Household Troubles: Japanese Women's Conceptions of Self (1603–1868)

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Abstract

This paper examines how Japanese women's conceptions of self were shaped by the stem family structure during the Tokugawa period (1603–1868). Stem families, also identified by historians with the Japanese term for "house," ie, were diverse structures of kinship and economic support. They typically—though not always—consisted of a male household head, multiple generations, and a single heir. In most cases, the stem model was cyclical, ensuring that household headship and assets would be passed down. The Tokugawa period represented a unique historical shift; whereas previously only the samurai class adhered to the ie structure, during the Tokugawa period, households of all classes generally adopted this form of family organization. The ie was important because it delineated certain roles and expectations for different status groups. For women in particular, this role was often complex, contradictory, and open-ended. Two normative characteristics of Tokugawa-era families were filial piety and collective possession. These two values particularly shaped the roles and expectations of household women. Using Noriko Sugano's research on the Official Records of Filial Piety (1801) and Amy Stanley's Fashioning the Family: A Temple, a Daughter and a Wardrobe (2019), this paper asserts that women were encouraged to think about their identity in terms of membership within a larger group.

I. Introduction

The family was a fundamental social and political unit of kinship for people in Tokugawa Japan (1603–1868). During the 17th century, the stem family—also used interchangeably with the Japanese term for "house," ie—would become the dominant household structure, even for families outside of the samurai class. Stem families consisted of a male household head, his parents, his spouse, and their children.[1] Although they generally spanned three generations, stem families were relatively small, especially when compared to the flexibly large warrior families of Japan. This paper argues that the stem family was a tradition of support that encouraged women to think about themselves and their identity in terms of membership of a larger group, a norm that impacted them more than any other household group.

The first part of this paper analyzes the influence of Confucianism and Confucian scholarship in Japan to provide context for societal expectations for women. This analysis is followed by a discussion on how Confucian values translated into the stem family structure. Using Dorothy Ko's research on women and Confucian cultures in East Asia as well as William McCullough's research on marriage institutions in premodern Japan, this paper identifies filial piety, a principle of respect and care for parents and elders, as the most significant tenet of

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[1] Berry, Mary Elizabeth, and Marcia Yonemoto, eds, *What Is a Family?: Answers from Early*

Modern Japan (University of California Press, 2019), 5.

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Confucianism for Tokugawa-era women. The stress on "filial women" is unmistakable in the emergence of texts in the mid-to-late Tokugawa years concerning a woman's place in the home and in greater society.[2] One of these texts was the *Official Records of Filial Piety* (1801), a book published by the Tokugawa shogunate (hereditary leader and his administration) to document "good" and "virtuous" acts by real people. Drawing from Noriko Sugano's research on the *Official Records of Filial Piety*, this section concludes by asserting that filial piety was one of the normative characteristics of stem families that encouraged women to think about themselves in terms of membership.

The second part of this paper uses Amy Stanley's *Fashioning the Family: A Temple, a Daughter and a Wardrobe* (2019) as a case study for unfilial women who formed possibilities for themselves outside of the home. Stanley's research pieces together the life of a young commoner woman named Tsuneno following her escape from her hometown in Echigo province—contemporary Niigata Prefecture—to the capital city of Edo, pawning family possessions and divorcing multiple husbands along the way. Tsuneno's character, which was the antithesis of filial female exemplar, demonstrates how the survival of the home was significantly vested in women. Her story also identifies collective possession as a second normative characteristic of stem families. Collective possession was the unspoken rule that household assets were owned collectively by members, rather than individually. Although Tsuneno was pawning her own clothing, they were marked by family, creating a household dispute over their ownership. Stanley's research suggests that even women who were physically removed from the home shared a common

conflict of negotiating the needs of themselves through the needs of the household.

2. Women in Stem Families

In the stem family formation, household headship was given to the eldest son, who acquired the bulk of assets, including the primary residence, hereditary titles, and the responsibility of maintaining the ie.[3] Non-inheriting daughters were married and placed into the household of other family lines, while non-inheriting sons became new heads of branch lines.[4] The significance of this arrangement was that it could "replicate itself indefinitely"[5] while offering a diversity of possible arrangements. Instead of an uncompromising conjugal structure, the stem family is best thought of as a flexible social and economic support group. However, the stem family was a historically identifiable family structure from the beginning of the Tokugawa era.[6] There was not one model of family, but Tokugawa people's life courses seemed to be notably affected by the space they took up in the home.

This was definitely the case for women, who had the unique experience of maintaining the identity of their parents' household while simultaneously committing themselves and their emotional ties to a second, third, or even fourth home, whether through marriage, divorce, or adoption. Despite non-inheriting sons also leaving the home for a new place of residence, it was women whose sense of identity was thwarted by the social changes of new names, spaces, and legacies. Consequently, women were confronted with a multitude of identities, all linking them to the structure of household in ways men were not. When incorporated into the home, women were regarded as important members in its success and

[2] See Kaibara Ekken's Onna Daigaku "The Greater Learning for Women" (1729).

[3] Berry, *What is a Family?*, 5.

[4] Ibid., 5.

[5] Drixler, Fabian. *Mabiki: Infanticide and Population Growth in Eastern Japan, 1660-1950.* 1st ed., (University of California Press, 2013), 62.

[6] Yonemoto, Marcia. *The Problem of Women in Early Modern Japan,* (University of California Press, 2016), 11.

longevity. Conversely, an independent woman, especially an economically independent woman, was inconceivable.[7] This is one of the puzzling ironies of women in early modern Japan. Agency was dependent on household membership, but women were also conceiving possibilities for themselves unaccompanied by the home.

This paper relies on anecdotal evidence from the lives of few Japanese women and is therefore exceptionally limited. For this reason, self-conception is used loosely to describe beliefs and ideas women held about themselves that were affected by structures like the household. The stem family is worthy of investigation because it did not simply impose limits—it also exalted women in notable ways. If women's identities were tied to household names and they performed specific roles in the home, the stem family undoubtedly affected women's sense of self. As much as the household was central to the construction of women's identities and experiences, they were not just victims of a larger patriarchal architecture. They were important members of the household who negotiated divisions of labor, headship, inheritance, and survival, making Tokugawa women experts in their own sphere of influence.

3. Confucian Ideology and the Proliferation of Filial Exemplars

Confucianism can be defined as an ethical system that represents hierarchical human relationships based on "three bonds" and "five relations." The three bonds are between ruler and minister, father and son, and husband and wife.[8] Mencius' (372–289) five relations define filial piety between father and son, loyalty between ruler and minister, differential harmony between husband and wife, precedence between elder and younger siblings, and trust between friends.[9] Filial piety was a virtue of respect, and as will be seen, it could be linked between other members of the household. In China, between the Han dynasty (206–220) and the Tang dynasty (618–907), lawmakers adapted the "patriarchal family paradigm,"[10] which was characterized by Confucianism and aimed to shape Chinese families. The beginning of the patriarchal family paradigm's growth in Japan can be dated back to the Nara period (710–794)—which was concurrent with the Tang Dynasty in China—when Japanese scholars joined embassies on extended educational expeditions to the Tang court and returned to Japan with materials such as literary classics, encyclopedias, medical works, musical instruments and other technology.[11] The transmission of Chinese texts was critical for Nara courtiers who felt that Chinese classics had practical application in governance, ritual and everyday life.[12] This process of synthesizing Chinese texts, selecting important tenets, and codifying filial and patrilineal attitudes in law and literature would continue to dominate the spaces of Japanese thinkers for years.

During this period, two different developments informing Confucian influence on pre-Tokugawa families can be observed. Firstly, a male-dominated political sphere would emerge, as facilitated by patrilineal systems encoded during the Nara period.[13] Eighth-century criminal and administrative codes, for example, delineated roles for residential unit heads and their wives and redefined repudiation to allow a stronger patriarchal paradigm.[14] The stress on gendered functions between male and female courtiers would eventually place women in subordinate positions with less political influence, mirroring

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[7] Yonemoto, The Problem of Women in Early Modern Japan, 5.

[8] Goldin, Paul R. Confucianism, (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 25-26.

[9] Ko, Dorothy, Haboush, JaHyun Kim, and Piggott, Joan, eds. Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan, (University of California Press, 2003), 27.

[10] Sekiguchi, Women and Confucian Cultures, 27.

[11] Ibid., 13.

[12] Ibid.,13.

[13] Ibid., 17.

[14] Sekiguchi, Women and Confucian Cultures, 40.

the development and specialization of female roles in non-elite families, such as the housewife.[15] As the political power of men was strengthened, the political freedom of women was effectively weakened. The second development was the increased power women held in affairs related to kinship and marital practices.[16] During the Heian period (794–1185), women were permitted to obtain a divorce, and there is no evidence that having multiple subsequent husbands was viewed as socially or morally unacceptable.[17] Heian nobles also had a custom of matrilineal succession of property and residence.[18] Given Heian couples' preference for residence at or near the wife's parental home or residing at a house separate from either spouses' parental home, female ownership of property and household assets was not unlikely.[19] Though pre-Tokugawa Heian families housed a small and elite minority of women, the possibilities for these women deviated significantly from traditional Confucian norms. Thus, economic autonomy and control over aspects of kinship and marriage could coexist with filial and patrilineal ideals of Confucianism. While there are seeming contradictions, Japanese families were not imitations of Chinese Confucian models. Rather, Confucianism was one of many cultural knowledge systems in Japan under which women performed a "delicate balancing act."[20]

The institutionalization of Confucian thought would continue into the Tokugawa period by the shogunate. In accordance with their ancestors, the shogunate understood that the stability of government, tradition, and everyday life was contingent on maintaining an ideal social landscape.[21] In order to accomplish this, Confucian education of moral virtues such as filial

piety was disseminated through written texts. More specifically, the shogunate would produce a series of filial "exemplars" in the *Official Records of Filial Piety* to promote the state's ideological goals while sanctioning individual attitudes and behaviors. In 1789, the military requested names and accounts of individuals who had demonstrated "good deeds," and in 1801, these individuals and deeds were organized into a book which was published for the general public.[22] The timing of its release meant that not only commoners, including peasants, merchants, and artisans, were able to acquire the text, but also that a majority of women were able to read it.[23]

Noriko Sugano's research on the *Official Records of Filial Piety* found that the overwhelming majority of female exemplars in the book relate to filial acts and chastity.[24] For women, filial piety included respect, obedience, and care for both parents and parents-in-law. Sugano also compiled a list of seven virtuous acts which recurred frequently under the category of filial piety.[25] The stories of exemplary women in the *Official Record of Filial Piety* illustrate that female filiality tended to be conditional. This is illustrated in the story of a woman named Myoki from Higo Province—contemporary Kumamoto Prefecture—who was commended in 1685 in the *Official Records of Filial Piety*.[26] Myoki's family suffered from economic hardship after her father fell ill, leading her to raise her younger brother and take control of household finances. Filial exemplars were media representations of ideal women. They maintained that household membership was the primary way in which women should think about themselves. In this way, stories like Myoki's tended to favor narratives that stressed certain virtuous acts while

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[15] Ibid., 17.
[16] Ibid., 18.
[17] McCullough, William H., "Japanese Marriage Institutions in The Heian Period," Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies 27, (1967), 136.
[18] McCullough, "Japanese Marriage Institutions in The Heian Period," 141.
[19] Ibid., 137.

[20] Ko, Women and Confucian Cultures, 18.
[21] Sugano, "State Indoctrination of Filial Piety in Tokugawa Japan," 171.
[22] Ibid., 172.
[23] Ibid., 172.
[24] Ibid., 173.
[25] Ibid., 173.
[26] Ibid., 186.

neglecting others. Myoki was not represented as a "de facto head of household";[27] rather, her intelligence and leadership were manipulated into a narrative about devotion to family and having household success in mind.[28] If the self was defined by belonging, the stem family structure helped create the terms under which women should think about their individuality.

4. Inside and Outside the Home

Within the stem family, everything belonging to the house, both tangible and intangible, became part of a pool of household possessions. Despite this collective ownership, there were unspoken rules about the allocation of these household possessions. Some possessions—like property, for example—were assumed to belong to the male household head.[29] Other possessions—those that were not heirlooms or shared equally—could be a bit more ambiguous as to which member of the household they belonged to. This was particularly true of clothing, which was especially obscure because it represented the production and consumption of household women.[30] Inside the home, women were responsible for purchasing materials and producing, repairing, and managing the family's wardrobe. Outside of the home, the clothing both styled and worn by women were a display of the family's wealth, sense of fashion, and worldliness.[31] This positioned household women as critical social players in the maintenance of a good family reputation.[32] Clothing also became a key commodity during the Tokugawa period because it allowed poor, rural communities to create household investments. The transition from expensive durable materials to cotton textiles—which were cheaper, more

accessible, and in need of frequent replacement— bridged the economic gap between city families and rural farm families.[33] In this way, new textiles evened the playing field by expanding the types of property poorer households could own. They also blurred the lines between individual craft and collective ownership.

In Fashioning the Family: A Temple, a Daughter and a Wardrobe, Amy Stanley examines one household where collective ownership was complicated by a young woman who rejected the female filial exemplar. Stanley's work covers a brief part of twenty nine year old Tsuneno's life where she exchanged letters with her family in Ishigami Village in Echigo Province. The story also follows Tsuneno's older brother, Giyu, a head priest at the Rinsenji temple to whom most of the letters are addressed.[34] After one failed marriage, Tsuneno was preparing to be married again in 1833.[35]

In the weeks leading up to her marriage, Tsuneno and her family would procure a sizable wedding trousseau. Cataloging shopping lists, purchasing new materials, and tailoring garments was a household effort that depended on the collaboration of all members.[36] Tsuneno would find herself divorced yet again, and the trousseau would follow her through a third marriage and a third divorce. Although the reasons for this divorce are left out of Giyu's records, marriage may not have been a part of Tsuneno's plan. In 1839, Tsuneno made the bold decision to run away to Edo, bringing with her a substantial portion of her wardrobe, which she knew she could pawn in the city to cover her living expenses.[37] For women, leaving the home was considered socially and economically disastrous for both the woman and her family.[38] When Tsuneno arrived in Edo and

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[27] Ibid., 186.

[28] Ibid., 186.

[29] Ibid., 5.

[30] Stanley, Amy, "Fashioning the Family: A Temple, a Daughter, and a Wardrobe," (University of California Press, 2019), 174.

[31] Stanley, "Fashioning the Family," 175.

[32] Ibid., 175.

[33] Ibid., 175.

[34] Ibid., 176.

[35] Ibid., 177.

[36] Ibid., 177.

[37] Ibid., 180.

[38] Ibid., 184.

pawned her clothing off, she effectively used her wardrobe as currency, threatening the normative structure of collective ownership which characterized the stem family.

Of Sugano's collection of seven virtuous acts from the *Official Records of Filial Piety*, Tsuneno rejected more than half, making her an excellent example of an unfilial daughter according to the terms of the Tokugawa shogunate. She rejected the stem family structure and the female filial exemplar in two main ways. Firstly, Tsuneno gained some degree of economic independence by claiming ownership of her craft. Her ability to capitalize on her wardrobe destabilized the institution of clothing as a shared household asset. Later, however, Tsuneno's funds began dwindling, she lacked clothing to use as social currency and thus struggled to be considered employable.[39] Returning home years later after another failed marriage would reinforce the meaning of collective possession for Tsuneno.[40] A second way in which Tsuneno was unfilial was by refusing to be a part of a household. The back-and-forth of multiple failed marriages met with her family's efforts to quickly marry her away may have created an environment in which Tsuneno did not see the value in membership to a longstanding tradition. Her independent life in Edo was by no means glamorous, but she did subvert the stem family structure by refusing to be part of the household physically, and to a great degree, economically.

5. Conclusion

The household was an important physical and social structure that shaped the lives of Tokugawa women. This paper was confined to analyzing the lives of young women who were socially perceived as daughters. In brief, daughters were sources for household trouble because they represented something ambiguous. Two important characteristics of stem families concerning

daughters are filial piety and collective possession. These normative characteristics of stem families particularly seemed to encourage women to think about their identity in relation to the household. Although filial piety was not directly imposed by the shogunate, Noriko Sugano's research on the *Official Records of Filial Piety* suggests that women were in constant encounter with media representations of filial female exemplars. These female exemplars demonstrated that women should negotiate the needs of themselves through the needs of the household. Amy Stanley's research in Fashioning the Family: *A Temple, a Daughter, and a Wardrobe* highlighted some of the other ways in which women's lives could be imagined. Although these examples frame Japanese women's experiences as binary—where women could be one or the other: filial or unfilial—the fact of the matter was that everyday women experienced lives dramatically different from Myoki or Tsuneno. Although four-times-divorced Tsuneno is on the more extreme end of cases, her story is the perfect example of the countless possibilities and alternative life courses that existed for contemporary Japanese women.

Representing the experiences and inner workings of how women may have been thinking about themselves is an impossible task. Self-conception is typically not a historiographical exploration. However, thinking about how people's perceptions of self may have been affected by the "everyday" structures of life is useful for understanding the conflicts of premodern women. The home was a physical space where women spent much of their time forming emotional relationships and community, but it was also a space for making difficult and fraught life decisions that often complicated families. The main discovery of this paper is not that Tokugawa women were victims of patriarchy or Confucianism, but that women had possibilities for subverting, working in, and succeeding within

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[39] Ibid., 183.

[40] Ibid., 185.

an ideological system.[41] Roles and expectations were sometimes ambiguous, but the stem family structure seemed to inform women that membership and incorporation into a support group was the most obvious way of thinking about the self. The lack of visibility behind this logic, however, has larger implications for constructions of gender in Japan.

Women in the Tokugawa period engaged with gender based on a series of actions that were more or less in their own interests. In Marcia Yonemoto's *The Problem of Women in Early Modern Japan*, she discusses how in present day Japan, workplace discrimination and structural biases result in polls from women that favor women's preference to stay at home.[42] She argues, however, that "nonaction"[43] is the very basis of choosing not to take part in a political system where advancement yields very little return for women. Modern women and their Tokugawa predecessors engage in the same system of negotiation through structures that encourage membership. The degree to which women have the choice to participate was arguably greater in the past ie system than in modern-day Japanese institutions. Although the home was a significant place for gender socialization, those gender-based constraints were not regulated legally or explicitly in the way modern Japanese society does.[44] Thus, women will continue to act in unexpected ways as long as Japanese society includes women in adverse and violent ways. As Yonemoto asserts, gender history is no longer "compensatory."[45] Narrating the lives of Tokugawa women and women today is not enough to contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender equality. The idea of reconciling a prescribed social role with one's individuality is not a challenge distinctive of Japanese women in the present or of Tokugawa women of the past. Thus, the stories and strategies of Tokugawa women should be seen as reflective

of our own complex problems and how we conceive the self.

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[41] Ibid., 221.
[42] Ibid., 222.
[43] Ibid., 222.

[44] Ibid., 222.
[45] Ibid, 223.

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