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JAPANESE ATTITUDES TO WOMEN,  
MARRIAGE AND FAMILY SINCE THE TOKUGAWA PERIOD  
AND THEIR EFFECT ON FAMILIES  
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## ABSTRACT

Some of the ideals about women, marriage and family which exist in Japan today can be traced back to the ideals of feudal society which crystallised in the 'bushi' class of the Tokugawa Period. These ideals were largely part of the Confucianism and Buddhism that were imported from China many centuries earlier and which the Tokugawa government used as the moral base by which they controlled society. The feudal view that the primary function of a woman was to produce heirs for her husband's family lowered women's status. The idea that the sole purpose of the marriage was to perpetuate the family related to the vital aspect of its economic survival. So in 'bushi' families, the relationship of the married couple was denied in favour of the hierarchical relationships through which the source of income was transmitted. The family centered on the flow of generations, at the expense of the happiness both of the current title-holder and his family, as individuals and as groups. These ideals were spread throughout society in time.

Changes were made to the law after the Meiji Restoration, when the old feudal institutions were abolished. Some of these changes were the result of influences from the West, but because the new rulers came from the 'bushi' class they carried their ideals forward, especially in relation to the family, as a trusted means of social control. The greatest Western influence was felt in the Constitution of 1947 which awarded recognition to the individual and therefore to women and to married couples. These changes are only now becoming part of the consciousness of the people. As a result, the definition of "family" is in question, making it difficult to apply a precept which has been fundamental in Japan for centuries: "for the sake of the family". Under this precept people were expected to put the wellbeing of the family ahead of their own happiness. Urbanisation and industrialisation have simultaneously contributed to the pressure for change both in ideals and realities for women in particular.

We can trace changes to the ideals by looking at the families caught up in 'sankin kotai', 'dekasegi' and 'tanshin funin'. The latter can be called a social problem in that these families are at the cutting edge of change. Their difficulties are forcing society at large to rethink the traditional balance of the interests of the individual and society.

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## INTRODUCTION

In Japan as much as anywhere else the family is perceived as the basic unit of society. In families people seek everything from satisfaction of biological needs to economic security, and the diversity of functions a family has means it shapes the attitudes and expectations of its members in almost every area of human life. It therefore influences society in significant ways. Conversely attitudes and expectations formed in the community from forces like government policy and ideas from abroad have had their effect on the Japanese family too, influencing the way people see their roles, purposes and potentials in groups and as individuals.

Attitudes are partly rooted in history, stem partly from the contemporary environment and also from individual personality. Attitudes and expectations change over time, and what at any one time may be thought of as an "ideal" may not be possible or relevant in real life, or may make aspects of daily life quite difficult for those who do not measure up.

Although any division is arbitrary to some degree this study is divided into four parts for the purpose of comparison. Part One deals with what people think of women as individuals. Part Two covers what they think of women in marriage and Part Three what they think of

women as mothers and family members. Having considered this background we can then in Part Four look at the cases of "separated families" and compare their situations with each other, as well as with the norms for the time. In each Part the study focuses on the Tokugawa Period first, then on the Meiji Period to 1946, and finally on the time since then. This is because these are the periods in which each of these "separated families" are to be found. These separations were brought about first by the 'sankin kotai' system of enforced residence of 'daimyo' and other vassal families in Edo. Next from the Meiji Period on, the economic conditions of rural peasant families forced them to do 'dekasegi', or leave home to find work to supplement the meagre resources of the land. In the present time there are a variety of circumstances that have led to 'tanshin funin', literally "going to one's post alone". The latter is given particular attention because a good deal of Japanese media coverage has been awarded it in the 1980's and it is referred to as a "social problem". Consideration will be given to how apt this term is in light of the fact that neither this nor the other two kinds of "separated families" have involved more than a small proportion of the population.

Looking further back in history one learns that "separated families" as such were nothing new even in Tokugawa Japan. In "Manyoshu", a collection of poems and songs spanning two centuries and compiled around AD759, several are by young peasants from eastern Japan, sent to do military guard duty in Kyushu under the

`Sakimori' system. Three thousand at a time, recruited at the rate of a thousand a year for three year terms, these men had to leave families behind, and many were lost from starvation and disease. The poems they left show how their families suffered from the absence of their strongest worker and head of household, one of the reasons the system was eventually abandoned. A major theme of the poems is the sorrow of parting and feelings for those left behind (Kodansha Vol 7, 2). Some, like this, tell of the whole family's grief:

"...My mother picking up the hem of her skirt,  
 Stroked me with it and caressed me.  
 My father said regretfully with tears streaming  
 Down his beard as white as the `taku' rope:  
 "My fawn, my only son - how sad  
 Your parting in the morning, dear child!  
 I shall miss you when I see you not  
 For such long years. Let me talk to you  
 If only for today!" He sighed and moaned.  
 My wife and children gathering here and there,  
 Wailed like the birds of spring,  
 Their sleeves all wet with weeping.  
 They tugged me by the hand to retain me;  
 And loath to part, they followed after me.

But in dread obedience to the imperial command  
 I started out on the road,  
 Looking back many times from the corner of each hill



Having left my dear ones far behind,  
 My mind knew no rest  
 While the pain of longing wrung my heart.  
 ...May all be well with my parents!  
 May my wife in sound health wait for me!... "

(Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkokai 1965: 176-7).

Others tell of the couple's feelings:

"Pining and waiting for you these long days,  
 She will sleep with her sleeves turned back,  
 And her black hair spread out -  
 Your sweet young wife".

(173).

"How sad was the parting  
 Of the Eastlander from his wife -  
 He brooding on the long years  
 Of separation!"

(174).

"In obedience to the imperial command,  
 Though sad is the parting from my wife,  
 I summon the courage of a man,  
 ...My mother strokes me gently;  
 My young wife clings to me saying:  
 "I will pray to the Gods for your safe-keeping.  
 Go unharmed and come back soon!"

As she speaks she wipes with her sleeves  
 The tears that choke her.  
 Hard as it is, I start on my way".

(175).

"As for me, I can take  
 Travels as they come;  
 But my poor wife with the children -  
 She must be falling thin with care!"

(252).

"Ah, must I leave you dear -  
 You, who clasp me,  
 Even as the creeping bean-vine clings  
 To the wild rose-bush by the wayside!"

(253).

"Oh for the body of my darling wife,  
 Better far than seven coats  
 Worn one over another,  
 When on a chilly night of frost  
 The bamboo leaves are rustling loud!"

(283).

Looking at these lines we get a strong sense of the importance of the emotional bond of the family members; we can see, too, the importance of the man as head of household. But there are also hints that men are seen as brave and able to stand alone while women are seen as dependent and likely to suffer physical ills from

emotional distress. Nevertheless, in obedience to imperial command, they parted.

Some historians, Inoue Kiyoshi and Takamura Itsue, for example, postulate a kind of marriage from even earlier than the 8th century known as 'tsumadoikon'. In this, the couple underwent a form of marriage ceremony, but then resided in separate dwellings. Superficially this seems like a "separated family" too, but it is thought that the couple remained in their separate clan-based dwellings, except for conjugal visits from either partner, only until the birth of the first child. At this point, the wife is supposed to have moved in with the husband's family. If this is the case, it was really a kind of trial to prove their fertility, suggesting the importance placed on children as the real basis for marriage. However evidence for the existence of 'tsumadoikon' is disputed, and this can not form part of my case.

There is speculation about the evolution of primitive "group marriages" where spouses were shared, to the tribal type of family in which incest was banned and women played a key role in the economic life of the hunter-gatherer community. They were more than just childbearers. There is speculation too about the respect women were awarded in ancient times because of the mystery of their fertility which was seen in such complex terms as an awesome link to the gods, dangerous and 'tapu' as well (Ienaga, 4).

But it was the introduction of Chinese ideas around the 4th to 6th centuries which had a massive impact on Japanese attitudes to women, marriage and family. Their early influence was on the native 'uji' or clan which traced its ancestry back to the mythical creation of Japan. They were the nobility who imported culture, philosophy and religion from T'ang China to strengthen their position as rulers of the scattered communities of Yamato, old Japan. Along with systems of government, they brought in Buddhist and Confucian ideas, and over the centuries these became the models for their own family systems.

The effectiveness of the governing system they instituted fluctuated, but the philosophical and other importations that were ideals first for the ruling nobility later became those of the new 'buke' or military families who held real political power from the establishment of the Kamakura Bakufu in 1185 (or 1192) until the end of the Tokugawa Period in 1868. Of course there were modifications in this long period of time, but the significant point is that these ideals did spread through to all sections of society, many proving extremely durable.

Since the 15th century Japan has also been exposed to ideas from the West. These became quite influential in the politics, economy education system and so on of Meiji Japan, but showed less impact on family life until after World War II. It is in modern times that this impact is being felt.

The aim of this study is not to postulate a causal connection between 'sankin kotai', 'dekasegi' and 'tanshin funin'. It is not an attempt to trace the roots of 'tanshin funin'. Nor is it a comparison of Japanese and Western or Chinese models. Only those ideals which have been evident in Japan will be considered. Current Japanese opinion about possible future trends will also be mentioned since these seem to require further modification of current ideals.

As women's history is still a relatively new field of study it does not have the extensive documentation available to historians of politics and economics, say, nor yet the depth of research from which to draw. Literature has been used as one source, partly because it is a useful way to see differences between ideals and realities. It is also useful as a reminder that documentation of any kind is, after all, no more than a record of somebody's perception of what is "real" and "important". Besides standard texts written in Japanese on the history of Japanese women, marriage, family and culture, sources include articles from Japanese language magazines and newspapers from all of which I have read and translated largely by myself.

During 1985 I was able to travel to Japan where I had discussions with several acquaintances, male and female and of a range of ages, whose opinions I sought. Mrs D is in her late thirties, is married to a foreigner, has young children and lives in Japan. Mrs H is in her late forties with older children, and as well as transferring with her husband she has experience of

'tanshin funin'. Mr M and Mr O are in their mid-twenties, unmarried and with experience of living and working overseas. Mrs S is in her late forties, is married to a foreigner and lives overseas. Miss S is in her early forties, unmarried and financially self-supporting. Mrs T is in her early forties and has lived apart from her husband for most of the ten years of their married life. Mrs Y is in her early thirties, has no children but lives apart from her husband because both have careers. The insights these kind people gave me are incorporated in the text. What I offer, then, are my perceptions of the perceptions of others.

The system of Romanisation used is the Hepburn System although long vowels are not marked. As the normal order of Japanese names is surname first, that is the order adopted here with the exception of those mentioned in the Acknowledgments. It should be noted that literary figures are commonly referred to by their given names. This convention has also been observed.

References to "Onna Daigaku" relate to my translation of this work in the Appendix. Other references take the form author and page number, and are incorporated in the text.

## PART ONE: IDEALS FOR WOMEN

### CHAPTER ONE

#### Women of the 'Bushi' Class, Tokugawa Period

"Women are the passive 'yin' sex. 'Yin' is night and therefore dark. A woman, then, is foolish in comparison with a man...". So says "Onna Daigaku" (Appendix), which goes on elaborating and embroidering this tenaciously held view of women. Originating in the Confucianism of ancient China, the images it praises were adopted by the nobility of old Japan, in time trickling down into the consciousness of the people at large to become, during the Tokugawa Period, one of the threads from which the very social fabric of the nation was woven. Although later modified by the breakdown of the class system and by Western ideals drawn from a very different philosophical base, the traditional fabric is still widely admired in many quarters for its durability and "beauty". Yet the realities of the industrialised, urbanised world which the huge majority of the Japanese now inhabit are fraying and weakening it. The old ideals of women are under siege.

The demands made of women in "Onna Daigaku" were so stringent that they could hardly have been carried out in real life, yet their effect has been profound. They reflect some of the major planks of feudal society - hierarchy, which ensured womens' inferiority and obedience, which enforced their subservience were two characteristics which are still in evidence today. There is another aspect which proves of particular relevance when considering the situation of modern women too, and this comes from Buddhist philosophy. Ueda Yoshifumi explains it thus: "The many (society) is not simply a collection of ones but is the negation of the one (Moore, 83). In other words, "society" is only possible when the disruptive complexities of its component individuals are negated. Professor Inatomi Eijiro says a Japanese has "no clear consciousness of the individual self, but recognises his own existence only in the composite life of the world" (Ibid, 307). From here come two problems - can an inferior subordinate lacking full individual consciousness live an independent and meaningful life? This question relates to 'Bushido' which although associated with male values has implications for 'bushi' women too. 'Bushido' involved "dedicating one's life unconditionally to one's master's service" (Ibid, 305). Ekken taught that the master whom a woman should so serve was her husband. The second problem is this: can an inferior subordinate lacking full individual consciousness be a complete human being? If not, it is not possible to create an ideal in which one woman can be "everything" to one man. Toge-



ther these two questions gave rise to two distinct ideals for women which arose in the Tokugawa Period. Only one was for women who would follow the hallowed path of matrimony. The other assumed a different role for them. The two are still distinct in present day Japan, and, as we will see, have implications for the ideals of marriage and family now emerging into consciousness. First let us look at how women have been regarded over the last three hundred years.

The Tokugawa Period, named for the dynasty of the 'shoguns' who headed the government from 1603 to 1868, was a time of relative peace and political stability after the centuries of struggle the Japanese military class had waged against the nobility and among themselves to set up and govern feudal society. The 'bakufu' used Confucian morals as part of their system of control, dividing society into a hierarchy of four classes: 'samurai' (warriors), 'hyakusho' (peasants) and 'chonin' (townsmen including craftsmen and merchants). Because these classes lived so differently it is necessary to look separately at their ideas about women, marriage and family even though the spread of commerce, the growth of the economy, urban centres and the transport network, made possible by this long period of peace, also gradually eroded the relevance of class distinctions.

### The Confucian View

The writings of the respected Confucian scholar, Kaibara Ekken (1630 - 1714) were used by the authorities as part of their method of social control. Born into a 'samurai' family of Shinto priest ancestors, as a youth Ekken studied orthodox 'Chu Hsi' Confucianism under his father. Later his connections with the 'bakufu' enabled him to study in Kyoto where he became influenced by Neo-Confucianism, though with reservations. At 39 he married Token, a woman skilled at 'waka', classical music, calligraphy and scroll illustration (Kokushi Daijiten, 91-2). She is reputed to have collaborated with her husband on "Onna Daigaku", or Great Learning for Women, a treatise on Confucian morals aimed at women of the common classes. Unlike many scholars, Ekken wrote not in the Chinese language of the original texts but in simplified Japanese, thus allowing his works to be relatively widely read from the mid-Tokugawa Period on. "Onna Daigaku" was used as a calligraphy model in the education of nice young ladies. It reveals many assumptions about women and many 'samurai' ideals for them to live up to.

Clause 19, quoted at the beginning of the chapter, starts with the warning: "In general, the worst ailments to affect a woman's mind are not showing mild obedience, being angry and resentful, criticising others, envy, and shallow wisdom. These Five Ailments are certainly found in seven or eight women out of ten. They are what make women inferior to men".

Among the strict rules for women's behaviour, the strongest requirement was for obedience. This was a cornerstone in feudal society, the underpinning of the hierarchical relationships in which all people were placed. Inferiors were to show obedience to superiors, and a woman, then, was to obey men, her superiors, for life. The Three Obediences for women stated that as a girl she should obey her father, as a wife she was to obey her husband and as a widow, her son. (Inoue, Vol 1, 130). The overall tone of "Onna Daigaku", full of 'shoulds' and 'musts', gives a clear impression of the importance accorded to obedience.

In setting out the basis for a girl's training Clause 5 says: "When a woman is in her own home there is reason for her to show filial piety to her parents". This refers to the fact that she would be required to shift her allegiance later in life, and as loyalty was also a pivotal concept in the feudal world, this was another thing that made her inferior to her brothers. Suggestions for her training were laid down in Clause 3. "From their earliest days girls should properly be separated from boys and should certainly not see or hear foolish or trivial things. According to the etiquette of old, a boy and a girl must not share a mat. They must not keep their clothes in the same place. They must not bathe in the same place. And when giving and receiving things they must not pass them directly from hand to hand". It is possible that these recommendations reflect the ancient feeling that women were somehow unclean. Anyway the main reason this training

was so important appears right at the beginning of the treatise. "... because a woman goes to the home of another when she grows up, and serves her father- and mother-in-law, even more than a man she must not disregard the teachings of her parents". In other words she is to be trained for her shift in allegiance to her husband's family.

It was the importance of lineage to the Heian nobility and then to the warrior rulers of the Kamakura and Sengoku Periods that had a serious effect on the status of women. In the Sengoku Period the things valued in society were strength of arms, and the ability to acquire territory. In regard to the first point, women, who did not become soldiers, were belittled. Then, as the feudal system was put in place, warriors became dependent on stipends granted from rights to the produce (especially rice) of defined areas of land in return for loyalty. Early on these rights became hereditary, but as the continual division of land over time renders the rights less and less valuable, while in the fourteenth century assets had been shared out among all the children including females, by the early Tokugawa Period single inheritance by the oldest male was the rule. Women had lost almost all rights to inherit property (Inoue Vol 1, 102), and had been made almost entirely dependent on men for their means of survival. Those who did own real estate seldom managed it for themselves anyway, leaving that to husband or guardian (Miyagi, 163).

Chastity was a prime virtue of a woman; as Clause Three of "Onna Daigaku" says, "She should safeguard her heart like gold, and protect her honour even if it cost her her life". While moral tracts besides "Onna Daigaku" stressed sobriety, propriety in demeanour and chastity, they did not include any suggestion that sex itself was shameful. Girls were to be taught the arts of love through 'makura zoshi', illustrated manuals designed to ensure the pleasure of their husbands, if not their own. The chastity laws which prohibited premarital sex among warrior class women expressed the fact not that sex was sinful but that women were the property of their fathers and then of their husbands. (Lehmann, 99). It was also connected with the need to be able to ascertain the father of her sons for the purpose of inheritance. A woman's only values had come to be as potential wives in politically expedient marriages, and as the producers of heirs. Their personalities were now denied in favour of obedience (Inoue Vol 1, 103).

Examples of behaviour unacceptable from a woman are found in several clauses of "Onna Daigaku". The second clause states: "A beautiful woman with a bad heart gets stirred up, glares at others with bulging eyes, speaks coarsely, uses bad language, goes ahead of others, holds grudges and is envious, boasts about herself, criticises others and gives others superior looks". It goes on to warn: "These all stray from the Way of Woman", and gives as the attributes to be esteemed above beauty "calm obedience, and chaste, kind

quietness". "Menoto no Saishi", another lesson book for upper class women says they should not show their emotions openly, should be patient and magnanimous, and should not laugh loudly. These admonitions came from the ancient Buddhist view of women, were adopted by the early nobility and hence later came to be the expected behaviour of the warrior class women. These "inferior" creatures were clearly to be reserved as well as obedient.

If her 'yin' nature was supposed to be a cause of her foolishness, this was manifest in lack of discernment, as Clause Nineteen shows: "... [she] can not see things when they are right before her eyes. Nor can she discern the things which people ought to ridicule... She resents innocent people, curses angrily or envies others, thinking only of herself... These will prove her ruin. This is empty foolishness". Because she is ... "easily led astray by sorcerers and mediums... she must not go to worship recklessly" (Clause 11), nor frequent places like temples and shrines where crowds gather, but she must "...have consideration and keep firm control over herself". The implication here is that she is weak-willed as well as foolish. Yet another of the cardinal virtues of the warrior class was self discipline (Miyagi, 97), and this, it seems, was to apply to both sexes, no matter how much the "lesser" of those was likely to fail in its application.

Having fulfilled all these requirements, humility was then expected of all women. "Even if she does manage to do something good she must not pride herself

on it, but if she does something bad and is criticised by others, she must not argue. She should correct herself quickly and remind herself not to repeat the mistake so that people will not continue to speak badly of her. Also if others ridicule her she must not be angry or resentful but be patient and endure it gracefully" (Clause 19).

A warrior class woman was expected to know something of the arts of tea ceremony, flower arranging and calligraphy. To be able to play 'koto', 'shamisen', to compose poetry and to dance was also acceptable (Miyagi, 174). As the ruling class in the Heian Period, the nobles had set the "desirable" standards for men and women, and these had been incorporated into the ideals of the new ruling class, the warriors, in the Kamakura Period. Now, in the Tokugawa Period, they would filter down to the wealthier merchants who were to become the driving force in cultural growth, and so on to the 'chonin' class as a whole.

It was fine for a woman to acquire some culture - but only to a degree. "Women should not have talents in a lot of arts or hanker after attractiveness., but should have the Four Virtues, as these alone are the Way of Righteousness for woman", says "Jokun San no Michi" (Ibid, 171). To become a Master in any of the arts was not an image for women. The Four Virtues, chastity, womanly speech, womanly etiquette and womanly merits, took precedence. "Womanly Merits" included knowing how to run a household and to spin, weave, sew, wash and prepare meals; not that these skills themselves were



directly Confucian teachings, but they did emphasise the idea that home was the place where a woman should stay.

The sheer number of books of precepts besides "Onna Daigaku" that were produced for women, as well as the many tales of heroines and virgins published, show that literacy was valued as it had been too by the nobles of earlier times. Now, though, the main lessons they taught were obedience and chastity (Ibid, 170).

There was agreement that talent had little value, but at least the need for sagacity was recognised. "Chiekagami", written early in the period, gave examples from Chinese history to show that "...wives not having talents is a virtue, but a woman lacking talent and wisdom is a stupidity. Can a stupid woman accomplish the Womanly Virtues?" (Ibid, 172).

In short, woman by nature was said to be foolish, disobedient, resentful, critical, envious and so on, and therefore inferior. She was also likely to show her emotions, boast, and show lack of discernment. Yet the ideal woman was to be obedient, chaste, reserved, mild, kind, discerning, humble, uncritical, unselfish, self-disciplined, cultured and competent in domestic matters. There was nothing to suggest she should have skills for employment outside the home. Completely lacking any direct economic value to the men of her class, her real value lay in her ability to produce heirs.

It was because they brought neither inheritance nor much dowry to a marriage that warrior class women were of no real economic value and "in warriors' eyes women were not even human, not even family" (Inoue Vol 1,



127). This referred to the fact that once married they became the property of their husband's family. It was ironic that although it was their ability to produce heirs that gave them any value at all they were not recognised as bloodline. The principle was that it was the male side which transmitted the heritage.

Another example of the low status of women was that they were not brought up as individuals with personality of their own but just as future marriage partners who should be gentle, graceful and not play with boys (Ibid, 130). Not being expected to "use their own ideas, cultivate their power of judgement or foster knowledge", which may have proved a hindrance to their being controlled by men, no real education was seen as necessary for them (Inoue Vol 2, 5).

Although "Onna Daigaku" was quite widely read, it would be a mistake, to imagine that its precepts were universally applied even by the warrior class women from whose ideals it was drawn. Indeed the very force of some of the exhortations suggests that it could have been rather like a modern government campaign for road safety, necessary because it is evident that there is too much straying from the rules. There is a hint that this is the case in the writings of Chikamatsu, Saikaku and others, to which I will return later.

It would also be a mistake to imagine that the ideal woman expounded in "Onna Daigaku" was the ideal of other classes in society, the 'chonin' and the 'hyaku-sho' from the start. Likewise it would be wrong to assume that because "Onna Daigaku" was officially

approved, and that society was heavily regulated by a government from which came the moral leadership of society, that this was the only opinion of women to be found in Japan. "Onna Daigaku" does not necessarily describe how women of the warrior class really lived during the seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. It does, though, show where the essence of feudal morals lies (Ienaga, 183).