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# Images of the Family on Stage in Early Modern Japan

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This study examines the popular images of a number of demographic and family events and relationships as portrayed in the Kabuki plays of early modern Japan. The events examined include marriage, adoption, divorce, inheritance, betrothal and others.

***Keywords*** : FAMILY, MARRIAGE, ADOPTION, DIVORCE, INHERITANCE, KINSHIP, PARENTS, CHILDREN, KABUKI, THEATER.

## INTRODUCTION

What images does popular theater show us of family life in early modern Japan? In this paper I define early modern as the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. My data sources are the popular Kabuki plays largely written during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Plays written during the twentieth century are known as "modern Kabuki" within the Japanese Kabuki tradition and so do not fit the early modern paradigm (Mizuochi 1993, p224).

Popular culture as seen in popular plays, novels, poetry and songs can be good sources for understanding the attitudes, values and norms of a society. E. P. Thompson used popular culture for his classic study *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). Lawrence Stone also used the most popular plays of the period he studied as part of his data sources to understand changes in family values and sexual behavior (1977).

Popular literature has also frequently been used as a data source for scholars of Japanese history and the issues addressed can be quite varied. Nishimura Hiroko (1993), for example, uses an anthology of tales compiled in the early twelfth century to study marriage during the ancient period of Japanese history. Anne Walthall (1991) uses popular literature for her study of peasant protest and Kazuko Honda (1988) uses Kabuki plays among her sources for her study of the folklore of child abandonment in Japan.

Although there are some problems, Kabuki plays and the related narrative tra-

ditions including dance and puppet plays are an excellent source for popular attitudes. These narrative traditions are essentially oral, or semi-oral traditions. The words are written, but much of the performance depends upon the music which was not written until the twentieth century. The result is that unpopular plays were lost from lack of performance, and forgotten when not taught to the next generation of performers. There are no Bachs in this tradition. An old play can be revived only if someone composes new music for it. Therefore, limiting the sample to plays still in the performance repertoire virtually guarantees that they were popular when first performed and have generally remained so over time. Even so, there are nearly 300 plays in the popular performance repertoire. Even after limiting my survey to plays written during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that use the family or family relations as a framework, I used some fifty plays for this study.

One of the problems with the plays as an historical data source is that the wording in the plays is rather fluid and has changed over time according to the requirements of censorship as well as public opinion (Mitchell 1976). These changes, however, are well documented and rarely change the important relationships in the plays (Nakauchi and Tamura 1927).[1] In this paper I focus on the general plots and relational settings rather than specific lines of dialogue, so the fluidity of dialogue should not be a problem.

Kabuki theater was an important part of urban life in early modern Japan. According to tradition, the art began as dance pantomimes used by prostitutes to attract customers. Later, the actors were separated from the prostitutes and confined to specific entertainment sections of the city (Gunji 1990, 192-193). With this background, it is probably no coincidence that prostitutes and courtesans play a major part in many plays. In spite of the official restrictions, however, there were many unlicensed theaters both in the major cities and the provinces and troupes toured villages as well as castle towns (Gunji 1990).

As popular theater, Kabuki plots tend to focus on the shocking, scandalous and the melodramatic. As presentational theater, emphasis is placed on evoking emotional reactions in the audience with various scenes and situations. Many plays are based upon real events—murders, robberies, suicides, and historical events. Legal prohibitions against dramatizing contemporary political events merely caused these events to be rewritten as historical fiction. Plays portraying suicides and double suicides were so popular and influential that they caused suicide epidemics in the population regardless of government efforts to discourage them. Government pressure did not prevent playwrights from producing these plays or including other behaviors the authorities would prefer to discourage in the plays (Mitchell 1976).

Although there is some debate by Japanese scholars, the research evidence suggests that the early modern Japanese family was a stem family. There were major

regional differences in household forms and the way household formation rules were applied, but these rules appear to have generally followed a stem family system (Yonemura and Nagata 1998). Under this system one child stayed home to succeed to headship of the household and family—in some cases groups of related households called *dozoku*—and the rest generally left home by the time the heir married. The heir tended to be the eldest son, but there were alternatives in case there was no son, no child or the expected heir was unsuitable. These alternatives included adopting a son or son-in-law and, of course, other siblings were also possible heirs. The potential sources for dramatic conflict in the system are obvious. In this paper I examine how the system is represented in the performance repertoire.

## MARRIAGE

Arranged marriages called *omiai* were more common than "love marriages" in Japan even twenty or thirty years ago. Even today arranged marriages are not uncommon although less popular. In the population registers of early modern Japan that historians have been using for demographic research, however, there is no record of how the marriage was contracted. Frequently there is little apparent difference between a marriage and an adoption. When a woman appears as someone's wife when previously she had been a daughter, sister or aunt, then we assume that she married. On the other hand, divorce appears to have been frequent as was remarriage after divorce. So who made the decision to marry and who decided the divorce?

In *Manju Musume* (Chikamatsu Hanji and Chikamatsu Kasaku 1783) the heroine O-Tani marries Karaki Seiuemon without her parent's permission by taking Usami Gouemon as a substitute parent. This suggests that parental permission of some form was necessary for a legal marriage, although there were ways around the requirement. Later in the play Seiuemon divorces O-Tani and properly marries her little sister to gain a legitimate reason to avenge his father-in-law.[2] Since the tale is mainly about warrior vengeance, the requirement may have been limited to the warrior class. Other plays do not support this requirement for commoners. In *O-Chiyo Hanbei* (Chikamatsu Monzaemon 1722), for example, O-Chiyo has been married twice before marrying Hanbei, her father-in-law dislikes her, and her father dislikes her father-in-law. This treatment in the plays is also supported by legal cases regarding the early modern crime of adultery. The Tokugawa courts apparently defined commoner marriages by their registration on the population registers and not by other formal ceremonies such as betrothal (Ishii 1988, 272-282)

When parents choose a bride for their son—natural or adopted—the

promised bride is called the *iinazuke* or the betrothed. In *Nozaki Mura* (Chikamatsu Hanji 1780), Hisasaku betrothes his step-daughter O-Mitsu to his foster son Hisamatsu because she has fallen in love with him. Hisamatsu, meanwhile, has fallen in love with the daughter of his employer O-Some who is betrothed to another man. Similarly in the play *Hokaibo* (Nagawa Shimesuke 1784) Matsuwaka betrays his betrothed Nowake for another girl O-Kumi.

Several plays mention that the hero and his betrothed have been brought up together as siblings. Sawaichi and O-Sato, a very happily married couple in the play *Tsubosaka* (Anonymous 1887), were brought up together in this way. Kaheiji, the main character in the play *Ikudama Shinju* (Chikamatsu Monzaemon 1715), was also raised like a brother to his betrothed O-Kiwa. This last play is particularly interesting in two other respects. First, Kaheiji has an elder sister and a younger brother in his household, so he did not grow up in O-Kiwa's family. Second, this play by Chikamatsu Monzaemon is based on a real event which lends more credibility.

As with Hisamatsu and O-Mitsu above, betrothals are not always made as children. O-Mitsu's father betrothed her to Hisamatsu because she had a crush on him. In another play, *Asagao Nikki* (Yamada Kakashi 1832), a father betrothes his daughter to the man she had already privately promised herself to.

Marriages in the plays are not always arranged. A number of plays have couples and households formed by love matches. In *Izayoi Seishin* (Kawatake Mokuami 1853) a former monk named Seishin has a courtesan lover and they set up a household as husband and wife and become robbers. In *Seigen Sakura Hime* (Tsuruya Namboku 1817) a young woman falls in love with a man after her family has been destroyed and sets up housekeeping as his wife in Edo where she supports him working as a courtesan.[3] Households of this last type with a woman working as a courtesan to support a man—often her husband—are quite common in the plays. This is an arrangement that also appears in legal suits during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Ishii 1988, 272-282). Nevertheless, young lovers on the Kabuki stage are more likely to opt for double suicide when times are difficult than to set up housekeeping.

In short, marriage in the Kabuki repertoire does not generally mean household formation, but household continuation. The elder generation, usually the parents, carefully chose the marriage partners of their children and tried to ensure that they liked each other. In most cases, the couples that just establish a new household without the blessing of their parents are couples that get into trouble.

## ADOPTION AND INHERITANCE

Research using the population registers of peasant villages has shown that adoption and headship succession were important aspects of family life (Kurosu 1997; Okada and Kurosu forthcoming; Nagata 1998, 1999). Although this research has been largely limited to peasant families, evidence shows that these were important concerns for merchants, artisans and warriors as well (Kagawa 1989; Nakano 1978, 1981). Adoption as a mechanism for assuring a capable and acceptable heir has great potential for conflict and popular theater can give us insights to the tensions within the system.

In a number of plays the eldest son or heir is discredited by people who hope to be chosen as heir in his stead. In *Igagoe Dochu Sugoroku* (Chikamatsu Hanji and Chikamatsu Kasaku 1783) a cousin uses this method. In *Keisei Hotoke* no Hara (Chikamatsu Monzaemon 1699) a younger brother uses this strategy. Of course a strategy that will get the eldest son disowned will also work with an adopted son. Chouemon is the adopted heir in the play *O-Han Chouemon* (Suga Sensuke 1776). In this play, Chouemon's adoptive father Hanzai has remarried and his new wife has a son Gihei from a former marriage. This step-son tries to get Chouemon disowned so he can replace Chouemon as the adopted heir. Similarly, a merchant shop journeyman tries to discredit his employer's adopted son so that he will take his place as adopted heir in *Tateba no Taheiji* (Tsuruya Namboku and Fukumori Kyusuke 1850). Perhaps the most interesting twist on this theme is *Kirare Yosa* (Segawa Joko 1853). In this tale, the adopted son and heir of a shop gets himself into mischief so he will be disowned and the real son of his adopted father can inherit the headship.

In addition to plays in which a third person tries to discredit the heir so as to take his place, there are a number of plays in which the heir gets himself into trouble and is disowned. Whether the heir was the adopted or natural son, and whether he was framed or caused his own trouble, the trouble itself is remarkably consistent. Usually the heir is disowned for a combination of two actions. The first and most important is that he lost the family fortune. The fortune was either stolen from him, he gambled it away or he used it on a mistress. In the case of a mistress, she is a courtesan and he is determined to buy out her contract. The second action in the combination that may cause him to be disowned is to take a lover—whether a courtesan, one of the housemaids or some other woman—when he is already married. However, having a concubine or mistress was a socially acceptable method for a man to ensure that he had heirs (Otake 1984). Therefore, the main reason an heir was disowned must have been financial mismanagement which would endanger the future of the family.

In some of the plays featuring adopted heirs, the adopted son maintains some sort of contact with his birth family. In these plays, we can see which son is

adopted out and which remains to become head from a different angle. In *Tateba no Taheiji* (Tsuruya Namboku and Fukumori Kyusaku 1850) above, the adopted heir Yohei was the third and youngest of three brothers in his birth family. Hanbei is the adopted son of an Osaka green grocer in *O-Chiyo Hanbei* (Chikamatsu Monzaemon 1722). According to the tale, he was adopted at the age of five from a warrior class family. He returns to his birth family for a visit after his younger brother becomes head and a castellan. In *Umegawa Chubei* (Chikamatsu Monzaemon 1711), Chubei is the adopted son and heir to a delivery business. His birth family are rural farmers from a peasant village, but no mention is made of siblings.

In short, the continuity of the family depended upon having capable heirs to take over management of the family in each new generation. This capability was far more important than blood ties and an incapable heir could be replaced through adoption. At the same time, sons who did not inherit in one family could be adopted as heirs to another. By this method, the two families strengthened their social ties as the adopted son maintained relations with his birth family as well as becoming a member of the adoptive family.

## FAMILY TIES

In the Japanese stem family system, collateral kin tended to leave rather than remain home unmarried. Whether family members left the household for marriage, adoption or work, years might go by without meeting each other. Moreover, family members could lose contact with each other. Of course, population registers cannot tell us that family members rarely met, but apparently the registers sometimes lost track. The Kabuki plays certainly used the dramatic possibilities in this situation.

In the play *Benten Kozo* (Kawatake Mokuami 1862), for example, Benten is a member of a group of thieves that set out to play a scam on a merchant. As he talks to the merchant, however, he realizes that the merchant is really his father. Similarly, when an adopted son leaves his adoptive family to help his elder brother in the play *Tateba no Taheiji* (Tsuruya Namboku and Fukumori Kyusuke 1850), his brother never recognizes him even though he stays at his brother's house. In yet another play, *Numazu* (Chikamatsu Hanji and Chikamatsu Kasaku 1783), a man meets and helps a merchant on the road and is invited to stay the night at his home. He later realizes that the merchant is his father, but the merchant does not realize the relationship.

This lack of recognition between close relatives is also used in tragedies. In *Hitotsu Ya* (Takeda Izumi et al. 1762), an old woman bent on revenge is killing travelers for their money. When her daughter comes by, the old woman fails to

recognize her and kills her as well. In yet another play, *Izayoi Seishin* (Kawatake Mokuami 1853), a young man gets into trouble because money he was holding for someone else was stolen from him. At the end of the play he discovers that the thief was his elder brother who did not recognize him or even know he was there at the time.

In spite of the above tragedies, family ties are also presented as very strong and important in the Kabuki plays. Perhaps the above tragedies were intended to show the problems that occur when family ties are cut or lost. More often, relatives interfere to mediate problems and rescue family members. Thus an elder brother mediates when a married man takes a lover in *Shinjū Ten no Amijima* (Chikamatsu Monzaemon 1720). The elder brother of a local lord mediates the problems his younger brother causes in *O-Chiyo Hanbei* (Chikamatsu Monzaemon 1722). A grandmother retrieves a girl who is ready to commit double suicide with her lover in *Nozaki Mura* (Chikamatsu Hanji 1780).

In a far more complicated relationship, a maid who is also the lover of her employer is married off to the leading man ıt employee of the household's business and they are given the funds to set ›ranch shop. When her son—the illegitimate son of her former employer—later gets into trouble, the wife of the new head of the family and business helps him out and his foster father pays his debts in *Abura Jigoku* (Chikamatsu Monzaemon 1721).

## PARENTS AND CHILDREN

One of the debates regarding the early modern Japanese family concerns infanticide. Most scholars agree that infanticide existed, but disagree on how common it was or the reasons behind it. Contemporary authorities assumed that poor peasants chose infanticide out of despair in times of financial hardship. Since these authorities were concerned with maintaining an agricultural work force, they combatted the practice with fertility incentives, legal restrictions and anti-infanticide propaganda (Sawayama 1998: 188-194). Many scholars have also made the same assumption (Hayami 1986: 290). Other scholars have suggested that infanticide was used as a kind of family planning strategy (Hanley and Yamamura 1977; Smith 1977). Carl Mosk, for example, argues that infanticide was used to eliminate the weak so as to ensure the survival of other stronger children (Mosk 1978). Superstition is a third explanation suggested by Hiroshi Kawaguchi who uses evidence from the diary of a rich merchant who supervised the infanticide of several of his children (Kawaguchi 1994).

The Kabuki repertoire is not very helpful regarding popular attitudes toward infanticide. Early modern playwrights seem to have found suicide a more melodramatic solution to despair than simple infanticide. In the play *Fude Uri Kohei*

(Kawatake Mokuami 1885), for example, Kohei has two daughters and an infant son. His wife died in childbirth and he has just lost the clothes on his back to debtors. Kohei's final solution is for the entire family to commit suicide, but he is stopped by a neighbor and they survive with the help of neighbors and friends. Similarly, a young woman who becomes pregnant by a married neighbor decides to kill herself out of shame in *O-Han Chouemon* (Suga Sensuke 1776).

Despair may not have led to infanticide on the early modern stage, but there are several plays in which parents kill their children. Let's consider the situations behind this extreme action as presented in the plays.

*Ichi no Tani Futaba Gunki* (Namiki Sosuke et al 1751) is a historical play set during the civil wars of the twelfth century. Kumagai Naozane is appointed to lead the battle against a young warrior courtier named Atsumori and bring back his head. The many legends surrounding Atsumori usually paint him as young, beautiful, talented, courtly, kind, brave and innocent. In addition, Naozane's wife is an old friend of Atsumori's mother and formerly served as her maid. Naozane is reluctant to kill Atsumori and so kills his own son and substitutes his head for that of Atsumori. Afterwards, Naozane shaves his head and becomes a monk in regret.

Naozane sacrifices his own son for honor. In another play, *Kitakuniya* (Chikamatsu Hanji and Chikamatsu Kasaku 1783), a warrior leaves his wife and hides his identity while on the trail of vengeance. His wife follows him with their infant son and catches up just when he has gained entrance to the home of an enemy. Unfortunately, his name is clearly marked on the clothing of the child. When his wife hands him the infant and his identity is about to be revealed, he reluctantly draws his sword and kills the child as if the child of his enemy. By this action he proves his sincerity and gains assistance in his task. Again, a father sacrifices his son for honor.

My final example is from the play *Seigen Sakura Hime* (Tsuruya Namboku 1817). Sakura is a young girl who finds herself all alone after a thief sneaks into her home, kills her father and brother and steals their fortune. She meets a man, falls in love with him and goes to Edo with him where she supports him as a courtesan. Several years later she discovers that he was the thief who murdered and destroyed her family. In vengeance she kills him and the child she bore him and returns home to reestablish the family. So, as far as the Kabuki stage is concerned, a parent kills his or her child for honor and vengeance.

While it is tempting to suggest that the acceptance of any reason for killing one's child points to an acceptance of infanticide, other plays written around the same time suggest otherwise. In two plays, *Sodehagi Saimon* (Takeda Izumi et al. 1762) and *Numazu* (Chikamatsu Hanji and Chikamatsu Kasaku 1783), fathers sacrifice themselves to save the life or honor of a son and other plays show parents protecting, scolding and rescuing their children. In general we must keep in

mind that the agony of a parent forced to kill or abandon a child is just the sort of scandalous and shocking behavior that met the needs of early modern popular theater. As such, this action should be seen as part of the group of other scandalous and shocking behaviors such as murder, rape, suicide and revenge rather than as an acceptable part of the norm.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The plays performed on the early modern popular stage represent the Japanese family as a stem family system. One child remains home to inherit and the others adopt or marry out, or just leave. The child who remains home to inherit is expected to be a loyal, capable and responsible manager of the family finances and affairs. For this reason, undesirable heirs may be disowned and others chosen or adopted in their stead. This family system, therefore, was quite flexible and also contained great potential for rivalry, competition and conflict.

Nevertheless, family ties are presented as generally strong. Family members mediate problems, rescue and help other members who are in trouble and avenge their wrongs. Adopted members receive and perform these duties for both natural and adoptive families. Thus adoption serves to extend the network of alliance and mutual suppport. Important though family networks may be for survival, friends and neighbors also form a network that provides help in times of need.

Marriages, particularly the marriages of heirs, were generally decided by or with the approval of the elder generations. If the marriage partner was chosen when the couple were small, then the betrothed couple may have been raised as siblings. Betrothals were also made as adults and parents took care to choose the partner their son or daughter preferred. At the same time, while the married or betrothed couple could not easily end the marriage, the elder generation could divorce or disown a spouse they disliked.

The melodrama of the popular theater and the fluidity of an oral tradition may cause the historian to hesitate to use the plays of the Kabuki tradition as a research source. These popular images of the family, however, provide a valuable view of the conflicts and motivations behind the actions reflected in more objective data. Moreover, these images show how the system worked to resolve the conflicts that occurred.

1. In my studies of narration in the Tokiwazu school—one of three major schools supplying the musical narrative for the Kabuki stage—I have found that many classic plays have had adjustments made to the narrative text over the years. Cuts and adjustments

are also frequently made for other practical reasons such as length or artistic considerations of rhythm. Such changes are never allowed to affect the essential plot of a tale.

2. *Manjū Musume* is the popular name for part 2 of *Igagoe Dōchū Sugoroku*, a play written in 10 parts by Chikamatsu Hanji and Chikamatsu Kasaku (Mizuochi 1993, 14). I will refer to the plays by their popular names where possible.
3. For a full English translation of the text of this play see "The Scarlet Princess of Edo" in James R. Brandon, *Kabuki: Five Classic Plays*, University of Hawaii Press 1992: 241-349.

## Plays Referred to


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Chikamatsu Hanji (1780) "Nozaki Mura," *Shinpan Uta Zaimon*, 近松半二作「新版歌祭文」(野崎村)。

Chikamatsu Hanji and Chikamatsu Kasaku (1783) "Manjū Musume," part 1 from Igagoe Dochu Sugoroku, 『饅頭娘』近松半二、近松加作合作「伊賀越道中双六」第一部。

Chikamatsu Hanji and Chikamatsu Kasaku (1783) "Numazu," part 2 from *Igagoe Dōchū Sugoroku*, 『沼津』近松半二、近松加作合作「伊賀越道中双六」第二部。

Chikamatsu Hanji and Chikamatsu Kasaku (1783) "Kitakuniya," part 4 from *Igagoe Dōchū Sugoroku*, 『北国屋』近松半二、近松加作合作「伊賀越道中双六」第四部。

Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1699) *Keisei Hotoke no Hara*, 近松門左衛門作「けいせい仏の原」。

—— (1711) "Umegawa Chūbei," *Meidō no Hikyaku*, 近松門左衛門作「冥道の飛脚」(梅川忠兵衛)。

—— (1715) *Ikudama Shinjū*, 近松門左衛門作「生玉心中」。

—— (1720) "Ten no Amijima," *Shinjū Ten no Amijima*, 近松門左衛門作「心中天網島」(天網島)。

—— (1721) "Abura Jigoku," *Onna Goroshi Abura Jigoku*, 近松門左衛門作「女殺油地獄」(油地獄)。

—— (1722) "O-Chiyo Hanbei," *Shinjū Yoi Gōshin*, 近松門左衛門作「心中宵庚申」(お千代半兵衛)。

Kawatake Mokuami (1853) "Isayoi Seishin," *Sato Moyō Azami no Ironui*, 河竹黙阿弥作「花街模様薊色縫」(十六夜清心)。

—— (1862) "Benten Kozō," *Aoto Zoshi Hana no Nishiki E*, 河竹黙阿弥作「青砥稿花紅彩画」(弁天小僧)。

—— (1885) "Fude Uri Kohei," *Sui Tengū Megumi no Fukagawa*, 河竹黙阿弥作「水天宮利生深川」(筆売り幸兵衛)。

Nagawa Shimesuke (1784) "Hōkaibō," *Sumidagawa Gonichi no Omokage*, 奈河七五三助作「隅田川続俤」(法界坊)。

Namiki Sōsuke et al. (1751) *Ichi no Tani Futaba Gunki*, 並木宗輔、浅田一鳥ほかの合作

「一谷嫩軍記」。

Segawa Jokō (1853) "Kirare Yosa," *Yowa Nasake Ukina no Yokogushi*, 瀬川如皐作「与話情浮名横櫛」(切られ与三)。

Suga Sensuke (1776) "O-Han Chōuemon," *Katsura Gawa Renri no Shigarami*, 菅専助作「桂川連理柵」(お半長右衛門)。

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Tsuruya Namboku (1817) "Seigen Sakura Hime," *Sakura Hime Azuma Bunshō*, 鶴屋南北作「桜姫東文章」(清弦桜姫)。

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## 要 旨


### 日本の家、家族のイメージ

メアリー・ルイス・永田

１８、１９世紀の歌舞伎、浄瑠璃で描かれた家、親族のイメージがこの研究のテーマである。家族と人口史の研究では近世の家族制度について色々分かって来ているが、この論文の設問は当時の理解、当時の価値である。結婚、離縁、または養子のことは誰が決めたか？どのような問題が起きたかを調べる。相続人の離縁には何が決め手だったのか？問題があった時、誰に頼るのか、誰が助けてくれるのか？家族親族の繋がりも問題にする。間引きと言う子殺しが行われた時代の親子関係。親はどんな時に、何の理由で我が子を殺すのか？親子の愛は如何に描かれるのか？

１８、１９世紀の歌舞伎、浄瑠璃の家族は直系家族である。子供一人が相続人として残り、他の子供は出て行く。残った相続人は家名、家の財産と親族の世話人、または管理人であって、大変な責任を背負う。この重荷に相応しくない人は離縁される。それでこの柔順な家制度は強いものと同時に争いの可能性の多い家族でもあった。しかしながら、親族関係も強くて、養子など縁組みで広がっていく。それで間に合わない時には隣人、友人、共同社会が助けてくれる。これが歌舞伎、浄瑠璃による日本近世の家族のイメージである。