

THE JAPANESE FAMILY

The Japanese family is a very peculiar institution. It takes a foreigner some time to fully understand why it is so different from a Western family. Knowledge of the Japanese family helps us to understand the attitudes of the people.

The family system may be followed as far back as Japanese history records and it always has been closely linked with the social and political life of the country. Unless the family is understood, it is difficult to understand these other agencies and customs.

The "Old System" emphasized the house without regarding the people who lived in it; there was no individuality. The oldest male member of the family was regarded as the head and all others were in complete obedience to him, even if he was wrong. This complete obedience is termed "filial piety", and its highest form is when a daughter sells herself in order to keep her parents alive in years of poor crops. This custom is still observed in the poorer regional districts of Japan. "Filial Piety" also emphasized the emperor who was the head of the national family.

In the traditional family, the father and the eldest son always sat on an elevated platform, ate the best food that was served, and bathed first in the water the entire household used. The wife was virtually a slave (she called her husband "master") or, to use a better term, a producing machine.

According to this old system, if a wife did not bear any male offspring she encouraged her husband to take a concubine. If, after three years, no children were born, the couple were considered divorced. The only purpose of a marriage was to raise children. It was the sign of married woman whose eyebrows were shaved and whose teeth were blackened. Many of these women may still be seen in the villages and smaller towns of Japan.

Even today in Japan love matches are rare; under the old system marriage was always arranged by the parents through a mutual friend. The couple did not meet until everything had been arranged. The only solution for an affair between a man and woman of different classes was suicide. Many Japanese believe that if they are not happy in this world they will be happy in the next. This belief is called "double suicide"; many of them are still reported in the newspapers. The resort town of Atami is famous for double suicides; so many of these gaudy deaths occur there

in autumn that the town has a special budget set aside for the removal of the bodies. According to one Japanese student from this town, it is not rare to have ten double suicides a week.

The influence of Christianity in the 16th century (St. Francis Xavier) changed the old system for a time. Christianity spread rapidly, among women especially, for it regarded them as being equal to men. But the time was not ripe for the emancipation of the Japanese woman. Christianity was suppressed by the government, who knew that if the traditional family system was set aside, the political and social systems of the time would fail. Japan was almost completely closed to foreigners in 1587 and practically no Western influence crept in until the Meiji Restoration in 1868. After the Restoration, foreign ideas began to filter into Japanese life. Education was opened to woman and prostitution was abolished. But the old family system still remained.

In the 31st year of Meiji, the Old Civil Code was drawn up and, although women obtained the right to seek divorce, they were given no compensation and were, if successful, left on their own. Even to the present day, the fact that these women were not able to support themselves and that others lost their husbands during the Pacific War is the reason why there are so many "women of the streets" in Japan.

After the Pacific War, a new civil code was promulgated ending the family system and proclaiming the true emancipation of women. Since 1946 Imperial rule was replaced by a democratic system of government, although the Emperor remains as a figurehead. Since Christianity was the basis for democracy in the West, Japanese democracy existed at first only on the surface because of the lack of Christian freedom.

At present there is a movement in Japan to resurrect the Imperial system which is closely linked with the problem of rearmament. The revival of the old family system necessarily follows the resurrection of the Imperial system. This movement is supported mainly by older people who are afraid that they will not be supported when they are unable to work. They blame the present lack of morality in Japan on the rise of democracy. Whatever happens in the future, we may feel sure that since the youth have migrated to the industrial sites and have gained their freedom, they will never voluntarily return to the submission of their elders.

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