

# THE FAMILY IN JAPAN

## 19<sup>th</sup> Century Changes in Japan

**General** Not surprisingly, Japan's more dramatic embrace of reform in response to Western military and economic threats, from 1868 onward, included substantial changes in family life. These are less well known than efforts in the economic and political sphere, but they merit careful attention. At the same time, the Japanese sought to avoid a fully Western version of the modern family.

**Childhood** Key changes deeply affected the roles of children in the family, including new public health measures that cut into levels of child mortality. The 1872 educational act required primary schooling for both boys and girls. Implementation was somewhat gradual, given resource constraints and continued needs for child labor, but by 1900 a substantial shift had occurred. Some resistance developed among the peasantry, but previous educational traditions and the larger umbrella of Confucianism assured a relatively smooth transition. Some daycare centers emerged as well. For smaller groups, including some women, education began to extend beyond the primary level. As in the West earlier, these changes also began to generate a birth rate decline: parents were adjusting in various ways. Japanese reformers also pressed for wider attention to childhood in other ways, often copying Western expert arguments about the importance of more careful parenting. Children "will become learned and virtuous if the training methods are appropriate, stupid and bigoted if they are not," as one authority noted in 1874. Advice manuals proliferated after 1900 along with new periodicals such as the *Family Magazine*, which urged adults to convert to the realization of the "child as treasure". Finally, and somewhat unexpectedly, Japan became a world leader in the production of child-centered toys, by the 1920s.

**Distinctiveness** With all this, Japanese authorities also sought to differentiate Japanese children from their Western counterparts by insisting on the importance of group and family solidarity (along with nationalism and loyalty to the emperor). After brief flirtation in the 1870s, the government came down hard against individualism. An 1879 Memorandum insisted on "the virtues of loyalty, filial piety, honor and duty, which have been cultivated for several centuries." This approach influenced parental goals and tactics, including strong reliance on shaming wayward children, and also the ties Japanese youngsters developed with their parents and peers. Similar conservatism dictated a domestic emphasis for women despite their educational advances (though this was not entirely dissimilar from patterns in the West). Even upper-class girls in secondary schools were urged to develop their capacities to become a "good wife, wise mother". Feminist initiatives developed but they were constrained.

**Marriage** Japanese law unabashedly supported patriarchal authority, deep into the reform decades. The legal code of 1898 required a husband's consent for a wife to sign a contract. Women's adultery might be punished as a criminal offense, but the same did not apply to men. Marriage required a father's consent (this for both men and women, until age 30 for men, 25 for women). In a divorce, custody of the children rested with the father. More than laws were involved. As contacts with Westerners increased, the Japanese upper classes resisted the tradition of the mixed-gender dinner party, after a brief flirtation: the Japanese did not like to have their wives along (but valued geisha company, which disconcerted Westerners); and they definitely wanted daughters to stay home, lest paternal authority to arrange marriage be disputed. Japanese of all social classes, and not just the elite, began to be urged to maintain greater control over sexuality.

**Adjustments** Here too, however, there were important changes. At the legal level, concubinage was outlawed, a huge redefinition of family at the upper-class level. More broadly, industrialization increasingly took Japanese men out of the home, giving mothers huge new authority and responsibility. Some new family activities were encouraged, even by the government: for example, dinners at home with husband and wife together. Dining tables became a popular new furniture item. By the 1920s, discussions of the importance of love as a basis for marriage increased, with some widely-publicized cases (including at least one suicide) where young women resisted parental arrangements in favor of the inclinations of

the heart. Not surprisingly, the modern Japanese family as of the turn of the century was a complex mix of tradition and genuine innovation. Here, clearly, was an industrial style family with a distinctive link to earlier patterns.

### **Further reading**

Mark Jones, *Children as Treasures: childhood and the middle class in early twentieth century Japan* (Harvard University Press, 2010)

Michael Kinski, *Kinderheit/Childhood In Japanese History* (Harrassowitz Verlag, 2016)

Marnie Anderson, *A Place in Public: women's rights in Meiji Japan* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2010)