

Preface

Having lived in the United States for nearly 15 years, my return to the native land of Japan was a shock. I realized that Japan was a small country, but not so small that the institution of the family could be analyzed uniformly. I had come to the point where I could view my own country with the objectivity gained from valuable comparative insight. Following my extended stay overseas, I lived in rural Niigata for a few years teaching at a graduate school for international relations. It was my first experience living in rural surroundings in Japan. My encounter with the region was a total surprise.

“Coming out of the long tunnel I saw snow country,” writes Yasunari Kawabata, a Nobel Prize-winning Japanese author, when he begins his tale of *Yukiguni* (The Snow Country) (1937). He had just passed through the 9.7-km-long Shimizu Railroad Tunnel that connects the two sides (the Pacific Ocean and the Japan Sea) of Japan. The snow-covered land at the tunnel’s end was in contrast to the sunny winter day the narrator had left behind in Tokyo. The contrast that Kawabata describes is one that also permeates the fabric of the Japanese society and the institution of the family as well. What I saw in the family and households in the rural farming area of Niigata truly reflected the coexistence of modern living based on the traditional nature of Japan. This realization inspired me to look at Japanese families through these two visions of the dual structure perspective and regional variations.

Today we live in the Information Age, and the world moves toward a global society. When news of Japan floods the media, events are not necessarily reported correctly. Part of this problem comes from the inability of Japan to clearly state its point of view to the global society. This inability, in turn, is partly because the Japanese people themselves lack a fair knowledge of Japanese history. This book, therefore, is an attempt to alleviate the situation through the field of family sociology.

Sometimes I have felt I was a “voice in the wilderness” among Japanese sociologists, insisting it is vital to study the regional groups in a country. My studies have focused on Japan and the differences among people in the various areas. “Although Japan is a small island country, the cultural diversity from one region to another is extensive,” I wrote. I have also sought to explore the “dual structural model”—where

traditional values meet modern ideas. In analyzing family issues such as demographic characteristics, courtship and marriage, divorce, and the elderly in Japan, this book emphasizes the significance of two theoretical frameworks: the dual structure and regional variations of the community network in Japan. Thus, the hypothesis to be tested in this book is that family issues in Japan vary from region to region. At the same time, it is hoped to find the existence of continuities sustaining the traditional nature of the Japanese family and household. Therefore, family issues in Japan in these areas are studied most effectively and appropriately through these two theoretical frameworks.

This book is a sociological study of the Japanese family. More specifically, topics include demographic changes, courtship and marriage, international marriage, divorce, late-life divorce, and the elderly living alone. The method of analysis adopted in the study is qualitative with a historical perspective rather than a quantitative orientation.

In the title of the book, the expression “the elderly” is replaced with “older adults” as the former is considered ageist in a number of academic circles and journals in Western societies today. Using the expression “older adults” in the title is a reflection that I am aware of this recent trend in Western societies. Furthermore, those who go through the process of late-life divorces are likely people in their middle ages—40s, 50s, and 60s—not necessarily those 65 and over. In Japanese, the equivalent expression to older adults, the elderly, and elders is only one, i.e., *korei-sha*. In the Japanese language, “seniors” may have a positive connotation as being experienced, senior ranking, or respected. Personally, however, the phrase “the elderly” does not sound offensive or discriminatory at all to me as I never used it in a disrespectful way. In the text, therefore, the expression “the elderly” is kept throughout, because I use the term to refer to the generalized category of the people 65 years old and over.

The special feature of this book is the prefecture and community-level discussion of family issues in Japan rather than taking Japan as a whole through the MANDARA mapping presentation. This way of graphic presentation will enable readers to easily grasp regional variations in Japan. Thus, the book provides insightful sociological analyses of Japanese demography and families, paying attention not only to national average data but also to regional variations and community-level analyses. It is a paradigm shift from former studies of Japanese families, which mostly relied on national average data. In this book, the focus is placed on sociocultural variations and the diversity of families in Japan. For these reasons, I believe, the book is an invitation to more in-depth qualitative dialogue in the field of family sociology in Japan.

This book also attempts to contribute to an understanding of the Japanese family and demography from the Japanese perspective, rather than the Western point of view, for which there are many publications. This new book builds powerfully upon my earlier works by taking the reader deep inside an institution normally hidden to non-Japanese eyes and revealing its regional variations. It is my hope that readers will be fascinated to realize that such regional variations have long been rooted in Japanese history. The knowledge of regional variations which exists in my small

island country will encourage the reader to reevaluate his or her perspective. The book also sheds light on how and in what direction the Japanese family will be shifting in the process of unprecedented population aging in twenty-first-century Japan. For these reasons, I believe that this book will be of great interest not only to Asian scholars but also to other specialists in comparative family studies around the world.

Bringing this book to successful completion has required a lot of work and a great deal of time. Fortunately, I was able to convince Lawrence R. Blake, formerly a professional editor, to assist me in editing, rewriting, and bringing the manuscript to publishable form. Through experience gained from his editorial and writing professions, Larry always seems to know intuitively what I am trying to say and how best to say it. Besides this, his work is always meticulous and his attitude is sincere. Without his support, I would not have been able to complete the numerous tasks required to publish this book.

Sincere acknowledgment is also extended to various individuals and institutions. Without their cooperation and warm support, this book project could not have been accomplished. It is next to impossible to list them all, but let me list a few. Jayanthie Krishnan, editor of Springer Asia, and Vishal Daryanomel, assistant editor of Springer Asia, encouraged me to pursue writing a monograph by providing me with insightful and meticulous instructions on the final editing of the book. Last but not least, special appreciation is extended to two anonymous reviewers of the manuscript for their critical but truly constructive comments. Their professional support was essential for the completion of this project.

Tokyo, Japan

Fumie Kumagai

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With Special Attention to Regional Variations

Kumagai, F.

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