

Attitudes toward *Ie* Succession in Contemporary Japan: An Analysis of the SoWIA Survey

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Abstract

This paper examines the current state of awareness of the tradition of *ie* succession in Japan through an investigation of historical background and case studies. Until the amendment of the Civil Code after World War II, the system of patriarchal monopoly was legally protected, but post-war reforms shook the legal and economic foundations of the patriarchal system. However, the sense of patriarchy (the role of men in maintaining the family line) continued to exist in Japanese minds, especially in rural areas. In order to understand how these outlooks have persisted and changed, we drew on the narratives of three people from the interview survey obtained from the Social Well-being Interview in Asia, describing their thoughts and experiences of family and marriage. With a rapidly declining birthrate, the Japanese people's sense of *ie* is currently undergoing a major change. In urban areas, where many salaried workers have no family property or family business, the sense of succession is waning. Even in rural areas, where agriculture as a family business has declined, it is assumed that the traditional sense of *ie* will decline in the future.

Keywords

ie (Japanese family), adopted son-in-law, intergenerational succession, well-being, SoWIA

Nan Lin (2001), who theorized the concept of social capital, wrote on traditional succession as follows:

Restriction of succession within the primordial group reduces the range of the surrogate's choices. Depending on the rules on succession, the choice may be reduced to zero (e.g., the oldest son as the successor). (Lin 2001:133)

In modern Japan, the Civil Code, which was in effect from 1898 to 1947 (referred to as the "Old Civil Code"), provisioned for a "head of household." The "head of the household" was the head of the family register and had the exclusive right to inherit the family estate, i.e., the family's property,

ancestral tablet, and graves. As the head of the family, the head of the household had the right to grant permission for marriages and divorces to family members, the right to inherit the "family estate," and the duty to support the family. The family estate includes the property right to maintain the family business, the right and duty to maintain the management of the family business, and the duty to protect the family name and ancestor worship. These provisions for the heads

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of households were abolished in the 1947 amendments.

The portions of the Civil Code relating to family and property inheritance were drastically revised after the Second World War, denying the exclusive property and management rights of the family head, and greatly weakening the economic basis for the continuation of the family business. However, the concept of family estate remained strong, including the duty to support elderly parents, maintenance of the family name, and inheritance of ancestor worship. Regardless of which element is emphasized, the strategy for maintaining the stem family based on the concept of *ie* (in Japanese, *ie* means the house where the family lives, but it also means the stem family and the kinship group that accompanies it) is referred to as the “strategy for the succession of the *ie*” (Yonemura 1999; Nagano 2009).

A survey was conducted as part of the Social Well-Being Interview in Asia (SoWIA), Japan, and three of the interviewees, whose answers demonstrated that they may succeed *ie*, were chosen and analyzed for this study. This paper discusses the enormous amount of pressure related to carrying on the family lineage and sense of well-being.

Background of the Study

Ie Consciousness in Pre-war Japan: There has been a lot of debate about *ie*, which can be translated as “family” in English (the term *ie* is used in Japanese social science and can also mean “home” or “house” which denotes the building where the family lives). This study adopted a loose definition for *ie* as “a permanent family group with a family business or property to inherit.”

In most cases, the family system in modern Japan has been maintained through the marriage of the eldest son and their exclusive inheritance of the family estate. What is to be inherited (inherited goods) can be broadly divided into material goods and symbolic goods (Yonemura 1999). In the case of farmers, material goods include productive goods such as land, buildings, and

production equipment, while symbolic goods include the family name, ancestral tablets, and tombs, which indicate the prestige of the family. The social capital brought about by mutually beneficial and mutually supportive relationships that have been accumulated over many generations is also of great value in a rural society with low mobility.

The family estate was generally considered to be inherited by the first-born male but there were some exceptions. Some regions have the custom of “eldest sister inheritance” by which the first girl child succeeds the family estate by adopting her husband into the family, or “youngest son inheritance” by which the youngest son succeeds the family estate (Nagano 2009). In addition, even in areas where the eldest son inheritance was common, if there were only girls, or if a couple did not have any children, the family estate was handed over by adopting the first daughter’s husband into the family or by adopting a boy as a child from another family (often related by blood or kin). In any case, even if a girl was expected to be the heir, in principle, the son-in-law would become the head of the family and ultimately, the pseudo-male stem family is maintained.

Embree’s (1939) *Suye Mura: A Japanese Village* provides a clear picture of the pre-war Japanese adoption system through fieldwork undertaken in a typical rural village. The following is a quotation from the section on family and adoption:

The primary social unit in buraku life is the household. ... The small family consists of master, wife, eldest son (owned or adopted), eldest son’s wife, any unmarried children of the master, and eldest son’s children (owned or adopted). Living in the house with the small family may be a retired (*inkyo*) father, mother, or both, of the master.

In the event of no sons, the problem of perpetuating the family name and taking care of the ancestral tablets when one dies is solved by adoption. A more practical need for a son is to help work in the house and provide sustenance for

the old people. This custom of adoption is common in Suye.

Occasionally, if the married couple has some children but all are girls, a son may be adopted who later either marries one of the girls or marries some entirely different girl. Alternatively, the parents may wait until one of the daughters is of marriageable age and then adopt a husband for her.

Inheritance is ideally from the master to the eldest son. If this is impossible, then the eldest son is created by adoption or adoptive marriage (Embree 1939:79-82).

Ruth Benedict, who had a profound influence on the post-war Japanese identity (Soeda 2018), describes these Japanese values as follows:

Every Japanese man must have a son. He needs him to do daily homage to his memory after his death at the living-room shrine before the miniature gravestone. He needs him to perpetuate the family line down the generations and preserve the family honor and possessions. ... If the father could not pass trusteeship to his son, his own role would have been played in vain (Benedict 1946:255).

This explains the Japanese people's "deep sense of continuity." (Benedict 1946; Ritchie 1999). It was very important for Japanese families in the pre-war period to maintain a direct line of descent by having a male heir for the family estate, or if that was not possible, adopt a child, or even adopt the daughter's husband into the family. In this case, the name of the family, the house, the land, the property, the family business, and the graves for ancestor worship were all passed down as an inheritance to the direct son or, if that was not possible, to the adopted son or son-in-law.

Succession after Post-War Reforms. The old Civil Code, which legally provided exclusive inheritance to the head of the

household, was drastically amended during the time of the US military rule. If there were several heirs, such as a spouse and children, one half of the family estate was awarded to the surviving spouse and the rest was divided equally among the children, thus denying the exclusive succession of property rights to the head of the household.

Despite the fact that the abolition of the family headship system eliminated the exclusive inheritance of property, and the legal obligation to support one's parents and worship one's ancestors, the concept of "head of family" continued to be widely shared in Japanese society. In other words, although there were no legal provisions for the exclusive inheritance of property or the obligation to worship ancestors, in the case of multiple children, the first-born male was expected to succeed as the "head of family" (eldest son inheritance) and assume ultimate responsibility for the family's name, ancestral rituals, and, in many cases, the support of his parents.

In addition, if a married couple only had girls or were unable to have children, there was still a sense in Japanese society, especially in rural areas where productive goods such as land were important factors, that the head of family should succeed in the manner described by Embree. Meanwhile, since the head of the household lost the exclusive right of inheritance of property, family names and ancestor worship, as represented by symbolic goods, came to be inherited as family genealogies in urban areas. Nagano argues:

Even today, the farmer's heir's marriage signifies the determination of the heir couple to run the family business and manage family properties. If there is a boy, the eldest son will be the heir, but if there is no boy, the next best thing is to adopt the husband of the eldest daughter as a son-in-law, which is still widely seen today (Nagano 2009:99).

Despite the loss of legal and economic basis for the succession of the family estate,

the sense that *ie*'s succession is dependent on the first-born son or rallying around the patriarch remains strong, especially in rural areas.

METHODS

This study was a part of the SoWIA project. "This study uses ... data from a qualitative survey, SoWIA, conducted by the International Consortium for Social Well-Being Studies. ... A qualitative survey was conducted in the urban and rural areas of Japan between February and September 2020" (Yazaki 2021). Please refer to (Yazaki 2021) for details on sampling and interviewing methods.

RESULTS

Summary of Three Cases

We chose three cases for comparison. The life histories of the cases discussed in this study are outlined below.

U06: Male, born in 1950, lives in an urban area and is the eldest son. Failure to achieve intergenerational succession of the *ie*.

U06 was born and raised in downtown Tokyo. His grandfather came to Tokyo from a rural area and was a civil servant. As the eldest son, his father needed to support his many siblings, so he started running a factory, but he lost material possessions and his ex-wife in the war in 1945. U06's siblings included one elder sister and one younger sister. When U06 was twenty-six years old, his father died of illness, and he was forced to take over the management of the factory. Today, he has several factories in the capital area. He married his wife at the age of 28 and had three children, a son, and two daughters. Due to the illness of his eldest son, he has not been able to successfully pass on the family business (factory management). Since he maintains extensive and wide-ranging social networks in the community through local activities, his level of happiness is high.

R12: Female, born in 1955, lives in a rural area and is the eldest daughter. Intergenerational succession of the *ie* has been achieved.

R12 was born and raised in the countryside of the Kanto region. She has never lived outside her birthplace. Members of her family have been farmers for generations. Her parents made a living by growing rice and chestnuts, and from sericulture. She has a younger sister. R12 completed higher education and primarily worked as a nursery teacher, and in other capacities locally. Her husband is a civil servant and when they married, he changed his family name and became an "adopted son-in-law." They have three children, an eldest daughter, a second daughter, and a son, and are presently living on the same property as their eldest son, his wife, and two grandchildren. Currently, R12 and her husband are retired and continue to farm in a modest way. Since the eldest son has a stable job in the local area and has a grandson, it can be concluded that the *ie* has been passed on to the next generation. Her level of happiness is high.

R09: Female, born in 1974, lives in a rural area and is the eldest daughter. Ongoing intergenerational succession of the *ie*.

R09 was born and raised in the countryside of the Kanto region. Hers is a distinguished family whose genealogy dates back to the Middle Ages. Both her parents completed higher education and were schoolteachers, but they are now retired and engaged in farming. R09 is the eldest daughter and has two younger sisters. They are both married and have moved to other areas after marriage. A few years ago, she married her husband, who became an adopted son-in-law. She and her husband have a three-year-old baby boy, and the succession of the *ie* to the next generation is currently underway. Her level of happiness is high.

What these three cases have in common is that they all have a high level of happiness. As the eldest son, or the eldest daughter of a family without a son, all three have been

expected to succeed the *ie*, and they have lived their lives accepting this as their destiny. In addition to symbolic goods such as names and family lineages, it is estimated that *ie* contains a considerable amount of productive and material goods to be inherited.

However, there are many differences among the three cases. U06 grew up in the city and is a factory owner. R12 and R09 were born and raised in a rural area and their family business was farming but they completed a higher level of education than was typical among their peers in rural areas and became civil servants. In contrast to U06, a son who was naturally expected to succeed the *ie*, R12 and R09 were expected to take a husband who would become the head of the family, because their family of orientation had only girls. Although R12 and R09 reside in the same area, as seen in the description of Suye village, the pattern of inheritance of family lineage in families where only girls are born is a common feature in village communities.

R09 is more than 20 years younger than U06 and R12, and it is assumed that there is a large generation gap in lifestyle and values. In spite of this, all three aspire to succeed in *ie* and report the same level of happiness. The following section examines narratives from the three cases with respect to several perspectives.

Family and Household

U06 talked about his father as follows: “My father was the eldest son, so he had to take care of his five to six sisters and brothers. With this, my father quit being an office worker and started his own business, his own factory.” Regarding his family structure, U06 explained that it consisted of “my wife and three children, my older and younger sister, cousin, and I’m also taking care of a kid with a developmental disorder.” This reveals that U06 experiences considerable pressure and responsibility as the head of the family. “I really did not want to do it (succeed father’s factory) For me, I have watched my father and mother’s struggles since I was a kid and

thought it was impossible for me. That’s why, if it was possible, I wanted something that I could do on my own, like start a business as a lawyer or accountant.” However, his son’s illness makes it difficult for him to succeed the family business. “I really had high hopes for my son when he was younger. The company aside, I need someone to succeed the family for such things as the relationship with the temple.” This suggests that U06 had traditional Japanese values, and believed that succession after the *ie* should be borne by a male in the direct line, and that it involved a strong sense of responsibility.

R12 said about her family: “My mother is now being taken care of in an institution. In addition to my mother, my husband and I live with my son and his wife, and two grandchildren, making a total of seven people.” This shows that hers is a typical four-generation family. Her husband is an adopted son-in-law, and he is caring R12’s own mother who is in the institution. “I have a younger sister, but my grandparents always told me, and my mother also told me again and again since I was small, ‘You have to take over the family line, you have to succeed the *ie*’.” As for the possibility that the R12 family, which has existed for six generations, might cease in the future, she said, “I’m not very bothered about it, but my husband does say that it would be a problem.” In response to her son’s natural succession, she said, “I wonder if my mother told him to do so when he was a child, while interacting with him.” As is usual for a farming family, the R12 family was expected to pass down the *ie* to the next generation from childhood.

R09, who is about 20 years younger than R12 and was also born and raised in a rural area, was expected to take over the family business from her childhood. Similar to R12, R09 has two younger sisters. R09 describes how she was brought up by her parents as follows: “My parents knew I felt that way. Therefore, they raised me to be a successor. They have engraved this into me. They taught me I am this and that, so I will be able to endure living here. They have basically raised me with the intention that I will

become the successor of this family.” In other words, she had been subjected to gradual conditioning since she was a child. She admits that succeeding *ie* is a heavy burden. “Basically, to work together as one family, so we don’t end up unhappy is difficult. Also not being a sacrifice for that happiness. ... ‘Sacrifice’ might not be the right word, but I had the responsibility to burden this heavy work.” She also hopes that her son will return one day to succeed the *ie*, even if he has to live outside the home. “Right, I think that’s the case, for him to come back here. I feel bad for wishing for him to return here since I have felt trapped being in a similar situation, but I do wish he returns here at the end.” Therefore, she talked about *ie* that she succeeded: “I think the R09 family need that kind of relationship to be able to work it out. Especially my sisters, they take care of my parents, and we have a strong bond because we support each other. ... Someone becomes the breadwinner of the family, while someone takes care of the house and the maintenance fee: cooperation with neighbors, maintaining family, and kinship relation. We also have to manage land, fields, and forests. ... The symbol of my family is the house, a grave too, and living here.”

Pressure to Maintain Family Lineage and Difficulty in Choosing a Spouse

Those who are expected to succeed the *ie* need a certain amount of restraint in their choice of spouse.

For example, U06 states as follows: “I had accepted that my life was this way and all I had to do was clean up after my father. I thought that was the elder son’s duty. Thus, marriage would come into the picture. I had many girlfriends, since I am very talkative; however, I thought it would be bad for my partner, so I could not get married. You know, it would be bad for the spouse, dragging her into my troubles.” Eventually, he met his wife through a friend. U06 has three children, a son, and two daughters, but he feels that family succession is not going well. This is because his son is sick and his two

daughters, although in their mid-thirties, are not yet married and have no grandchildren. We do not know why the daughters are not married, but if his children do not produce grandchildren, the U06 family line will cease to exist, and his factories will be handed over to the public. U06 did not say anything about future prospects.

In agricultural areas, the norms for maintaining family lineage are stricter than those in urban areas. For farmers, land and buildings are basic productive goods, and it is likely that the purpose was to prevent divided inheritance. During the post-war land reform, land owned by large landowners was divided, and small farmers became dominant. In addition, both R12 and R09 had received higher education and are civil servants, meaning they do not have to rely on farming to earn a living. However, in both cases, there seems to have been considerable self-determination when choosing their spouses. In other words, they chose a person who fit their “family culture” as the “adopted son-in-law.”

R12 explained that her parents did not allow her to lodge somewhere to pursue higher education or work when she was young, and schools and workplaces were limited to those within commuting distance from home. In Japan, there is an expression: “A girl in a box.” This means giving a well-sheltered life to one’s daughter. “I had many chances to date men when I was younger, but falling in love with a man who was a first son in line to succeed his own *ie* would mean leaving my family to marry him, which I thought would be bad. I gave up many chances to go out with someone because of this.” In the end, she married someone she met through a friend (a matchmaker), and her husband took R12’s surname (to be an adopted son-in-law). “My parents were old-fashioned, after all. I think they told me not to stay in a relationship for too long, and that if I did not hate them, I should get married as soon as possible.” She explains that her parents’ preferences are reflected in her own marriage.

R09 married about 30 years later than

R12, but she says that there was still a lot of self-determination in choosing her spouse and where to live. “They kept asking when I was going to get married but it didn’t go as smoothly. I could not find someone with whom I could agree. I was told to have an arranged marriage. I tried meeting them, but I did not like it. Even if the person was good, I felt like we were ill-matched. My parents were stressed over how I could not find a match and my grandmother had been urging me to do it.” As seen here, the daughter to succeed *ie* is expected to marry a good adopted son-in-law and to give birth to a son. Perhaps this was also because she had acquired modern values from the higher education she received. She was in turmoil. “I did have someone I liked at my first workplace, yes. However, things did not work out between us. I was not very proactive in approaching them anyway, and I also had my family to worry about. ... I convinced myself that things would not go well with them.”

R12 is similar to R09, in that she wanted to marry someone she loved but gave up the idea because she was not sure if her parents would approve of him as her life partner. “I think of it that way and give up, I don’t want to go through heartbreak, so I just avoid it from the beginning looking at their specs. There are potential issues like them not being in the same area as us, they are unlikely to return to their parents’ house, and maybe they will not be able to bear living in my house, etc. My sisters had the same issues. Perhaps they will not get along with my father, etc. My sisters had also made judgments based on these things in the end.”

What she wanted from her spouse was for him to be an adopted son-in-law, to share a life with her parents and family, and to take over R09’s *ie* in the future. We can also see that not only the eldest daughter, R09, but also her sisters are looking for a spouse based on whether they can work well as a member of the R09 family.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has discussed Japanese people’s

traditional awareness of *ie* succession. The family estate system was legally protected until the Civil Code was revised after World War II. Post-war reforms shook the legal and economic foundations of the family estate system. However, the concept of a patriarch (a male to maintain the family line) persisted in the consciousness of the Japanese people, especially in rural areas.

In order to find out how these are maintained or changing, three case studies from the interview survey conducted for the SoWIA project were chosen and examined to understand their experiences and views of family and marriage.

It became clear that these three people shared a strong sense of mission to keep the *ie* going and that this was an internalized expectation from their parents and grandparents. All three, more or less, shared the same desire for their child (the first-born son) to succeed the *ie*, but the results were different for each of them.

Born in 1950 and living in the city, U06, as the eldest son, had accepted taking over the family business from a young age. However, since his son was ill, he has given up hope that he will marry and have children, or that he will inherit the family business. U06’s succession strategy did not work well. His life was filled with troubles for a long time, and he is disappointed that his son cannot succeed his family lineage and asset. However, he scored high in happiness. He has satisfactory social relations and reputation. He has pseudo family membership outside of his family.

Born in 1955 and raised in a rural area, R12 is the eldest of two sisters and has been expected to succeed the *ie* since she was a child. She was forbidden from leaving her home for education or work, and she restrained herself from falling in love because she had to marry an adopted son-in-law. She has been blessed with three children, including a son, who has been living with her since his marriage, and the role of the patriarch has been taken over by him. She also has a grandson who is expected to succeed in *ie*. R12’s succession strategy was considered successful. Her life was relatively quiet and tranquil with her

family of orientation and procreation. She is satisfied and proud of her family, in which she could pass succession to her parents to her son's generation in a traditional Japanese way. Thus, her feeling of happiness is stable.

Born in 1974, R09 was the eldest of three sisters in a prominent family that has been around since the Middle Ages. Both her parents were teachers, and she herself received higher education and became a teacher (local government official). Like R12, she grew up with the expectation that she would succeed from childhood. A few years ago, she married and had a son. As for R09, until her son grows up and succeeds the *ie* in the future, she will continue to follow the path of her succession strategy. Her life does not seem easier than R12. Now, she has just started the succeeding process with her procreation family supported by orientation family members. She might know that she will face many problems in the future. However, she is happy enough to have her husband and son to be successors.

David Plath described the life courses of the Japanese as a long engagement with convoys. No matter which life history we learned, remaining responsible for the *ie*'s succession strategy is a long engagement. Finally, these three persons found their identities with their significant others, that is *convoys*, which "makes the bond so rich, allows it to incorporate duty, respect, affection, comradeship, and a history of shared experience" (Plath 1980).

However, with a rapidly declining birthrate (Diamond 2019), Japanese people's sense of *ie* is currently undergoing a major change. In urban areas, where many wage earners have no family property or family business to succeed, the sense of succession and ancestor worship are diminishing (Inoue 2003; Shimane 2012, 2018). In areas where agriculture as an industry is weakening and the value of farmland is declining, the social mobility of residents is expected to increase, and the traditional sense of *ie* is also expected to decline.

According to Chiyo Yonemura, who has studied modern Japanese *ie* from

the perspective of family precepts and constitutions, "the '*ie*' has survived not because the people who belonged to it sought its succession in a common and equal manner, but rather by being constantly constructed in the face of change" (Yonemura 1999). In other words, the *ie* consciousness does not always take the same form, but it continues to exist while changing its followers over generations. If we assume that the Japanese *ie* is something that "seeks to survive on a supra-generational basis" while gradually or rapidly changing the family members, the family business, and the place of residence, then the consciousness of the Japanese *ie* will have to change drastically in the future.

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