwar years was accompanied by a related phenomenon: the rise of the New Middle Class. Indeed, in the usage of many Japanese social analysts, the modern nuclear family and the New Middle Class have

become almost synonymous. This often makes it difficult to determine what the label refers to—class, family arrangements, values, or all three. Reality and rhetoric are further confused by the fact that, in polls, 90 percent of all Japanese respondents identify themselves as thoroughly middle class. (And while there is much less of an income spread in Japan than in the United States, the gap between the salaries of, say, business executives and factory workers is wide enough to make such survey responses almost meaningless.)

Despite its imprecision, the term New

and Westernized behavioral patterns—all of these, claim the conservative *hyōronka*, have disrupted the traditional forms of control formerly exercised by the powerful head of the *ie*. They point to the fact that the *ie* of old was not only an economic unit but the locus of spiritual values, prominent among which was veneration of the ancestors. The felt presence of the ancestors legitimized the authority of parents and made the fulfillment of parental obligations a sacred duty. The moral and spiritual training of children was considered the most important task not only for parents but also for



The typical nuclear family of Japan's New Middle Class: father, mother, and two children.

Middle Class appears frequently in the media, where, like the *ie* of prewar days, it is taken to mean the living arrangements and the ethos of the majority of the population today. The average New Middle Class household—inevitably suburban—includes a white-collar salaried husband (the “salaryman”), a homemaker wife (an updated good wife and wise mother), and two studious children. And it is this family that commentators point to when they discuss Japan’s declining spiritual health.

Gender equality, liberalization of parent-child relations, egalitarian inheritance laws,

grandparents.

Not so in the modern household, say the *hyōronka*. The elderly have been abandoned, condemned to “dying alone and unwanted.” And without the watchful gaze of the ancestors, young couples, especially wives, are inadequate to the task of raising the future citizens of Japan.

Some Westerners may be surprised to learn that the modern Japanese housewife has been judged so deficient. After all, in our press and even in scholarly studies, the Japanese housewife appears to be the model parent, the real secret behind Ja-

pan's postwar success. In a recent *National Geographic* article, for example, journalist Deborah Fallows reports that "it is a commonplace statement in Japan that the nation's hardworking housewives are its secret weapon . . . the backbone of the nation that enables its men to perform their economic miracle, and the insurance that the next generation of Japanese will behave in the same hardworking way." Many in the West have read that the Japanese mother is impeccable in her housekeeping, tireless in the care and education of her children, and stoical in her acceptance of the fact that she must do all of this on her own. While her husband is gone all day, she scrupulously attends to the family budget, works for the PTA, or drills her children so they can pass the stiff school entrance examinations.

While this image, and the praise that attends it, may still be "commonplace" among some Japanese, the conservative political establishment and a growing number of social critics present the housewife in a far less flattering light. One stereotype that frequently appears in the media is that of the new housewife in her fully automated household, a creature of luxury and ease who enjoys *san shoku hiru ne tsuki* (implying an easy, permanent job with three meals and a nap thrown in). Conservative commentators blame these "professional" housewives for what is called the "feminization" of the family. Modern mothers, they say, are preoccupied with their children and enter into a "symbiotic" relationships with them. Several writers, including the physician Shigemori Kyūtoku, author of the best-selling *Illnesses Caused by Mother* (1979), have suggested that young women have lost their "natural child-rearing instincts" and begun to treat their children like "pets."

By many accounts, suburban mothers themselves are suffering. Prominent Japanese psychologists claim that young moth-

ers are excessively controlling and compulsively fastidious. As a result, they are particularly vulnerable to a host of new *bunmeibyō* (diseases of civilization), including "high-rise apartment neurosis," "moving-day depression," the "kitchen syndrome," and "menopausal syndrome." But, to most *hyōronka*, women's liberation is not the solution. One Tokyo physician explained to me that even though women had become neurotically obsessed with "trying to create a good child," they had also lost their ability to persevere. "They've lost all that since women's lib," he concluded. "They have poor self-control now."

What, then, is a suburban Japanese mother to do? Damned if she stays at home, she is damned if she ventures out. Seeking employment outside the home, most conservative *hyōronka* say, is both unseemly and unnecessary. It leads to the "masculinization" of women. Fortunately, one respectable option now exists: that of the "New Mother." According to professor and author Masatoshi Takada, the "New Mother" skillfully balances part-time work, hobbies, and family life. The "New Mother" is deemed successful if she can negotiate the narrows between selfishness on one side and obsession and loneliness on the other. It remains to be seen whether the "New Mother" will become a workable model of motherhood for future generations of women, but at least it offers a possible escape from the present double-bind.

In some ways, fathers receive even harsher blame for the perceived family pathology. Their greatest fault is absenteeism. Casting what critics call "a thin shadow," modern fathers are seldom at home. When they are, they serve as weak role models, failing to apply discipline when it's needed. Recently, a widely circulated Health and Welfare Ministry document called on men

to demonstrate more masculinity in what it implied were mother-centered families.

The question, of course, is how they will do this. It is difficult, if not impossible, for most salaried employees to spend more time with their families. Their normal days are long, and evening drinking bouts are considered part of an executive's responsibilities. Salarymen are also required by their companies to be away from their homes for extended periods, often for months and, in the case of foreign assignments, for years at a time. (It is widely believed that refusing such assignments jeopardizes one's chances for promotion.) To make matters worse, families are seldom given a relocation allowance, and even if they were, most parents would be reluctant to disrupt their children's schooling. As a result, temporary single-parent families are quite common in Japan. But while many critics lament the problem, few closely scrutinize its connections with the demanding corporate culture that governs the lives of so many Japanese men.

The media are also quick to point to the various "stress-related ailments" afflicting businessmen, including heart problems, loss of appetite, impotence, and insomnia. Again, however, *hyōronka* lay the blame on overwork and "weak personalities." Ridiculed even in the comics, the "worker bee" of today is cast as an incompetent husband and father. Gone, critics suggest, is the controlled samurai masculinity that characterized fathers of earlier generations.

Given their views of modern mothers and fathers, it is hardly surprising that professional critics think that Japanese children are also in trouble. One topic lately receiving wide media attention is the "school-refusal syndrome." A child suffering from this affliction typically remains in bed all day, listless, depressed, and unable to face the challenge of school. While some commentators claim that this syndrome is

rampant, I suspect that its incidence is such that a similar rate would cause little concern in North America.

However widespread, the "school-refusal syndrome" is one of those maladies, so beloved by the media, that crystallize a society's anxieties about itself and its health. The typical school-refusal child comes from a nuclear family; he (for it is nearly always a boy) has an Absent Father and either a Selfish or an Obsessive Mother. He may well be fed pre-packaged food by his mother, and his brain functions poorly as a result of countless hours spent in front of a television. He is bad at playing with other children, does not get on well in groups, "sticks out" inappropriately, and may even be physically weak. His personality is dangerously deficient. He may be stubborn, timid, withdrawn, or egotistical, and he sometimes becomes violent. He suffers from stomach problems, headaches, and even kidney or heart disease.

It is easy to see how the school-refusal child reflects all that is thought to be wrong with the New Middle Class. It is also obvious why the school-refusal syndrome serves as an ideal rhetorical device in the conservative critique of Japan's social ills. Not everybody believes the rhetoric, of course, but very few Japanese dismiss it out of hand, for at least two reasons. First, the rhetoric is used by people in positions of authority, and respect for authority, political as well as professional, is still strong. Second, there is a kernel of truth to it. Modern "professional" housewives do lead lives of comparative ease, certainly more comfortable lives than were led by most women who went before them (with the possible exception of the aristocracy). While most people in Japan—men, employed women, and children—are worked to the limit of their endurance, the housewife has time to play tennis or decorate sugar cubes for her afternoon cup of tea. Even suburban house-

wives confess to some guilt about their condition. When surveyed, such women report that they believe that running the household and raising children is crucial; nevertheless, most of the women I interviewed characterize themselves as being (at times) weak-willed, lacking in self-control, and inferior to their own mothers.

But there is also a third reason why so many people are listening to the worried *hyōronka*. By the year 2025, people 65 and over will make up a remarkable 23.4 percent of the Japanese populace. Government officials view this “graying of Japan” with something close to panic. What, they wonder, will be done with all of these old people if the nuclear family of the New Middle Class makes no place for them?

In recent media discussions of the issue, government and conservative commentators have called for a return to the traditional extended household—the *ie*—with one rather important modification. Instead of the authoritarian father, the good wife and wise mother will be the center of the revived *ie*. Rather than making plastic flowers or decorating sugar cubes, she will become the primary provider of services to her extended family. She will look after her aged parents-in-law and take care of any family members who have chronic illnesses or disabilities. She will continue to invest much of her time caring for and educating her children. And she will practice frugal home economics to accumulate savings that can be used to supplement meager old-age pensions.

What goes generally unacknowledged in the official literature is the fact that many women already do all of these things—and

often hold down jobs in addition. Studies indicate that married couples quite often take in their elderly relatives, usually after their children have married and left the household. Nor does one have to look very far to find a middle-aged woman who has spent years of her life nursing an incontinent parent-in-law.

There is no question, though, that Japan faces the same decision all other modern societies face: It must determine how the burden of caring for dependents such as children, the sick, and the elderly should be divided between the family and the state. Japanese social and economic policy, as promoted for most of the postwar era by the ruling LDP, extracts a large amount of labor from its workers, keeps taxes reasonably low, and carefully limits social services on the assumption that the family should be willing to take up the slack.

But in any postmodern society, particularly one that is rapidly “graying,” such a system leaves many people uncared for. If present trends continue, it is estimated that by the year 2008, the number of full-time housewives will equal the number of elderly suffering from senile dementia or other serious infirmities. This doesn’t sound like the harmonious extended *ie* that the ideologues invoke when they call for a return to the “good” old days. Nor does the rhetoric square with the fact that at present the majority of women work out of economic necessity and that many men are deprived of a family life altogether. It is little wonder that a growing number of people are beginning to wonder what economic growth and development are really all about, and for whose benefit they race blindly on.