

# **Domestic Space, Family, and the Individual: The Cultivation of “Individualism” within the Family Home**

**Pauline KENT**

*Ryukoku University, Kyoto*

Japan is experiencing the effects of aging and decreasing fertility rates. Affluence, marriage at later ages, expression of individuality, higher education qualifications for females and their subsequent entrance into the work force, and the like are all stated as reasons in advanced countries for decreasing fertility rates. Japan is no different in this respect. However, *rapidly* decreasing fertility rates in Japan suggest that other social variables must also be at work. In this paper, I would like to consider this problem from the younger generation's ideas about “individualism” and how these ideas have been influenced by the ubiquitous *nLDK* design that has dictated the use of space in Japanese homes since the end of World War II. I will first look at how the *nLDK* design has affected the family, and affected the younger generation of today, by hindering of relations with others. I shall then attempt to show how this has led to an increasing number of younger people electing not to marry and how this directly relates to the plummeting fertility rates in Japan.

Like many other developed countries, Japan is now experiencing the effects of aging and decreasing fertility rates. Affluence, marriage at later ages, expression of individuality, higher education qualifications for females and their subsequent entrance into the work force, and the like are all stated as reasons in advanced countries for decreasing fertility rates. Japan is no different in this respect. However, whilst other countries with particularly low rates such as Italy and Germany are beginning to stabilise, Japan continues to record a decrease in annual fertility rates without any

indication of slowing down.<sup>1</sup> This then suggests that even though Japan shares a great many similarities with other developed countries concerning this social problem, there are still other social variables at work that are affecting the Japanese rates. I acknowledge that the issue of falling fertility rates is, indeed, a complex one. Covering every aspect is far beyond the scope of this paper. I will focus here on one aspect, that is, lifestyle changes that have occurred in the family and the family home in an attempt to contribute to a more comprehensive approach to the pressing issue of falling fertility rates.

On Respect for the Aged Day, 2003, *Asahi Shinbun* announced that the percent of the population aged 65 and over had topped 19 percent to lead the aged societies.<sup>2</sup> The change from an aging society (defined as seven percent of the total population being aged 65 years or older) to an aged society (14 percent of the population aged 65 or over) took only a mere 24 years in Japan's case, in comparison to 61 years for Italy and 115 years for France. It is predicted that twenty years from now the plummeting fertility rates will result in one in four Japanese being aged over 65, which will lead to a large range of problems for society. One reason for an aging population and fewer children is affluence, as demonstrated by the prevalence of these social phenomena in developed countries. Improved lifestyles, better health conditions and advances in medical technology can explain many of the reasons for increased longevity. However, reasons for falling fertility rates are more complicated and have yet to be fully understood. Changes in choices of lifestyle for women is often stated as the leading cause for falling rates. Women's higher qualifications, greater participation in the work force and later marriages have all influenced fertility rates.

Naturally the family has been affected by these many social changes and in Japan many lament the decline in the extended family and cite the increase in nuclear families as a reason for declining fertility rates. However, this alone does not explain the problem, and certainly it falls short of explaining the very rapid declining rates. For example, the nuclear

---

<sup>1</sup> A decrease from 1.32 in 2003, to 1.29 in 2004 is an indication of the present free fall trend in Japanese fertility rates.

<sup>2</sup> *Asahi Shinbun* (15 September 2003).

family is not new to Japan, as shown by the results of the first census, taken in 1920. Already in that year, nuclear families comprised 54 percent of all families, as compared with 58 percent in present Japan. However, in 1920 the rate of cohabitating couples (not married) was 17 percent and households with one person 6.6 percent compared with today's rates of 3.3 percent and 16 percent respectively.<sup>3</sup> Nuclear families have been a staple in Japan for a long time, but this fact has not been taken into account when many Japanese talk about what they perceive to be the normal and desirable composition for a family. From the 1970s onwards, this idea has become standardised to the extent of including only formally married couples and their children—to the point of exclusion of any form of family that deviates from the “norm.” For example, children born out of wedlock, one-parent families, or other types of families that diverge from the norm are generally considered to be deviant. The result of this excessive emphasis on the norm has resulted in extremely narrow choices that are now focusing on a choice between either “normal” marriage or a life spent single and unattached.

Japanese youth are now increasingly choosing single life in the pursuit of what they perceive to be individualism. Their conception of “individualism” can be said to have been formed as a reaction to the restrictions of “normal” family life: as individuals they choose to place emphasis on the self—sometimes to the point where relations with others are spurned if they threaten to impinge on freedom of movement. This is increasingly leading to a rejection of marriage and family among the younger generation in Japan. Of course, the trend towards placing emphasis on self-fulfilment has led to an increase in later marriages not only in Japan but also in other advanced nations, and consequently other countries, too, have experienced decreases in fertility rates. Yet at the same time, even in America where individualism is greatly valued historically, alternative forms of family have appeared since the 1970s, and there is no trend towards a rejection of family; instead new forms of family have emerged in concert with attempts to express different types of individualism.

Not a few Japanese youth are now pursuing a form of negative and anti-social “individualism.” I suggest here that this is, in part, cultivated

---

3 Yuzawa 湯沢雍彦 2003, p. 3.

within the family home. Since the end of World War II the typical Japanese domestic space has been the *n*LDK design (*n* rooms plus a larger room combining Living, Dining and Kitchen areas). This has, in turn, promoted individuation of members within the family. The prevalence of the *n*LDK design of the family home in Japan began as a result of acute housing shortages and subsequently became almost universal with the onset of postwar economic growth. It was intended to recreate the ambience that surrounded the happy families portrayed in television dramas imported from the U.S. In fact, however, it has served not only to isolate the housewife in suburban wastelands, but also to box off space for individuals within the home. This creation of walled-off space has tended to contribute to the creation of a younger generation that tends to place greater emphasis on individual concerns, sometimes to the exclusion of intimate relation with others.

However, with the progression of globalisation, we can identify more and more similarities in social trends and phenomena, especially amongst advanced countries. Generational similarities are prominent. Before going on to discuss Japan's particular social trends, I would like first to take a brief look at these generational similarities that show up in many societies today.

### **Similarities among Baby Boomers**

Since the end of World War II, the world has become a smaller place. Those born after the war in developed countries became part of the new information society, and as social changes unfolded many were to experience the same changes and events. Post-war populations surged as the baby-boomers were born. Greater prosperity instigated a break with past values and a call for new ones, and new hopes for world peace grew in many lands. Compared with previous generations, baby-boomers had a free hand in constructing new values and ideas. They were inspired with rosy outlooks on the future and were privileged to attend higher education institutions in large numbers. They had visions of a happy and affluent family life and believed hard work in salaried positions would earn them all they envisaged. In this sense they were the first generation to possess many



characteristics and aspirations that converged and crossed international borders. Common experience of student uprisings, the wave of feminism, full employment and prosperity on a large scale has bound this generation together on an international scale.

In Japan, the promise of peace after a devastating war created optimistic views of the future tinged by reflections on prewar values that had driven the Japanese to war. Intellectuals such as Maruyama Masao 丸山真男 argued the need to cultivate Japanese individuals with a sense of responsibility in order to prevent a second onset of fascism.<sup>4</sup> The idea of individualism (as opposed to mindless collective behaviour) captured the imagination of the the Japanese baby-boomers (*dankai no sedai* 団塊の世代) who, like other baby-boomers around the world, also basked in the sunshine of post-war liberalism. This generation became disillusioned with, and demonstrated against, the establishment that had rebuilt order after World War II. But most of this baby-boomer generation eventually ended its rebellious phase and became *sararii-men*, and its liberalism dissipated, and boomers began to devote their lives to their companies. They did this to reconstruct the country and bring in a new age of prosperity for themselves, their companies, and Japan. On a personal level, there was a general call for the end of feudalistic ideas about the family (which were encompassed in the concept of *ie*, a concept that places great emphasis on the continuance of a household through the male line). The modern family would be a happy one that fostered individualism unrestricted by the norms of the *ie*. Yet despite these hopes for a better future, reality in the economic growth period dictated that family life be sacrificed by the male breadwinner. Family life came to revolve around supporting the working life of the father. Devotion to the company was required due to the employment system which took the form of lifetime employment for larger enterprises. Loans could be calculated on a lifetime of guaranteed wages, bonuses, and retirement payments that effectively kept employees indebted to their company for their entire working lives.

The popular NHK programme *Project X*, which exalts success stories of the economic growth period, demonstrates how Japanese success was

---

<sup>4</sup> Aoki 青き保 1990.

Pauline KENT

achieved on the hard work of devoted salary men. But the programme also demonstrates other characteristics of this period. Its male-centered success stories invariably include a housewife who silently supports the husband while tirelessly managing the upkeep of the household and the education of the children. Repeatedly screening this imagery, *Project X* tacitly pays homage to the homebound housewife and children who are careful not to tarnish the immense efforts of their parents. In other words it reenforces the image—as an ideal—of a family oriented around the company male.

### **Generation X**

The offspring of the baby-boomers have been labeled Generation X, a generation which is generally classified as the cohort born between 1965 and 1980. This generation forms the core of the generation now in their twenties and thirties. This is a generation that has been plagued by uncertain times. They hold no illusions about the future, which seems fraught with threats of unemployment, burgeoning deficits, false statements by politicians and elite businessmen, environmental problems, and decreasing funds for social welfare programmes and pensions. Social commentators regard this generation as detached from public and political affairs: they tend not to vote, distrust society at large, display little patriotism or national identity and, in general, place more faith in themselves and material things than anything else. However, these observations are perhaps tainted by a different perspective on social participation held by older generations. Taking a closer look at their concerns, it becomes obvious that Generation Xers have been seeking greater fairness and equality as economic recession has continued to widen economic and social gaps. This generation would like to see budget deficits reduced and a wider range of safety nets put in place to ensure a reasonable standard of living. They understand that the mistakes made today will yield problems for them to solve in the near future, and therefore they are concerned with politicians decisions that do not take into account long-term consequences.

As an example of what awaits their future, let us look at personal earnings and unemployment rates. The average weekly wage of Americans

declined by 15.5 percent over the period 1970-95.<sup>5</sup> The average yearly income for Japanese employees in private enterprise was recently announced as approximately ¥4,480,000, down yet again by 1.4 percent from the previous yearly figures and now on a par with figures from ten years ago.<sup>6</sup> Unemployment figures for youth (15-25 years of age) are increasing: Europe 15 percent in 2003 (as opposed to seven percent for those over 25 years of age); Japan, U.K., U.S.A. all approximately 11 percent; Australia 13 percent.<sup>7</sup> Generation X will not experience the golden age of full employment that was familiar to the baby-boomers, nor can they expect to equal or surpass the social mobility level of their parents. In short, the widening gap will directly affect them.

However, as a generation that has been familiar since childhood with environmental problems and recycling, they do not see profit and ecological concerns in contradictory terms. But this does stop them from fully supporting one political party in favour of another—they are more solution-oriented and tend to see politicians in terms of their ability to solve issues rather than in terms of ideological orientations. Thus, rather than blindly support politicians, they direct their political awareness to volunteer and NPO programmes, and make direct efforts to tackle problems through such activism. The Xers tend to concentrate on one issue and its solutions, in contrast to older generations, who are more ideologically and party-politics oriented.

There is also a difference in the way Xers perceive the family. Among the boomer generation, divorce rates began to escalate and different types of family patterns began to emerge. In Japan, the divorce rate overall has doubled since the 1960s, although these rates are still relatively low at 1.94 (cf. America 4.33, Australia 2.86). There has been, however, a noticeable rise in divorces amongst married couples in their teens and twenties (8.45 percent and 3.45 percent respectively for 2000), and it is expected that this

---

<sup>5</sup> Snyder 2000.

<sup>6</sup> *Asahi Shinbun* (23 September 2003), “Salaried Wages, Decrease for 5 years in a row to an average of 4,470,000 yen to reach a standard equal to 10 years ago.” 民間給与、10年前の水準 5年連続減で平均447万円。

<sup>7</sup> Human Development Indicators 2003.

will continue to rise.<sup>8</sup> Change from match-made marriages to love matches has transformed the Japanese perception of marriage from a union between two families for the purpose of procreation, to a match between two individuals in which each individual's personal expectations are given greater weight.<sup>9</sup>

### **Boomerang Kids and Parasite Singles**

As we have seen above, Generation Xers must cope with economic instability, social change, and changing ideas about the family. One result of this has been that a growing number of young adults choose to stay in the family home, rather than seek independence. In 1997, the sociologist Yamada Masahiro 山田昌弘 labeled this phenomenon in Japan as "parasite singles." Ensuing discussion has been largely critical. Singles have been criticised for their dependence on parents (mother) to take care of their basic needs such as laundering, meals, cleaning, et cetera, without paying for such services or contributing rent. Therefore the bulk of their earnings becomes disposable income, which they use to purchase brand goods and to indulge in a life filled with luxuries. As they do not move out of the home to establish their own new living quarters, durable goods purchases stagnate, thereby further dragging down an already sluggish economy.<sup>10</sup>

This phenomenon is not, however, peculiar to Japan. In other advanced countries it has been a topic of discussion since the mid-'80s and various names have been used to describe it: home-bounders (England), mature co-residers (Canada), adultolescents (America). The most common term employed is boomerang kids (baby boomer-ang kids). The children usually leave home for university, etc., but return to the family home for reasons that include lack of employment, economic difficulties, and relationship breakups. Although there is criticism of such youth in other

---

<sup>8</sup> Yuzawa 2002, p.195.

<sup>9</sup> In the 1930s match-made marriages accounted for 90% of all marriages, but this gradually decreased until 1995, when 90% of all those marrying did so for love. Suntory Fueki Ryūkō Kenkyūjo 2004, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Yamada 1999.

societies, greater understanding of them tends to be shown than in Japan. Many of the boomerangs would like to be independent if only they had the economic means, and parents, who are looking forward to life after retirement, encourage the children to move out when they do have the means. Unlike in Japan, payment of rent (according to income) is common.

Uncertain times thus have forced youth to become risk-averse, and this mindset leads many to take detours on the road to independence. One of the results of this is later first marriages. But, whereas in Japan the choice tends to be formal marriage or nothing, in other countries cohabitation and experimentation with different relationships is much more prevalent. For example, *de facto* marriages and children, living together, homosexual relationships (which may include children or gaybies as they are now being called) and other types of families can be found instead of early marriage. Nearly 80 percent of all cohabitating couples in America and Australia eventually marry, which demonstrates that cohabitation is now considered a part of the overall process of marriage.

In Japan, cohabitation is nearly non-existent and children born out of wedlock are taboo. The “normative” pattern of husband, wife and two kids has been the norm for over 50 percent of nuclear families since the seventies. (Statistics for other other types of families have also remained stable since the seventies: married couples, three percent; married couples and one child, nine percent; three children, 27 percent; four children or more, four percent.) “Normal” families are recognised by government policies (as exemplified by tax breaks for couples which ensure the housewife earns less than 1,030,000 yen per annum; this restricts any work to minimal part time work). Families that do not fit the mold are discriminated against by society in general as well as by government programmes, and support systems for aberrant patterns such as single-parent families are minimal.

This was not always the case. Historians of the early modern period have documented that many couples would divorce within a five year period and then go on to seek a new partner. This changed in the Meiji era, when the family was institutionalised by laws that resulted in lowered status for women and the formation of the “normative” modern family. Society and the modern family became male-dominated. Although society

changed dramatically after the war, ideas about the family as a support system for the male breadwinner became firmly entrenched, making it increasingly more difficult to create alternatives to the social norm.<sup>11</sup> Although the large majority of Japanese youth still eventually conform to the normative marriage pattern, a growing number are choosing not to marry at all. This translates into their remaining unattached for a lifetime. The question is, Why are Japanese youth now leaning so strongly towards a life without shared intimate companionship?

Anyone who has taught in a Japanese university will agree that students today have difficulty expressing themselves and tend not to participate actively in their studies or society. A survey by the Cabinet Office in 2001 shows that outside of class, 60 percent of university students study for 30 minutes or less. In 1998, 82 percent of 15-25-year olds in Japan left jobs of their own volition, in contrast to 33 percent of the same age group in America.<sup>12</sup> Social mobility in Japan is stagnating, and youth are not motivated to challenge themselves or society. Of course, the uncertain outlook for the future influences young people's attitudes, but the main point I want to emphasize here is that the home environment has also taught them to be passive and not create trouble for themselves and the family. This passive behaviour is conditioned by restraints in society, but at a very basic level it is also reinforced by the actual physical environment of the home.

---

<sup>11</sup> This is demonstrated by the archaic laws applying to children born in the immediate period after divorce. Although it is now possible to establish genetic links between father and child, a child born in the period of 300 days after divorce is formalised is still deemed that of the divorced father, if claims are laid. In the case of children born to a non-Japanese mother and Japanese father, unless the father acknowledges the child, parentage is not formalised. The laws seem to have little reason to them other than allowing the male parent to gain formal parental rights when it suits him.

<sup>12</sup> Yuzawa 1999, p. 153.

## Postwar Japanese Housing

The average area of the Japanese home has increased from 62.52 sq.m. in 1968 to 89.59 sq.m. in 1998.<sup>13</sup> According to a survey using only Government Housing Loan Corporation data, in 2003 the average area for the house was 137.3 sq.m. and for the overall land 292.1 sq.m.<sup>14</sup> No longer is Japan the land of rabbit hutches! In 1930, however, 70 percent of housing in Tokyo and 90 percent in the Osaka-Kobe area was rented with housing mainly taking the form of *nagaya*, tenement housing. During the Second World War, bombing in major metropolitan areas left Japan with a chronic housing problem. After the war the housing shortage was calculated at 4,200,000 homes, and with war returnees, people who had evacuated to the countryside to escape bombing, and laborers seeking employment flowing into the metropolitan areas this situation was further aggravated. Entry into Tokyo was restricted temporarily in 1946 in the hope of alleviating the problem. In 1950, the Ministry of Construction took the stance that the “poor should put up with small homes” and began to construct high density “modern dwellings” (*bunka jūtaku*). Walls were thin but rooms were affordable for those with low incomes. In these residences low income was the common denominator but social backgrounds were diverse enough to make life a little more interesting (Waswo 2002). Then in the sixties, in an attempt to alleviate the housing problem further, cheaper land on the outskirts of metropolitan areas was chosen for the location of high density rented *danchi* apartments. As Japan became more affluent, people began to purchase middle density “mansion” apartments and the period of “my home-ism” began. By 1973, Japan had achieved a “housing miracle” by reaching the goal set by the Ministry of Construction of providing one home for one family. The percent of own-homes reached 59 percent; but in the course of attaining this goal, lifestyles were compromised for the sake of reaching targets.

---

<sup>13</sup> Japanese Statistics Bureau, National Statistics Tables from 1998 Survey on Housing & Land (<http://www.stat.go.jp/data/jyutaku/1998/8.htm#p13>, March 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Government Housing Loan Cooperation, 2003 Main Indices for New Home Building Investors (<http://www.jyukou.go.jp/index/news1604.html>).

From the end of the war until 1973, 23,000,000 homes had been constructed, more than the total of homes constructed in France, England and West Germany during the same period. In order to achieve this “miracle,” construction materials and architectural plans had to be standardised; without standardisation it would have been impossible to produce such a large volume in such a short time. Moreover, residents’ backgrounds also became “standardised” due to the imposition of certain conditions that had to be met to be selected as a resident. For example, during the sixties, to qualify for moving into a rented *danchi*, a family had to have an income that exceeded the rent by five times. Apartments were of course restricted to families. This meant that, at the time, only salary men could meet such conditions thereby creating a population of very similar social backgrounds (Waswo 2002).

Many housing experts have noted the extent of the influence that the interior architectural design has had on the family. To create a modern setting whereby sleeping quarters and eating quarters could be separated, the 2DK (two rooms, dining and kitchen) design was introduced in 1951 (51C *gata*). Heralding a new era of democracy and greater freedom, the design was meant to create space where the whole family could eat together while at the same time provide private sleeping quarters for the parents. It was designed with the nuclear family in mind, and its modern amenities changed family life. Tables and chairs in the dining area meant that the mother could prepare and serve meals in the dining-kitchen area, the proximity of which allowed her to sit down and eat with the family. Various electrical goods lessened the burden of housework, and the dining table allowed the family to interact on a more egalitarian basis (Kishimoto 岸本幸臣 1996, p. 27). Yet it also served to reinforce the stereotypes of the woman as housewife and the husband as breadwinner. Located in outlying suburbs, the new housing tended to isolate housewives, causing them to live their lives through their children.

Ironically, the *nLDK* design was meant to alleviate the restrictions of the patriarchal family and its strict hierarchical structure. Feminist discussions urged the removal of the *tokonoma* and the *genkan*, which can serve as spatial indicators of social hierarchy. Also the open plan of the living, dining, kitchen area allowed the family greater spatial freedom in



contrast to the hierarchically-structured spaces of prewar homes. But removal of such spatial designations of social relationships meant that it became more difficult to teach children in the home about behaviour according to status and relationships that still existed outside the home. Less space also moved regular annual events outside the home, and removal of open verandahs around the house cut the home off from the outside world. Compared with the more traditional flowing Japanese design of prewar houses that allowed for greater interaction with the outside, the newly constructed residences tended to wall off the outside from the private family domain.

There was also a push by the Education Ministry in the 1950s and '60s to rationalise living in the country areas, and this included a changeover to unit kitchens imported from America. (Rationalisation also included child birth and birth control, but the rationalisation of the kitchen had an even more immediate impact on the women's lives.) Government policy advised the Japanese how best to design domestic space. The initial *nLDK* design created separate sleeping quarters for the married couple, thereby creating a measure of privacy. Then, soon after the war, children of high school age were allocated their own rooms in order to allow them to study in peace. In the succeeding two decades, middle school children and eventually primary school children were given separate rooms too. Thus, the first rooms to be "Westernised" were the kitchen and the child's room. Originally the children's room was meant as a study and sleeping area, but eventually, as the open space became a place where one felt watched, children began to retreat to their rooms and spend more and more time there.

### **Privacy and Private Rooms**

The seventies was a period of economic growth for Japan, although growth was interrupted for nearly two years by the oil shock. Companies demanded the full devotion of their employees. This resulted in the father being absent from the home, and cemented the position of the wife as a full-time housewife. Conventional wisdom came to hold that one's future was largely determined by the status of one's alma mater, and mothers

became fully involved in their children's education. An idea of egalitarianism that taught all were equal if only they tried and studied hard was common throughout Japan. If children studied hard and attended the right cram schools, many families believed, their future would be assured. However, this type of equality was also accompanied by imposition of conformity by means of uniform education; the system asserted control over large numbers of students, the children of baby-boomers. The ability to "fit in" became important for survival in a society that put so much emphasis on similarities. Identical home environments enforced this idea while the high density housing meant that raising voices in the home or causing trouble at school, etc., would be immediately transmitted along the gossip network, thereby identifying the family as "deviant." The physical environment did nothing to cultivate individual lifestyles or individuality and the close proximity of houses acted to maintain the perceived norms.

Within this larger setting the domestic space itself gradually became cordoned off into public and private zones. At school, children were constantly under supervision and bound by restrictive rules. Parents taught their children to "fit in" to such constrained systems, through repeated advice such as "don't cause trouble," "try not to create waves," and "try and get on well with everyone," but at the same time made efforts to cultivate individuality in the children. Allowing them their "privacy" in the confines of their "private" room was considered one way of cultivating individuality. The unintended actual effect of this was to create a withdrawn and self-centred view of the world.

Psychoanalyst Noda Masaaki 野田正彰 (2000) has written that children attempted to gain their individuality by voicing their discontent towards "fitting in" through a number of methods. In the seventies they tried to make their feelings apparent by committing truancy; later this was expressed in the form of domestic violence and later still through violence in the school; eventually this changed to bullying classmates; and in extreme cases, vehement protests were expressed through suicide. Now, as parents still fail to listen to their protests, the new wave of dissent is being expressed through anti-social and brutal crimes. An expert on juvenile delinquency and related laws, Sawanobori Toshio 澤登俊雄 (1999), has outlined the changes in juvenile crimes in the postwar period, and his

analysis is congruent with Noda's. He plots the character of waves of crime that have occurred since the war. Obviously, the first wave (which occurred in the immediate post-war period and peaked in 1951) was dominated by crimes committed for the purpose of survival. As Japan became more affluent (this period peaking in 1964), crimes for the sake of amusement (stealing bicycles for fun, etc.) become prominent. Towards the end of the seventies both crimes for amusement and anti-social crimes dominated types of juvenile delinquency and the frequency of these two types of delinquency peaked in 1983. Anti-social delinquency continues to capture the attention of the public today, especially as these crimes are often committed by what are termed "normal kids" who carry out their acts for no clear reason other than to achieve a sense of escapism by committing the act. Kageyama Jinsuke 影山任佐, a psychologist, suggests that these types of crimes are committed because the perpetrator suffers from an "empty self" and therefore is seeking reassurance of their own existence (Kageyama 2003).

In this way, rather than cultivating individuality and the ability to make responsible decisions, parents, through their demands for conformity, have actually hindered the child's search for identity, leaving them without enough confidence in themselves to relate meaningfully with others. In other words, risk aversion has become a major part of their education. Individuality has taken on the meaning of guarded privacy and a dislike for discussing private matters such as family, home life and other information about oneself. In effect, even outside the family home, youth tend to export the physical space and unseen barriers of their rooms into public areas. Moreover, individuality is also expressed as the opposite of the group-oriented tendencies of the older generations. Yet this emphasis on difference has not necessarily created a new and positive position for youths: it tends to be more an expression of what they are not, rather than what they actually are. Many young people are determined to avoid becoming company clones and want to be left alone to pursue their dreams, but with their limited social skills and lack of motivation, they lack the determination to create an alternative and indeed the ability to express their "dreams" in terms that would allow them to pursue them in a practical and systematic way.

Their particular brand of individualism does not place them within the greater network of society as active agents, and moreover it disavows obligations to society that traditionally accompany the rights of an individual. In short, members of this generation find it easier to be “individual” by turning their backs on society. The extreme case is manifested in the phenomenon of *hikikomori*, which can no longer be ignored. One in thirty-nine children is now categorised as being unwilling to attend school and one-third of these children have become *hikikomori*, children who refuse to come out of their rooms or leave their houses.<sup>15</sup> While the design of the home alone cannot be blamed for all these social problems, the fact that *hikikomori* has become so prevalent in Japan means that the role of the children’s “private room” cannot be ignored, as it forms a significant part of the equation.

### Single Life Instead of Marriage

In the post-war period, when democracy, equality, freedom and other values were being embraced as the values to be championed in a reborn society, the government brought in a number of policies in order to promote these ideas. The use of the *nLDK* design for the Japanese home was seen as one of the ways to cultivate these values and became the standard for the vast majority of housing, as we have noted. This design was supposed to sweep away the hierarchical, feudal family and herald the start of the new democratic and egalitarian family. In fact, however, in conjunction with a number of other social factors, it established conditions for the virtual imprisonment of the housewife within the home looking after the house, the children and, of course, the overworked husband. The typical family of husband, wife, and (two) children seemed to evolve in conjunction with the physical environs of the home. Sociologist Yazawa Sumiko 矢澤澄子 refers to this type of family as the “standardised family.”<sup>16</sup> She states that excessive standardisation of the home hindered changes and diversification of families resulting in a mold into which most families were forced. This

---

<sup>15</sup> Saitō 齋藤環 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Kishimoto 1996, p. 96.

mold, in turn, reinforced the division of labour according to sex, proving that society itself had done nothing to rectify the gender imbalance of prewar days.

This restriction on diversification has begun to directly affect birth rates. Although the nuclear family is often blamed for falling birth rates, when Japan is compared to other countries it becomes clear that this argument is not sufficient. In Japan the decrease in the numbers of extended families and increase in nuclear families is often cited as reason for the breakdown in families, but the present problem seems to be the lack of an alternative model. For example, Australian statistics tally “couple families” in order to include couples that are not formally married. De facto couple families form 12.1 percent (2001) of the overall numbers (ABS). In other words, cohabitation is now a recognised type of family. Cohabitation rates increased by 1000 percent in America from 1960 to 2000.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, 33 percent of all births are to unmarried women and 41 percent of first-born children of unmarried women are actually babies born to cohabitating couples. In the Netherlands homosexuals can now marry and increasingly homosexual couples are choosing to have children. Such families are now being accepted more and more by society.

In contrast, only recently has the Japanese government pushed through a number of laws related to the family. Correction of the imbalance in the division of labour and a somewhat reluctant attempt to recognise diversity seems to be behind this move. Of late, the Childcare Leave Law (1992), Nursing Care Insurance (1999), and Family Care Leave Law (1999) demonstrate the burden hitherto felt by families (female members) alone in the care of children and the elderly. The Equal Employment Law (1985) was revised in 1999, and in conjunction with this, the government also introduced the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society (also 1999). Debate is expected on allowing the use of different family names by married couples and on easing restrictions on divorce (especially for women). However, these moves all seem a little too late to rectify the burgeoning problems being experienced now.

---

<sup>17</sup> National Center for Health Statistics, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/index.htm>. Bumpass and Lu 2000.

In other countries, the participation of women in the workforce has had the greatest impact on changes in the family. Balancing both work and family required compromises from many quarters. Within the workforce, for example, job sharing and flexible hours allowed both men and women some flexibility in managing their lives. Men undertake more household chores and the idea that a woman's proper place is always in the home is now mainly a thing of the past. Such changes have forced the family to change and diversify to meet the new challenges of society. Thus, while fertility rates have fallen this is mainly due to delaying of childbirth, but not to the rejection of the family—as evidenced by the current stability in fertility rates in such places as Italy and Germany. If marriage is not desirable then there are other forms of family life that can be chosen without fear of alienation.

In Japan, however, standardisation has permitted few alternatives. Children born out of wedlock number 1.6 percent of all children born, and this percentage has not fluctuated since the end of the war. Likewise, fostering and adoption of children are practically unheard of. In this sense, unless registered marriages increase, birth rates will continue to plummet. Moreover, the practice of *yōshi*, a form of adoption particular to Japan that ensures the continuance of the family line, or *ie*, is now no longer so common as in the past. Cohabitation, too, is not seen as a viable option as evidenced by the fact that less than five percent of Japanese youth have cohabitated at one time or another (1997); for married couples the rate is around 3.3 percent (Batalova, 2002). Faced with an absence of alternatives, more and more are choosing not to marry at all. In 2000, 18.4 percent of men between forty and forty-four were still single. At these rates it is predicted that one in four men in their forties will be single in 2020, with the implication that a majority of these men will remain single for the rest of their life.<sup>18</sup>

More young people are indicating that they are inclined to remain single for life. Japanese of marriageable age often are not willing to make compromises when it comes to selecting a partner, which results in their choosing no-one at all and hoping that someone better will turn up at a later

---

<sup>18</sup> Ida 伊田広行 2003, p. 17.

date.<sup>19</sup> They calculate that marriage would mean less money to spend, restrictions on actualising dreams, and, especially for females, being tied down by child rearing and housework. At the same time, those who think the place for the woman is in the home while the man goes out to work number 60 percent, and 86 percent think that the woman should be responsible for properly bringing up the children and keeping the house clean (1997). Statistics such as these indicate that the image of the family will not change very quickly.<sup>20</sup>

To put this gender dilemma in perspective, recent research that garnered data on premarital cohabitation of couples and the sharing of household chores from twenty-two countries indicates that Japan is very different from any of the other countries in the study. The countries under examination included many of the advanced countries as well as countries from the former communist block in Europe. Cohabitation rates, sharing of housework and Gender Empowerment Measures (GEM)<sup>21</sup> were used to investigate the effect of cohabitation on equality in housework. It was found that cohabitation had a positive effect on encouraging greater equality within the household, but even with couples who had not cohabitated, a high GEM was found to have a positive effect on equality. Indices for countries such as Sweden, Norway, and America were all high, demonstrating greater gender equality all round. Research results led to the conclusion that high rates of cohabitation and GEM did have an effect of encouraging greater cooperation in the household (although just how these directly effected equality in the household could not be determined). However, even more pertinent to the argument here is the fact that the authors felt obliged to justify the inclusion of Japan in the data set. Japan, as an affluent and developed country was included as a matter of course.

---

<sup>19</sup> Suntory 2004, pp. 17-15.

<sup>20</sup> Japanese National Population Institute.

<sup>21</sup> Gender Empowerment Measures measure gender inequality using the following three dimensions: economic participation and decision making, political participation and decision making, and power over economic resources. For example, the number of women in management and political representation are taken into account. In 2003 the GEM value for Japan was 5.31. Compare this with the top value—for Norway—of .908.

Pauline KENT

Yet rates for cohabitation, GEM and sharing of household chores all proved so much lower than all other countries that the authors were forced to make excuses for the aberrant data. The point to be made here is that gender imbalance in Japan is so chronic that women have been unable to create change in the family. The family remains male-oriented and male-supportive.

Laws and institutions have also served as a barrier to social change, but this is a problem that occurs in other countries as well. In looking for other social variables that have influenced the lack of interest in marriage and its possible alternative forms, it seems reasonable to reflect upon the immediate environment of the family. Research on the standardisation of housing design has found that it has led to the standardisation of the family itself. This standardisation has dictated the parameters of the family as well as the role of the woman in the family. In turn, this has resulted in a reaction and a rejection of the “standard” family by growing numbers of young people. As freedom within the home has become defined as privacy within the confines of one’s own room, lateral thinking concerning new family patterns to fit a new age has not emerged in Japan as it has in other advanced societies. Private rooms and constant demands to conform have hindered Japanese youths’ ability to express themselves and find alternatives. This has also resulted in making relationships difficult for them. They are allowed few challenges to test their ability and in the end, passive behaviour seems the easiest path to follow.

In this paper, I do not mean to imply that all Japanese youth are self-centered and anti-social. Statistics do indicate, however, that a significant percentage of youth are now unwilling to interact with society in a positive manner. This is demonstrated by the lack of desire to marry or form alternative relationships, anti-social crimes and total withdrawal as in the case of *hikikomori*. The reasons for this tendency to passiveness are complex and many, but their immediate environment, the home and its physical space cannot be ignored. Here I have tried to understand the role that domestic space may have played in determining behaviour. Recently, a number of home improvement TV programmes have become popular in Japan. Most show a transformation of cluttered space to space that



facilitates a lifestyle of the family that is more open to variety and interaction among its members. These programmes are perhaps an indication that the Japanese are beginning to keenly feel the restrictions that domestic space has placed upon them and are taking measures to change this situation. Whether this will be enough to reverse dropping fertility rates is doubtful, but it does seem to be a positive move nonetheless.

## REFERENCES

### ABS 2003

Australian Bureau of Statistics,  
<http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/2.6.4?OpenView>.

### Aoki 1990

Aoki Tamotsu 青木保. “*Nihon bunkaron*” no henyō: sengo Nihon no bunka to identity 「日本文化論」の変容：戦後日本の文化とアイデンティティ (The transformation of nihonjinron). Chūō Kōronsha, 1990.

### Bagnall 2003

D. Bagnall, “Home Free,” *Bulletin* (9 July 2003).

### Batalova and Cohen 2002

J. Batalova and P. Cohen, “Premarital Cohabitation and Housework: Couples in Cross-National Perspective,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65 (August 2002), pp. 743-755.

### Bumpass and Lu 2000

L. Bumpass and H. Lu. “Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children’s Family Contexts in the United States,” *Population Studies* 54:1 (2000), pp. 29-41.

### Guzman et al. 2000

D. Guzman et al. “The Changing Role of Tradition and Culture in the Development of Japanese Housing,” *International Journal for Housing Science and Its Application* 24:3 (2000), pp. 215-225.

### Human Development Indicators 2003

<[http://www.undp.org/hdr2003/indicator/indic\\_343.html](http://www.undp.org/hdr2003/indicator/indic_343.html)>, United Nations Development Programme, 2004.

Pauline KENT

Ida 2003

Ida Hiroyuki 伊田広行. *Shinguruka suru Nihon* (The trend towards remaining single in Japan) シングル化する日本. Yōsensha, 2003.

Inamasu 2000

Inamasu Tatsuo 稲増龍夫. “Jibetarian to puchi iede” ジベタリアンとプチ家出 (Sitting on the ground and leaving home on a temporary basis), *Seikyō Shinbun* (1 June 2000), p. 6.

Kageyama 2003

Kageyama Jinsuke 影山任佐. “Gendai wakamono no shinri to kōdō” 現代若者の心理と行動 (The psychology and behaviour of contemporary youth), *Seikyō Shinbun* (24 July 2003), p. 9.

Kawai 2003

Kawai Hayao 河合準雄. “*Kojin*” no tankyū 「個人」の探求 (“In search of the ‘individual’”). NHK Publishers, 2003.

Kishimoto and Suzuki 1996

Kishimoto Y. 岸本幸臣 and Suzuki A. 鈴木晃, eds. *Kōza gendai jūkyō 2: kazoku to jūkyō* 講座現代住居 2 : 家族と住居 (Readings on Contemporary housing 2: The family and housing). Tokyo University Press, 1996.

Kyūtoku 2000

Kyūtoku Shigekazu 久徳重和. “‘Otona’ ni sodatsu tame no jōken” 「大人」に育つための条件 (Conditions for cultivating “adults”), *Seikyō Shinbun* (11 June 2000), p. 6.

Kyūtoku 2001

Kyūtoku Shigemori 久徳重盛, *Dokuta Kyūtoku no kosodate benkyōkai: kore dake no koto o shitte ireba kashikoi kosodate ga dekimasu* ドクター久徳の子育て勉強会 : これだけのことを知っていれば賢い子育てができます (Doctor Kyūtoku’s study group on child-rearing: You can practice wise child-rearing if you know just this much). Chichi Publishers, 2001.

Naikaku-fu Seisaku Tōkatsukan 2001

Naikaku-fu Seisaku Tōkatsukan 内閣府政策統括官 (Cabinet Policy Controller) *Dai 2 kai seishōnen no seikatsu to ishiki ni kansuru kihon chōsa (gaiyō)* 第2回青少年の生活と意識に関する基本調査(概要) (Second basic survey on the lifestyles and thoughts of youth

[Outline] (November 2001).

<[http://www.op.cao.go.jp/youth/kenkyu/seikatu2th/1\\_1.html](http://www.op.cao.go.jp/youth/kenkyu/seikatu2th/1_1.html)>

National Institute of Population and Social Security Research

National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, Data on  
Falling Fertility Rates,

<<http://www.ipss.go.jp/syoushika/syindex.htm>> June 2004.

Noda 2000

Noda Masaaki 野田正彰. "Hatarakanai wakamonotachi no haikei"  
働かない若者たちの背景 (What's in the background to youth who  
do not work), *Seikyō Shinbun*, 2000.

Qu 2003

Qu, Lixia. "Expectation of Marriage among Co-habiting Couples,"  
*Family Matters* (Autumn 2003), p. 36 (4).

Saitō 2003

Saitō Tamaki 斎藤環. *OK?, Hikikomori, OK! OK? ひきこもりOK!*  
Magazine House, 2003.

Sawanobori 1999

Sawanobori Toshio 澤登俊夫. *Shōnen-hō* 少年法 (The Juvenile  
Act). Chūkō Shinsho, 1999.

Shinohara et al. 2002

Shinohara Satoshi 篠原聡子 et al., *Kawaru kazoku to kawaru sumai*  
変わる家族と変わる住い (Changing families and changing homes).  
Shokokusha, 2002.

Snyder 2000

D. P. Snyder. "There is More to This Boom Than Boomers," Revised  
March 2000, accessed 15 August 2003 at

<[http://www.davidpearcesnyder.com/there\\_is\\_more\\_to\\_this\\_boom\\_th  
an\\_boomers.htm](http://www.davidpearcesnyder.com/there_is_more_to_this_boom_than_boomers.htm)> .

Sone 1990

Sone Yōko 曾根陽子 et al., "Kodomo no kūkan" 子供の空間  
(Children's space), *Sumairon* すまい論 15 (1990), pp. 34-39.

Suntory Fueki Ryūkō Kenkyūjo サントリー不易流行研究所. *Mai  
shinguru jijō: 30-dai, 40-dai shinguru sotsugyōsha no koe* マイ・シ  
ングル事情: 30代、40代シングル&シングル卒業者の声

Pauline KENT

(Reasons for remaining single). Suntory Fueki Ryūkō Kenkyūjo, 2004.

Waswo 2002

Ann Waswo. *Housing in Postwar Japan: A Social History*. Routledge Curzon, 2002.

Watanabe et al. 1999

Watanabe T. 渡辺竜夫, Senda M. 千田満, Inoue 井上寿. “Kodomo kara mita sengo Nihon jūtaku no henkan ni kansuru kenkyū” こどもからみた戦後日本住宅の変遷に関する研究 (Study on changes in postwar Japanese homes as seen from the point of view of children), *Nihon Kenchiku Gakkai Taikai Gakujutsu Kōen Kōgaishū* (Summaries of Academic Lectures of the Meetings of the Architectural Institute of Japan) (1999), pp. 275-76.

Yuzawa 2003

Yuzawa Yasuhiko 湯沢雍彦. *Dēta de yomu kazoku mondai* データで読む家族問題 (Reading issues concerning families through data). NHK Books, 2003.