

Chapter Eleven - Marriage and Family

I. Reading

Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow

Regardless of whether we are talking about Japanese or Western families, two things complicate our study and make it more difficult. First, there are considerable differences among families within both groups. Worse, when you look at countries with high immigration levels (like the U.S., Canada, and Australia), one has to consider both the new-country and old-country family traditions and patterns. Finally, we are living at a time when the family itself is changing very rapidly, both in Japan and in the West.

Look at the changes that have occurred in Japanese family life. It's uncertain how many families ever actually lived like Tora-san's (男はつらいよ, *otokowa tsuraiyo*), but it's certain that the Kuruma family was meant to represent a standard of Japanese family life of the time. How much of your family can you see when you watch one of these old movies? An extended family living under one roof, with the women staying at home or running an on-site family business, in a relatively close-knit community in which everyone knows everyone else—this was once viewed as the typical Japanese family. The picture today is quite different.



Surprisingly, the same is true in many Western countries, especially those with large immigrant populations. Not only do the families change as they adjust to the “new world,” but they change in response to the changes in society, as do all other families. Whereas our image of the western family is the typical nuclear family, that is a fairly recent phenomenon.

Once upon a time...

Believe it or not, there was a time in the last century when families in Japan and Western countries were not so different. Differences in family life were more likely to be a result of whether one lived in the city or in a rural area. The fathers worked, the mothers stayed at home with the children, and there were often grandparents or other relatives living in the same house or very nearby—the typical extended family. These were strong traditions both in Japan and in Europe, and the immigrants who came to the “new world” (U.S., Canada, etc.) brought these traditions with them. World War II affected family life similarly in Japan and in the West: the men went to fight in the war, and the women stepped in to take their men’s places in the workplace. When the war was over, the men returned home to their jobs, people started raising families, and created what we know as the post-WWII Baby



Boom.

However, after this, something strange happened. As these boomer children in the west grew

up, Western women returned to the workplace. They also began to demand the same rights and freedoms that they had enjoyed while men were at war. What was called “Women’s Liberation” was only one of many dramatic changes that took place in the Western world beginning in the sixties. This period saw revolutionary changes in the family, society, culture (especially music), science, etc. Interestingly, women in Japan have been much less active in asserting themselves until recently. This is one reason why Japanese and Western families look a bit different today. One might also be able to look at Western society today and see some changes that may be coming to Japan in the future.

Just as you’ve heard

Many of the common ideas you’ve heard about family life in the west are true, though the reasons for the differences and how the differences work in the larger system may be difficult to understand. In the west, many more women work outside the home (see Chapter Nine), and consequently, the men are more likely to share more of the housework. Families tend to spend more time together, with the father taking a more active role in raising the children. Daycare for children and baby-sitting are much more common than in Japan.

Of course, divorce is much more common, too. Even though Japanese divorce law changed significantly in 2007, there are still many legal, social, and psychological factors that pressure couples in Japan to stay together. There is still a social stigma associated with divorce; both men and women who have been divorced are treated differently in Japanese society, though this is changing. With so many people divorcing and remarrying in the west, there is little stigma there associated with divorce—unless of course, the number of divorces gets too big! Families in Japan put considerable pressure on couples to stay together, and the general belief is that this is always better if children are involved. In the west, not only is the individual happiness of the partners valued more highly, but it is also believed that, in many cases, a divorce is better for the children, especially if the couple’s troubles make for an unhappy home environment. The biggest factor, however, is women’s earning power. In Japan, women have been largely dependent on their husband’s salary for their well-being. Western women have been much more likely to have their own jobs and careers and be more financially independent. Simply, women in western countries get divorced because they can. If you look at statistics worldwide and eliminate religion as a factor,¹ the countries in which the women have the greatest social and economic equality tend to be the countries with the highest divorce rates.

Future shock

As radically as family life has changed in the last one or two hundred years, it’s possible that even greater changes lie ahead. Certainly, as women’s earning power in Japan increases, corresponding changes in the family will occur. Science and medical technology will also have an effect on families. More and more, the notions of marriage and childbearing are drifting apart. While we may consider it “natural” for people to get married and raise families, that may be less true in the future. Even today, many couples are choosing not to have children at all, and many countries now recognize same-sex marriages. Until recently, making a baby required a man and a woman, but artificial insemination, surrogate mothers, and even cloning already have changed how we think about that. Medical science may be able to produce human life completely in the lab in your lifetime. No one can predict what effect these developments will have on family life in Japan or in the West.

¹ Countries with large Roman Catholic populations have very low divorce rates because the Catholic Church prohibits divorce.

II. Comprehension Questions

If you have a difficult time answering these questions, read the passage again. If you can't find the answer, make a note of your question and ask the teacher for an explanation in your next class.

1. How has Japanese family life changed since the time your grandparents were young?
2. What important changes in society started in the 1960's?
3. How were these changes different in Japan and the West?
4. What are some of the factors affecting a country's divorce rate?
5. What do you think the "typical Japanese family" will be like for your grandchildren?

III. Thinking

New words and expressions

What are the main points in this chapter?

General summary of main points.

List some examples from your own life or observations that support these points:

List some examples from your own life or observations that do not support these points:

Your reactions and opinions: