Japanese Women and the Nuclear Family: A Historiography

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For most of Japan's history, Japanese women have experienced a lack of political and legal presence as the organization of families both left them reliant on their husbands and their husbands' relatives for support and put those extended family members into the care of these married women. After the defeat of Japan and the collapse of the empire in 1945, the Allied Occupation implemented the Civil Code Reform Law (1947), which officially adopted the conjugal, or nuclear, family structure and altered the rules of inheritance for children, replacing the nearly-standard patrilineal, or stem, family structure that had been in place either in part or in full for centuries.[1] Although many Japanese families held on to practices from the previous stem family system, the new familial formation meant that women were no longer socially expected to be caretakers of their husbands' parents because nuclear households were established in prefectures miles away; the number of nuclear family households rose continually during the postwar period as a result of economic growth and rapid urbanization. Despite the continuity of the stem family system, much recent scholarship by historians, family sociologists, and other scholars of Japanese familial history tend to present the lives of women in postwar Japan as adhering closely to the structure of the nuclear family as they tend to agree that the role of Japanese wives and mothers began to mirror more closely that of their American counterparts. This essay contends that while the women of Japan in the first few decades after World War II did not experience any significant changes in the more quotidian aspects of their familial responsibilities and social expectations, their attitudes towards and understandings of their place in the "new" nuclear family became more idealistic and

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[1] Akihiko Kato, "The Japanese Family System: Change, Continuity, and Regionality over the Twentieth Century" (MPIDR Working Paper, Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, 2013), 10.

deep-rooted as a result of the growing influence of American media portrayals of Western family ideologies on Japanese society and culture.

Hisaya Nonoyama introduces the idea of the nuclear family in postwar Japan through the lens of family structure in the Meiji period (1868-1912), offering that the government's goal in institutionalizing the patrilineal stem family system in the mid-nineteenth century was to create a structure modelled after that of the former samurai class, which made up only a small percentage of the population at the time. The gendered and asymmetrical roles of this structure, as well as its defining inheritance rules, had existed in Japanese families for centuries and only continued to become more widespread such that "by the end of the Meiji era, this system, whereby the eldest son had exclusive right of inheritance, had been established in virtually the whole of Japan" and that "by the Second World War, the Japanese had universally accepted that the family is a patrilineal stem institution."[2] In terms of women's role in this structure, Nonoyama prefaces that since the eldest son would eventually inherit his father's property, he remained and established roots on that land; his wife, who would have married into her husband's group, assumed an official role as a daughter-in-law, or a *yome*, which predominantly involved caring for her husband's parents and other members of his extended family in their old age. The postwar amendment of the civil law, Nonoyama claims, to legally embrace the conjugal system changed the manner in which wives were valued within the family by shrinking this large household of many close and distant relatives to an idealized household of four: husband, wife, and two children. However, he does not address the fact that the caretaking role of women he describes only applied to wives of an eldest son; only the male heir to a rural, agricultural family stayed on that property until inheritance, and thus, only his wife was responsible for the duties Nonoyama depicts. Interestingly, then, he

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presents the nuclear family in the postwar period as an otherworldly concept that drastically changed the lives of women in that the system, claiming that it "confines the woman (wife and mother) as a housewife under a fixed gender role division within a domestic territory" while it "puts man (husband and father) in a dominant position without a change of the patrilineal stem family as *ie* system since the Meiji era."[3] In fact, he claims that the exposure of the Japanese to the "American family lifestyle…was seen as an ideal to be aspired to," so much so that the nuclear family came to be understood as an indication of modernity and democracy.[4] Nonoyama asserts that, guided by both legal amendments promoting the adoption of the nuclear family and exposure to American media, the Japanese made conscious decisions to adopt the practices and ideas of nuclearization and do away with those of the stem family in an attempt to replace the old feudal system with a modern structure: "it was argued that a new family system of an egalitarian, conjugal type must be established in order to create a modern, democratic family."[5] In this supposedly new system, women were expected to maintain their duties of housekeeping and taking care of their children as the sole manager of the household, whereas in the stem family there were multiple daughters (and sometimes daughters-in-law) responsible for such tasks; regardless, the exclusively domestic presence of women in the family remained.[6] He equates the gendered division of familial responsibilities with an obligation of both the husband and the wife to support the country's postwar rehabilitation and economic growth in the sense that the typical—and, according to Nonoyama, new to most—workforce required women to take up the duties of the household to ensure the stability of the family: "the husband/father takes a competitive occupational role outside the family while the wife/mother takes the role of housekeeping and child rearing inside the family

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[3] Nonoyama, "The Family and Family Sociology in Japan," 33.
[4] Nonoyama, "The Family and Family Sociology in Japan," 28.
[5] Nonoyama, "The Family and Family Sociology in Japan," 31.
[6] Nonoyama, "The Family and Family Sociology in Japan," 34.

in order to adapt successfully to the increasing industrialization of society."[7] In questioning the roles of married couples as they both stem from and support Japan's post-1945 industrial growth, Nonoyama's article offers a combined analysis of legal and social shifts that changed the daily lives of Japanese women, and though his sources can be considered outdated by today's standards—his census and survey data being from no later than 1999 and his scholarly sources being published between 1949 and 1970—the research serves as a background for studies of updated demographic data.

Though he shares the notion with Nonoyama that the legal shift to the conjugal family altered the ideology of women's roles in postwar Japan, Akihiko Kato argues that no visible shift occurred in the lives of most Japanese women because the majority of the principles of daily life supported by the patrilineal stem structure survived nuclearization. Straying from the opinion of most family sociologists, he argues that "the numerical predominance of nuclear households in the cross-sectional census data does not necessarily mean a system change in family formation [because] it is compatible with stem family principle: the eldest son lives with the parents and succeeds or inherits the family property… [while] other sons leave the parental home and obtain their own home."[8] Kato highlights what Nonoyama fails to in his analysis: the second and third sons—not to mention daughters that did not marry eldest sons—had already been living in accordance with the American-defined, four person household system of the nuclear family for decades. This phenomenon only grew after Japan's defeat because "rapid industrialization accompanied by high economic growth in postwar Japan induced large-scale domestic migration from agricultural areas to large cities," and those migrating tended to be "young—primarily those who had no possibility of succeeding the family business, that is, second and third sons and

[7] Nonoyama, "The Family and Family Sociology in Japan," 32.
[8] Kato, "The Japanese Family System," 5.

daughters with few job opportunities near their home village."[9] He declares that for these young couples not bound to the inheritance of their families' properties, migration directly resulted in the formation of small, compact households in urban residential areas: "it was inevitable that couples living far away from their parents would form a nuclear family household. Moreover, there was no option but for the wife to become a full-time mother and homemaker in that setting."[10] From this perspective, he acknowledges that the nuclear family, as it is typically defined by both American and Japanese standards, became more widespread during Japan's postwar period, but he contends that the rise of nuclearization is not entirely a result of the legal changes to the family system. Although he acknowledges the widely-accepted nuclearization theory—the implication that a fundamental change in family system occurred directly after WWII—Kato contends that there was no systemic change because the stem family principle relating to inheritance is compatible with the rise in conjugal families; even with the amendment to the Civil Code, the eldest son continued to live with his family while the younger sons branched out to form nuclear families as they had been doing since early industrialization in the eighteenth century and especially as urbanization increased in the 1920s. He calls this non-change a "'fictitious nuclearization'" that "does not accompany a transition to the conjugal family system."[11] Though he suggests that the first few decades of the postwar period saw the spread of the idea and practice of the conjugal family such that intergenerational co-residence in the beginning of marriage declined—which he numerically and statistically judges using census and survey data from prewar and postwar generations about regional and national trends regarding marriage, residence, gendered household roles, education, and family structure—Kato does not denote this occurrence

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[9] Kato, "The Japanese Family System," 3-4.
[10] Kato, "The Japanese Family System," 4.
[11] Kato, "The Japanese Family System," 25.

as a major change in Japanese society, for either men or women. He does, however, purport that Japanese nuclear families admired, idealized, and adopted the conjugal family, a symbol of U.S. Cold War democracy, that was portrayed in American television; he even recognizes that the legal shift to the nuclear family was directly influenced by and created to uphold American standards of equality because "the new Civil Code presented 'the family that is connected by democratic and equal human relationships' as the ideal family model."[12] Moreover, he provides a unique, optimistic view of postwar gender norms, claiming that "for women of the time, becoming a housewife and stay-at-home mother meant liberation from being a daughter-in-law living and engaging in agricultural work with her mother-in-law."[13] This source contributes to an understanding of how the lives of men and women were structured in both the stem and nuclear family systems, and it informs the perspective that there is little statistical evidence to prove a significant change in the overall lives of women but that any change can be characterized positively.

As Nonoyama and Kato discuss the fundamental manner in which the shifts in postwar Japanese family structure caused changes in the daily lives of Japanese women—or the lack thereof—Hsiao-Chuan Hsia and John H. Scanzoni address the ideological role of women as housewives in the postwar period, alluding to the glorification of the nuclear family but acknowledging the reality of working women in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. In their article, Hsia and Scanzoni contend that though Japanese women can be considered powerless in terms of the extent of their labor force participation, their roles in the private sphere and some aspects of the public sphere should not be overlooked; in other words, women's lack of outward or direct power does not necessarily imply their inferiority or lack of value as perceived by society. However, they

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[12] Kato, "The Japanese Family System," 10.
[13] Kato, "The Japanese Family System," 5.

present the nuclear role of the housewife—similarly to that of the patrilineal *shufu*, or "main woman" in a large household—as a position of not only honor but joy and pride that Japanese women held; this characterization is made even in consideration of the fact that "the power of the [*shufu*] role had considerably shrunk" in the postwar era because "being female household head meant nothing more than being the wife of an urban wage earner in a modern conjugal family. There was no longer any 'main' woman because there were no other female members to supervise."[14] Nonetheless, since the conjugal household only included one woman (the wife), she was responsible for all of the domestic work and the managerial aspects of the household; while husbands were the public heads of the family, wives were the private—and, in fact, the true— heads of the family, as their duties consisted of more than just cleaning and raising the children. For middle-class women that did not have to work (that is, in addition to their husbands) to keep the family financially stable, the housewife role was treated like a full-time job, and Japanese society praised housewives for their organizational abilities and family-centric mindsets that kept the households running smoothly day-to-day: "the Japanese housewife, whose territory and responsibilities [are] clearly defined, takes pride in her home and in her family. She enjoys social approval of her skill and devotion, and she takes pride in her emotional strength, in being the central integrating force of the family. Indeed, Japanese women treat housework and mothering as their profession and careers."[15] Though this experience is true for Japanese families positively impacted by the economic growth after World War II, Hsia and Scanzoni also include the experiences of women who did have jobs in addition to assuming their wifely and motherly obligations; as many as 80% of all married and unmarried women in postwar Japan assumed full-

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[14] Hsiao-Chuan Hsia and John H. Scanzoni, "Rethinking The Roles of Japanese Women," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 27, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 313.
[15] Hsia and Scanzoni, "Rethinking The Roles of Japanese Women," 322.

time or part-time jobs in either industrial manufacturing positions or family businesses.[16] As the

nuclear family became the ideal model and did not permit wives to work at all, many working

women felt unfulfilled and "dreamed of being just a housewife because of economic uncertainties

and miserable conditions in [the] workplace."[17] The authors crucially do not disregard the

situations of those families not fortunate enough to only have one breadwinner; they admit that

middle-class hypocrisy exists because the reality of many families was that such living standards

and gender-specific roles were unattainable when survival was on the line. There might not have

been a complete change in most women's lives, as Kato suggests, but the societal importance and

the ideological understanding of women as housewives augmented in the postwar era. On another

note, Hsia and Scanzoni also mention that since many women of all classes took on jobs in the

factories and mines during World War II to fill the gap of their husbands' absences, returning to

the household full-time meant women lost their social network and connections to other women;

once men refilled those industrial jobs and women became more confined to the private sphere in

their duties to the family, "women were isolated from each other in [the] tiny nuclear

household…women had lost their communal women's world."[18] By identifying how mothers and

housewives were valued in the postwar period and examining how postwar middle-class women

understood themselves and their roles, Hsia and Scanzoni's article provides insight into Japanese

women's own opinions of their positions and the ways in which their lives can be characterized

both positively and negatively.

 Using the portrayal of the nuclear family housewife in Japanese postwar media and

television, Jennifer Coates also argues that an ideological change in women's lives took place in

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[16] Mary Saso, *Women in the Japanese Workplace* (London: Hilary Shipman, 1990), 4-5, 30.
[17] Hsia and Scanzoni, "Rethinking The Roles of Japanese Women," 314.
[18] Hsia and Scanzoni, "Rethinking The Roles of Japanese Women," 314.

the sense that the housewife role became not only idealized but normalized; the use of female actresses to exclusively play housewife characters directly stemmed from the Allied Occupation (1945-1952) because American media, presenting the ideal version of the American housewife in the nuclear family, influenced the promotion of the nuclear lifestyle. Through both Japanese and American drama shows, Coates explains that "an imagined gendered role was made to seem understandable, attractive, and even inevitable for the mass public of postwar Japan."[19] She fashions the housewife role as it appeared in Japanese television as both an appealing position and an imposed societal construct, as the American occupation lent itself to attempted change in gender norms and a more Western separation of the sexes. However, she notes the contradictory nature of female film stars portraying housewives in Japanese media, as they were not solely housewives themselves while they had jobs in acting: "the idealized professional housewife worked only in the home, whereas the actresses who portrayed housewives on screen worked very much in the public sphere."[20] Taking this circumstance into account, female actresses were played up and presented as managing both their household obligations and acting career in such an engaging and romanticized way—through interviews in their homes and other sneak peeks into their lives outside of acting—that "the mass media participated in the creation of the full-time housewife identity, persuading the Japanese public to accept this role as a real-life phenomenon."[21] For example, Miyake Kuniko (1916-1992) is cited as an aspirational actress who quit her acting job shortly before marrying in order to fulfill her household and familial duties and returned to the screen later on in life; Miyake was well-regarded and admired by both fans and critics, ultimately demonstrating that "the more willing to become a housewife an actress had appeared to be, the

[19] Jennifer Coates, "How to Be a Domestic Goddess: Female Film Stars and the Housewife Role in Postwar Japan," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*, no. 50 (2016): 30.
[20] Coates, "How to Be a Domestic Goddess," 31.
[21] Coates, "How to Be a Domestic Goddess," 49.

more celebrated she was upon her return to the screen."[22] Though Coates does not address the relationship between Japanese women's roles in media and those in practice—nor does she discuss the historical accuracy of the portrayals in film—the source provides insight into the causes of change in women's familial lives as they relate to the American involvement in Japanese affairs postwar and the growing consumption of television and media in the period.

The characterization of the conjugal family in Japan post-1945 typically pits the woman of the household as having a position of power within the family but having no public role or representation. Though this gendered system is associated with the American conception of the nuclear family—which did become popular exclusively after World War II—the Japanese nuclear family existed for decades in the early twentieth century in conjunction with the patrilineal stem family, meaning no direct shift in the familial structure or the responsibilities of any individual family member occurred as a result of Japan's involvement in the war. However, the rise in popularity of American media and television in the country as a result of the Allied Occupation did contribute to the spread of the American ideology surrounding the nuclear family such that Japan was influenced on the individual, familial, social, and legal levels. As the historical and sociological studies of the aforementioned scholars demonstrate, the lives of Japanese women in the postwar period can be understood as both positive and negative from various perspectives as change occurred only from an ideological standpoint.

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[22] Coates, "How to Be a Domestic Goddess," 43.