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Transformations of Family Norms: Parents' Expectations of their Children's Family Life Style

—Hideki WATANABE*—

What is the institution of the family, and how is it changing? How is the family preparing its members to adjust to further change? As globalization move forward, how does the definition of the family as an institution differ from one society to another?

This paper presents an image of the variety of family norms from an international comparative survey. From the viewpoint of international comparison, the family pattern of any one society can be seen as only one example of the diverse family patterns that are possible.

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I. Trends of Family Change

People's conceptions of family vary from time to time, and from society to society. The conception of family brings a certain order to families in a given society. If the word "order" is too strong, one may say "a sort of pattern" instead. Although today's families are different from traditional ones in most cultures—due in part to globalization, it can be seen not as a disorder or a collapse of the family, but as an emergence of new possible family patterns. As people move from one society to another, as they exchange ideas and images of families by way of media and personal relationships, those new possibilities become real and within reach. It is important to probe into the features of these new family patterns.

Some specific trends in family norms have been noted in particular countries and regions of the world. These and other trends are due not only to the awareness of alternatives, but also to how those alternatives are viewed. For example, in Europe and North America recently there is a great increase in cohabitation and children born outside of marriage. Specifically, in Sweden more than half of children are born outside of marriage¹⁾. This statistic appears to be due to the large number of couples who do not have their marriage legally registered²⁾. In France and the United States, one out of every three babies is born to an unmarried mother³⁾. With the exception of Japan, whose extramarital birth rate have been hovering around 1%⁴⁾, the rate has been increasing steadily in many advanced nations since the mid 1960s. These changes have been accompanied by a decrease in the social stigma attached to cohabitation and extramarital birth, although the causality is unclear. Did attitudes toward extramarital relationships and children become more tolerant because there were more families living that life style, or did the life style become more common because attitudes were more tolerant? Although one cannot say that the increase in the number of extramar-

ital births in these countries brings no problems, the extremely small number of Japanese extramarital births may be due to the inveterate discrimination those families face in that society.

This paper first presents an image of the variety of family norms from an international comparative survey. From the viewpoint of international comparison, the family pattern of any one society can be seen as only one example of the diverse family patterns that are possible. Through learning about other family patterns, our conceptions of families are made relative, and we are given the wide variety of choices of what families could be.

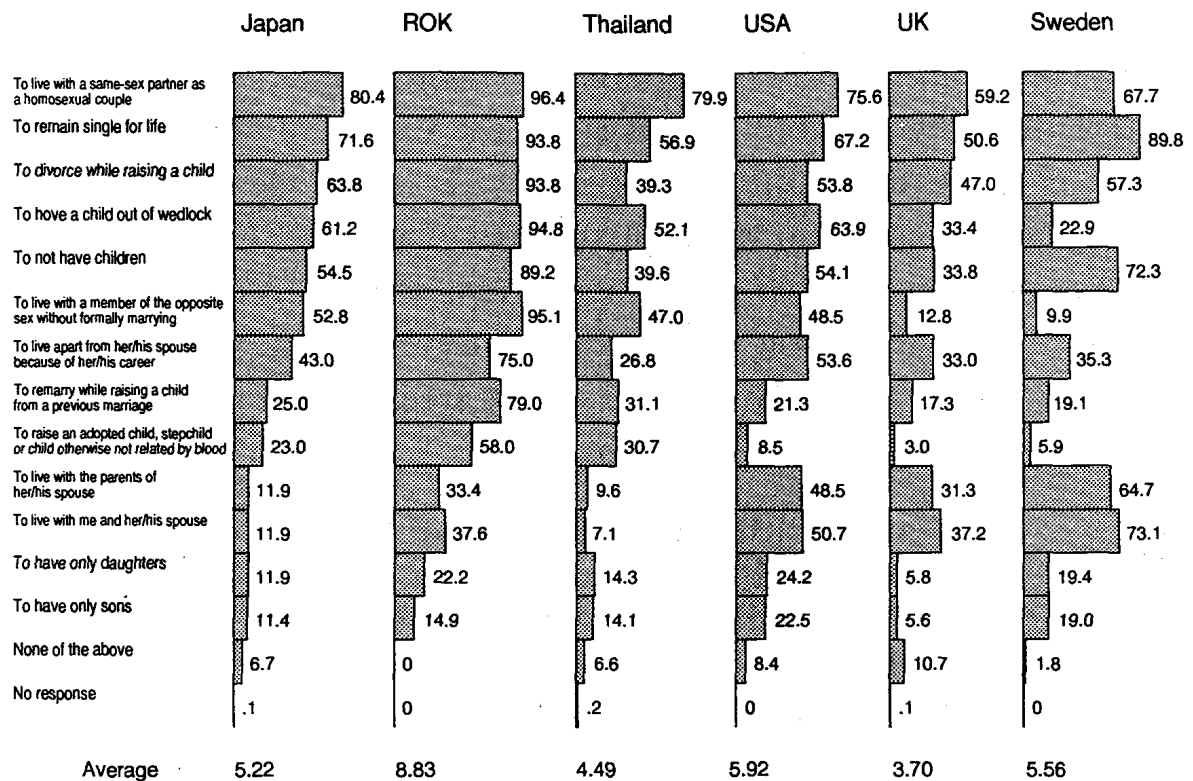
II. An International Comparison of Family Norms

We can see the conceptions of families that give order to family life or family-related behavior—that is, family norms—by examining the results of an international comparative survey conducted in 1994 commemorating the International Year of the Family (Japan Association for Women's Education, 1995). Approximately 1,000 parents, including nearly the same numbers of mothers and fathers, in each of six nations (Japan, Republic of Korea, Sweden, Thailand, United Kingdom, and United States) were interviewed in their homes. Parents were instructed to think about their child between the ages of 0 and 12 years whose birthday was closest to the interview date.

Figures 1 and 2 report the results of the question which asked, "As her/his parent, which of the following types of lives do you not wish for (*name of child*) in the future? Give as many as you like." Parents were given 13 life styles to consider. Their answers reflect some of the family norms of each society. Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents in each country who indicated that they did not want that life style for their child. The items are arranged in descending order according to the number of Japanese parents who indicated that they disapproved of the life style.

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Fig. 1 Future lifestyles that parents want their child to avoid (M. A) (%)



* The average number of responses is calculated by dividing the total number of responses (excluding "none of the above" and "no response") by the number of completed questionnaires.

(Source: Japan Association for Women's Education, *International Comparative Research on "Home Education"*; *Survey on Children and the Family Life*, p92)

III. The Structure of Family Norms

First, we will look at the "shape" formed by all 13 bars (or 14 if "nothing" is included) of each country in Figure 1. The "shapes" can be divided into two groups: Japan, South Korea, and Thailand are very similar, and the United States, the United Kingdom, and Sweden can be grouped together. (One could also note that Thailand and Sweden have their own "shape" within their groups.)

This comparison seems to say that the structure of family norms is different between the three Asian nations and three western nations. Examining which items seem to account for the difference between the two groups helps to explain the contrast. The parents

from the Asian countries report relative resistance to life styles which include "to raise an adopted child, stepchild or child otherwise not related by blood", "to remarry while raising a child from a previous marriage," and "to live with a member of the opposite sex without formally marrying." On the other hand, the parents from the western nations report resistance to items such as "to live with parents of his/her spouse," and "to live with me and his/her spouse". These findings suggest some clear contrasts between western and eastern cultures. In western cultures (or at least in these western cultures), parents do not expect to live with their married children. In eastern cultures, parents expect to raise children who are related to them by blood and find it difficult to accept or understand non-blood-relative caregiving relationships.

Within the overall western and eastern patterns, Sweden presents a unique "shape." In all five of the other countries, the most unfavorable family life style is "to live with a same-sex partner as a homosexual couple." But in Sweden the rejection rates of "to remain single for life" and "to not have children" are higher. It is clear that Swedish parents strongly expect their children to get married or have a partner (although cohabitation is accepted), to have children (although it is okay if those children are not related by blood or if the parents get divorced), and to stay independent and not to live with parents. Apparently living as a couple and becoming a parent are essential to fundamental family life in Sweden. Therefore we could consider that they maintain a firm commitment to family, in spite of generous norms regarding legal marriages, whether partners are the same or opposite sex, and whether children are related by blood or not.

Another contrast places the United States and Thailand in the same category; in both countries parents rate having a child out of wedlock as less desirable than getting divorced while raising a child. In the other countries parents rate the two life styles as essen-

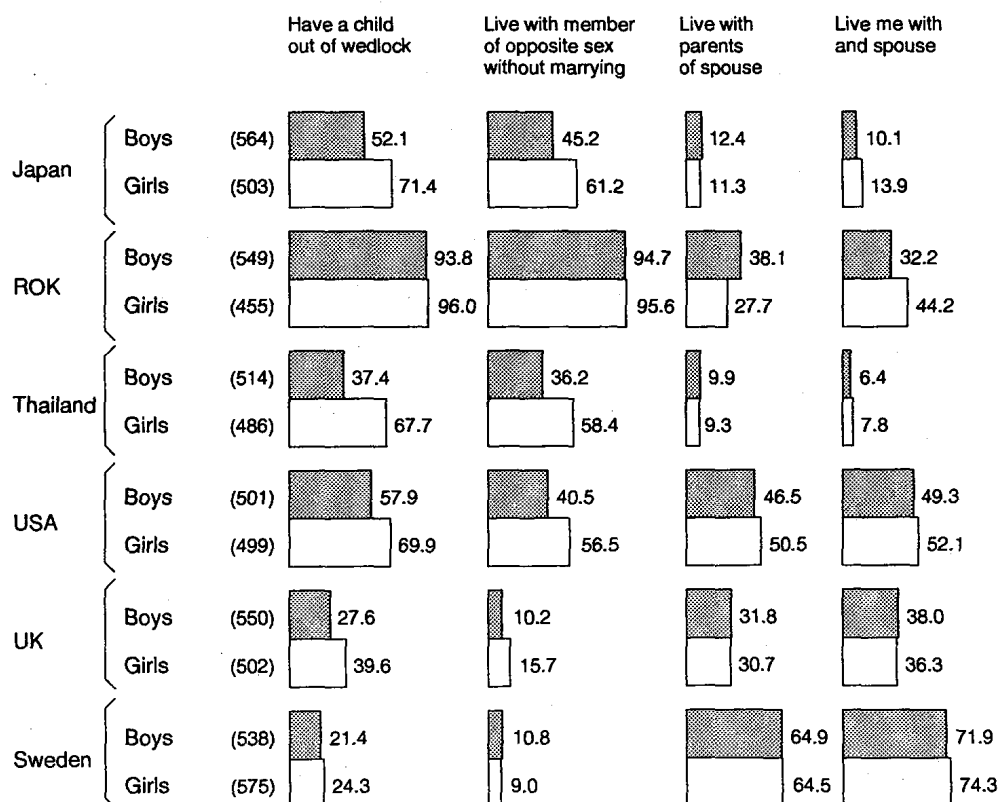
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tially equally undesirable or rate divorce as being worse than having a child out of wedlock. In both items, marriage is seen as important to childrearing. When marriage is not part of childrearing, however, parents in the U. S. and Thailand have been quicker to accept divorce than having a child outside of marriage.

IV. Family Norms and Gender

Figure 2 shows the parents' answers to the same interview question, but looks at their answers regarding daughters compared to sons. Again, Sweden shows a unique pattern. Swedish parents' expectations do not differ when their children are girls or boys. In other countries the rates of rejection of four possible life styles differ depen-

Fig. 2 Future lifestyles that parents want their child to avoid (according to child's gender) (M. A.) (%)



(Source: Japan Association for Women's Education, *International comparative Research on "Home Education", Survey on Children and the Family Life*, p93)

ding on the child's sex. In those cases, the rates of rejection of life styles for girls are almost always higher. An exception is South Korean parents who expect couples to live with the husband's parents, not with the wife's. However, a close look at the responses shows that it is still more acceptable for the boy to break that norm than for the girl.

The comparison by gender shows that, except for Sweden, parents feel resistance to girls taking alternative family life styles. This may reflect the higher probability of a woman experiencing social rejection when she takes on a varied life style than a man would. This survey therefore again confirms the existence of a double standard regarding family behavior based on sex.

V. Intensity of Family Norms

We have looked at the "shape" of the bar graphs. Now we will look at the "area" occupied by the 13 bars. A wide "area" means that certain intense expectations are held regarding the children's futures, because a large percentage of the sample reported that they did not want their children to have a large number of life styles. This could be a sign either of clear values and direction as individual families and as a society or of rigidity and restrictiveness. On the other hand, a small "area" means that parents have either weak expectations or flexible ones. If their expectations are weak, an extremely small "area" could mean that parents have lost family norms and are in a state of anomie. If their expectations are a sign of flexibility, the small "area" of the graph could indicate high degrees of acceptance and unconditional love.

South Korea's "area" is clearly the greatest. South Korean parents answer "Don't want" to 9 items out of 13 on average, and over half of the South Korean parents rejected 9 of the 13 life styles. This shows that South Korean parents reported resistance to their children taking varied life styles and may be rigid in their expectations

for their children's future family life.

The United Kingdom has the smallest "area". The parents rejected only 3.7 items on average, and only two life styles were rejected by more than half of the sample. Thai parents indicated "Don't want" to 4.5 items on average, only 3 items were rejected by more than half of the sample, and the area of the Thai bar graph is also small. It can be interpreted that the expectations for children's family lives in these countries is varied and flexible, or that family norms have become loose without any firm expectations. (It should be noted, of course, that only 13 family life styles were included in the survey, and that parents were asked only about what they would reject, not what they would support or encourage. It is likely that there are a number of other life styles that respondents would have either rejected or supported.)

VI. The Family: Post-Institutionalization and Re-Institutionalization

Considering the family as an institution, one can identify several stages or types of institutionalization from this study. Sweden's responses show a unique "shape" and cover a moderately large "area," and Sweden's families include a large number of cohabiting couples and children born out of wedlock. The institution of the family appears to be based on compound norms shared by many people, and there are clear expectations that families will conform to those norms, although the norms appear to be unique to Sweden, Figure 1 seems to indicate that Sweden is moving away from the traditional family institution and progressing with the formation of a new family institution—re-institutionalization.

In contrast, the United Kingdom has a very different pattern. The "area" of its responses is very small. It is possible that the family institution is weakening and that the U. K. is in post-institutionalization. As for Thailand, it is difficult to interpret their

results based on the author's limited knowledge of the country. The small "area" of its responses could represent flexibility in the family institution as it has traditionally been conceptualized in Thailand, or it could represent laxity of the family institution as evident in post-institutionalization. In any case, South Korea can be said to have a tight family institution, while Thailand and the U. K. have loose ones.

Finally, let's look at Japan. Japan and South Korea have the same basic "shape" of responses, but their "area" is quite different. The structure of the family institution is similar, but the intensity of the institutional expectations is lower in Japan. Compared to the United States and Sweden, Japan also has a smaller "area," although the difference is scant. These results seem to indicate that Japan does not have very resolute or firm expectations for their children's future family life styles. Whether Japanese parent's family conceptions are becoming diverse and flexible, or Japan is losing the family norm and entering a state of anomie, it is aiming toward a new institutionalization of the family.

VII. Family as an Incomplete Institution

In the midst of great social change, the family institution must change as well. The coexistence of a tight or rigid family institution and rapid social change is impossible. For instance, the combination of patriarchal/patrilinial society with a decrease in the birth rate in South Korea has resulted in an imbalance in the ratio of boys to girls at birth. According to 1991 data⁵⁾, the ratio of boys to girls is 112.7 to 100. The difference becomes more marked as more children are born into the family. The birth rate of boys is around twice that of girls in third- and fourth-born children.

Andrew Cherlin⁶⁾, the U. S. family sociologist, commented on problems faced by step families, a family form which has increased dramatically in the United States in recent years. Those families look for

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the norms and culture to give guidance to their behaviors as remarried couples and parents with step children, but the norms and culture are not yet clear. Cherlin called the remarried family an incomplete institution.

In our changing world, not only the remarried family, but all families are in the condition of being an incomplete institution. The re-institutionalization of the family means the formation of new guidelines for family behaviors.

NOTES

- (1) Council of Europe, Recent Demographic Development in Europe, 1995. See Fig. 3.
- (2) Sorrentino, Constance, "The Changing Family in International Perspective", Monthly Labor Review, March 1990.
- (3) See note 1 and U. S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1994.
- (4) Ministry of Health and Welfare, Vital Statistics 1994 Japan.
- (5) Young Ju, Yoo, "Family Issues Related to Fewer Children and Aging in Korea", Asian Women's Forum, What's happening to Asian contemporary families, Kitakyusyu-Japan, 1995. See Table-1.
- (6) Cherlin, Andrew, "Remarriage As an Incomplete Institution", American Journal of Sociology, vol. 34, 634-650, 1978.

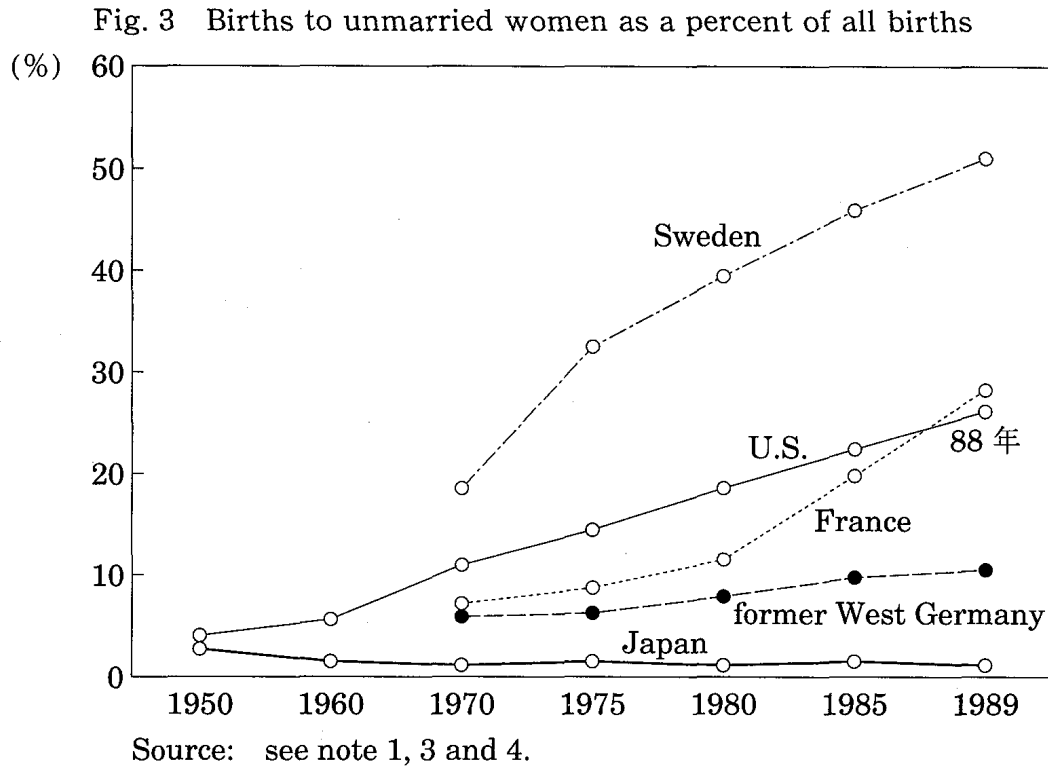


Table 1. Sex Ratio at Birth in South Korea

Unit: per 100 female births

Birth Order	1982	1985	1988	1991
Total	106.9	110.0	113.6	112.7
1st	105.5	106.3	107.2	106.0
2nd	106.1	108.2	113.5	112.6
3rd	109.3	131.7	170.5	182.8
4th	114.2	153.8	199.1	206.4

Source: National Statistical Office, Annual Report on the Vital Statistics, 1992.

(quoted from Young Ju, Yoo., 1995)