

# The Discovery of “Childhood” in Tokugawa Japan

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【Summary】 In the Tokugawa period, almost all the people could marry and attach importance to their family occupation and lives. Their concern was family's continuation and guaranty in the future. Under such condition, people came to concentrate on child rearing eagerly and were conscious of the responsibility of education and had a sense of deep unity between parents and children.

People in the early modern age often called their children “treasure (precious)” citing a famous ancient poem, the author calls this kind of rearing “child rearing as KODAKARA (precious child like a treasure)” tentatively.

The purpose of the child rearing was same regardless of the *samurai* (warriors), *Shonin* (merchants) and farmers, that is, family's continuation. As the society was stable and the succession of family was fixed, sure succession of their profession and property was regarded to fulfill their responsibility for their ancestors as if a baton is handed over from ancestors to the successors. They believed that this succession would guarantee their family lives and happiness as well as their own old age.

What they expected for their successors were different in classes and periods. Parents educated their children earnestly, and their education was indifferent to school education except *samurai* and some merchants. However, their feelings became the base of modern education in Japan.

## 1— The household from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern

The author use the term *family* as a couple living together along with their children; and ‘YE’, a Japanese traditional household, as a unit to manage their assets and everyday life. According to historians of medieval Japan, general development of family and YE is traced back to the last years of the Heian Period (11th - 12th centuries).

Medieval historian Haruko Wakita states that the YE ran on a cycle comprising in-house management of the household trade, fostering of successors, and the provision of social security

for the elderly and the infirm. Accordingly, she insists that the pre-modern era, including the early-modern era, can be said to be the age of family & YE, in the sense that management of such YE constituted a key social organizational unit, and family unit in medieval times was also an administrative unit (Wakita 2002). Certainly, this indication is applied aptly to the early modern period (Ohta 1994).

Where, then, can one find differences between the YE in medieval and early-modern Japan?

One of the important differences is a difference of class, wherein, as Wakita asserts, only one-fourth to one-fifth of women were able to become wives. Speaking from the standpoint as an environment for fostering children, this class difference had a definitive meaning. In medieval society, born as children of servants, basically, the boys were raised in the house of father's, and the girls were raised in mother's.

The *Sekyosho* (author unknown), which is supposed to have originated in the early 15th century, discusses huge class differences in the way women lived their lives. citing *Shunju Sashiden*,

The upper-class woman has a book in her left hand, a brush in her right, light in her heart, a song on her lips. Her eyes do not wander to young men, and her ears are deaf to mischief.... The middle-class woman has a toy in her left hand, a spool of thread in her right, chores in her heart, and thoughts of adorning her husband in her mind. From an early age, young boys should commune with fish and birds, and should be raised to be strong in both mind and body. Young girls should be raised to hold back from speaking out in public.... The lower-class woman toils with a pale in her left hand, and a ladle in her right; her lips are tight, and she cleans around the oven.

Here, knowledge on child-rearing and household affairs is only advocated for middle class women.

This leads us to another significant area of difference in the scope of the family, namely, the environment where children were raised. For that reason, within the home, many people were in charge of child-rearing, and children also had many playmates.

Hideo Kuroda, studying an iconographic Buddhist image of the Middle Ages, mentioned on the complementary relationship of nursing and upbringing between the elderly and the young children (Kuroda 1989). Within



Fig.1 Moronobu Hishikawa ; Iwaki E Tukushi, 1683. In this printed picture, A child and a elderly were hand-in-hand , on the other side a baby-sitter was appeared.  
中世的な老人・子どもの図像と子守の図像の共存、菱川師宣『岩木絵巻』(天和3=1683年)より

a single household, there were often infants to be raised and need care by elders. And because both of these family members could not provide labor, the elders cared for infants as long as they lived by oneself, and as the child became somewhat older, then in turn, the child would take care of the elderly person. Many pictures from the medieval times to the early-modern period portray children and the elderly hand-in-hand.(Fig.1 )



Fig.2 Tozaemon Tsunoda's diary, *Yorozugoto Oboegaki Cho*.  
角田藤左衛門『萬事覚書帳』

But from the 15th century up to the beginning of the 18th century, the existential form of the YE changed greatly, beyond just regional and class differences. The likelihood of servants became independent and formed their own YE, and the dominant unit of farming household came to be stem-family. Because collateral relatives and indentured servants became independent, they aimed to marry to form their own family. The household size became shrinking, and the child-parent relationship became much closer.

Tozaemon Tsunoda's diary, *Yorozugoto Oboegaki Cho* (reissued as Nango Mura Shiryo 23), written from 1683, to 1735, which I ever analyzed in a study of infanticide, is an example which shows us about the change from Middle Age's family to early modern's one.(Fig.2 )

Tozaemon wrote that he 'pushed back' the 6th, 9th, and 10th among his 10 children. The reason given for the last two cases of infanticide was that, the babies had been a different sex than predicted by divination, which they thought meant bad luck. But actually they were born as the 9th and 10th children right after the 8th child whom they had named 'Tomenojo,' a name meaning 'last child.' About details I've already indicate in my book, so here I will introduce only two impressive data of Tonosu-village.

The SAC (Shumon-Aratame-Cho) of Tonosu-village, where Tozaemon's wife was born, shows a change of a household of this time. In the first half of 18th century, stem-family became measure than large family in this district. (Table 1 )

In stem-family, the eldest son succeeds to birthright, and within the next or third son , the number who succeed branch families and so on were almost equal to those who leaved the village or died early. (Table 2 )

Early-modern stem-family consisted of a couple, their children, and their parents, and is the so-called "traditional" Japanese family. The parents expect one of their children to inherit the YE, and they hope to convey all the experiences that they have acquired to the next generation. In the small home, there was awareness of the lives of its members and of the basis of its welfare.

Table 1 Household structure according to a hierarchy (1714-48 *Tonosu-village SAC*)

An income	1714	1748
A large family including a married collateral relation	17	3
A large family including single collateral relations	8	8
A large family including servants	2	1
A large family including collateral relations & servants	3	0
A stem family	9	29
A nuclear family	12	19
A single	11	5

\*Koku: A unit of a crop of rice. One koku is near in the quantity that a person eats for one year.

Table 2 Life course of the second and third son (1712-1748 *Tonosu-village SAC*)

Life course			
The head of a household of a cadet family or a branch family	17	The head of a household	27
Head of a household after eldest son's death	3		
Husband to the house of his wife's parents	4		
An inheritor of the eldest son	3		
Get married, and live together by the birth-family	3	A collateral relation	9
Be single and live together by the birth-family	6		
Early death	3	Death & Disappearance	20
Solitary, Disappearance	17		

## 2—The relationship between parents and children and the attitude toward education during the Tokugawa period

Family precepts expound a family's rules and mind-set. In samurai families, they made family precepts quite often between the 13th and 19th centuries.

The common aspects of the initial family precepts was, first, they were broadly divided into the three stages of *childhood*, *adulthood* and *senescence*; and second, only adulthood was emphasized, as it was the only period regarded as being at the height of life, and hence childhood was only briefly touched on.

Furthermore, the family precepts of the 13th century advocated unconditional obedience to one's parents in exchange for inheritance of fiefs, and, above all, they advocated "filial piety" as a material relationship.

However, if we turn to articles on education from the 15th century, a more detailed division of ages appears which are based on empirical observations.

For example, the *Sekyosho* (author unknown, beginning of 15th century) states "the period from birth until age seven, when a child learns to read and write, is most crucial." Thus, attention had begun to be drawn to early childhood as the period when the character of a child is formed. The

period up until a child was seven was divided further into two stages. It appears that the stage up until age three was when a child would live with its father and wet nurse, and then the stage from age four was when the child would come to understand about discipline (what should be said). Emphasis was placed upon the personalities or character of the persons bringing up the child who were regarded as the child's father or wet nurse. Compared to the theories on child rearing during the Tokugawa period, which I shall discuss shortly, this era is characterized by the fact that children aged three and under were not yet regarded as the subjects of education.

The period from seven to thirteen was when a child would commence training at a temple, and they would be taught the specific routines of training in reading and writing at a temple. At thirteen, a child would leave the temple, and during the period until they turned twenty, they would serve under the instruction of a wise person, and prepare for their own social independence. During their twenties, a person would press forward with their own path of a philosopher or ideologist, and would be obliged to contribute to society. During their thirties, a person would gain an understanding of military affairs and social common sense; and in particular, the late thirties would be when the success or otherwise of a person would be decided. And finally, during their forties, it was explained that a person ought to set their sights on raising their successor.

Furthermore, with regard to succeeding to the position of family head, it was said that from seven until fourteen or fifteen, the actions of a boy should be well observed, and even if he is beaten or thrashed, his disciplining should be carried through; from seventeen or eighteen until twenty one or two, whether by word or other means, you ought to be devoted to his moral learning; but once he has turned twenty one or two, "tell him something once or twice, but on the third time, disown him." In other words, during childhood, which is absolute, a parent should discipline their child even with corporal punishment; during adolescence they should educate him with a sense of values; but if he is still not suitable to take over as head of the family, disinherit him. *Sekyosho* captures the formative period, but parents still have unquestionable authority even over their adolescent sons.

The *Imagawajo* of the 15th century contains the following poem: "If a parent truly feels sincere when thinking about their child, they must not have misgivings when reprimanding them." The basis for the parent's authority in this case lies in the subjective notion of sincerity. However, parents believed that children could be made to act according to their unilateral will. Even though bonds of affection in parent-child relationships during the middle ages were progressively growing stronger, parent-child relationships were still understood to be unilateral from parent to child.

Tokugawa era begins in 1603. The first characteristic, which can be mentioned about guides on raising children from the Tokugawa period, is that the commencement of education was apparently earlier than compared to the middle ages.

Although the view on early childhood in the middle ages – namely, there is no education for

children aged three or younger – remained in Ieyasu's Toshogu Goshosoku, a clear shift can be seen if we look at the family precepts in the *Kaibara Atsunobu Kakun* from the end of the 17th century.

"In order to educate a young child, a parent must first talk with their child while partaking a meal. At such times, the child will feel joy looking at their parent's face, or will recognize how angry the parent is by watching their expression. Thus, the parent is habitually teaching their child something." (Kaibara Ekiken, *Kaibara Atsunobu Kakun*, 1686)

As we enter the 18th century, we see that the writings contained in the Ekiken's *Wazoku Dojikun* also emphasize the fact that precepts ought to begin from infancy.

"From the outset, parents must not be overprotective of a child. On the contrary, if they are overprotective, the child will end up harmed." "Generally, if a child's education is initiated early, he will be able to distinguish between good persons and bad. This is a good upbringing as thought by people of old." "An ordinary common person without intelligence will say, 'it is useless to commence the education of a child from an early stage as the child will simply lose the will to learn. Therefore, one should let the child do as it pleases. The child will naturally get better as they acquire wisdom.' These are the words of a fool. Such a conviction is an enormous hindrance to education." (*Wazoku Dojikun*)

Ekken expounded education from early childhood. Similar views are also partially apparent in Nakae Toju, Yamaga Soko and other Confucian scholars from the middle of the 17th century.

What is particularly interesting to note about guides on raising children from the 17th century onward is that they begin to discuss reflectively how parents ought to be. Forward-thinking people started to believe that children did not necessarily develop as parents like. Then, they began considering that, if a child was not being brought up particularly well, then part of the problem also rested with the parents. This could probably be described as the beginning of interactive parent-child relationships.

"It is an unfortunate fact that, although parents know that a child is created from sexual intercourse, they do not know how to educate that child." "Feeling secure or feeling delight from having children is only experienced until the child turns eleven or twelve. In reality, there is no parent who feels secure just because they have had children." (Hayashi Shihei 1738~93, *Fukeikun*)

Toju and Soko also comment on the problem of parents who treat children with indulgence or favor. For parents who have a strong attachment to their children, the parent's own "interest" goes hand in hand with a strong interest in education hoping for a happy and fruitful life for their child's future. For the first time, scholars begin to question parents' strong attachment to their children and how these kinds of parents ought to be.

Thus, scholars of modern times were people who had a strong interest in education, and who had begun to gain a sense of responsibility for the education of children as well as a reflective

examination of how to raise children. From there, various perceptions on education are generated.

### 3 — The formation of the YE among rural families and their consciousness of child-rearing

Some historians said the theory that, among the working class, the formation of the family begins to take shape in the latter medieval period, that is, the 14th - 15th centuries, to be followed by the birth of stable village communities serving as a kind of territorial federation of YE (Osam Ohto 1996). Upon entering the early modern period, subordinate peasants and collaterally family subsumed under the home of upper class families also became independent and formed their own homes, and one sees a broad expansion of small, self-sufficient farming families. In this period characterized by the typical formation of small family administration, consciousness of the YE penetrates even to the farmer society, or as Ohto puts it, "seeing themselves positioned in the passage of time wherein the meaning of "self" passes from ancestors to descendants, people became aware of their role and responsibility for protecting and developing the YE. (Ohto 1996)

It was during this time that the early-modern ideology of treasuring children became prominent. In the outlying rural communities of Aizu Wakamatsu, in *Aizu Uta Nousho*, by Sase Yojiemon, who was viewed as an exemplary farmer, one finds the following *waka*. (Fig.3 )

- It is sad, if the diligent parent grow rich while indolent children merely grow old.
- If the parents poor, wise children can enable to enjoy wealth through hard work.
- Parents must educate their children on farming, if their children are fools, the parents suffer great shame.

(*Aizu Uta Nousho*, Vol. 2: 1704)

Those three poems clearly show the relationship between the early-modern farmer's consciousness of YE and the extent of child rearing. It was considered "clever" if even a small surplus in family assets and trade could be attained as they were passed from one generation to the next generation. To that end, it was important to educate and raise children well, and it was considered a shameful for the parent to fail to raise one's children properly. This is the manner with which the parent's sense of responsibility to child rearing was felt strongly in their heart. The fact that such *waka* were transmitted at the start of the 18th century



Fig.3 Sase Yojiemon ; *Aizu Uta Nousho*, 1704.  
佐瀬家に伝わる『会津歌農書』4冊（上之本・末、中之末、下之本。佐瀬伝治氏所蔵）



suggests that child rearing became an important facet of YE administration from early on in the establishment of independent small farming families. Moreover, Yojiemon recounts a number of principles based on his own experiences in child rearing.

Teaching their children farming is the father's concern.

For the child who shows no interest or initiative, teaching with love is the path to creating a good farmer.

And if one has a child who hates farming and wants to take his own path, that too can only be healed by a father's love.

Quick-tempered fathers who scold their children without affection should change their approach.

(Aizu Farming Book by Poem: Father's Love and Husband's Love, ending of Vol. 2).

Within the parent-child relationship, what was emphasized was the parents' affection. Without exhibiting a quick temper or showing partiality, the parents' role is to patiently teach, soften, and sometimes forcibly bring their children back to the farming way. They were strict when it came to the objective of telling them about harvesting, that is, farming. But the approach taken was considerate and polite, the aim being to socialize the child.

The pre-modern family, which was the unit of production and consumption, was held together by highly emotional bonds and a sense of unity, which in turn tied into the shared objective of expanding the family trade.

From the latter half of the 19th century and thereafter, following the lead of Europe and America, Japan pushed hard to modernize itself. The early-modern family infiltrated society from classes aiming to acquire an elite position with respect to school education.

The early-modern family—which was characterized by an equal partnership between husband and wife, separation of gender roles, emphasis of the role of women as persons in charge of child-rearing, intimacy within the parent-child relationship, and a passion for education—became typical in the urban middle class in and around the 1920s, and penetrated the rural classes from the 1960s onwards.

The parent-child relationship in the early-modern family consisted of child rearing oriented to establishing the child's independence, and was a home-based education that sought to prepare for school-based education. Although it shared the same fervor for education, child rearing in the Tokugawa era differed in the sense that it was oriented to raising the child to master the same trade as his or her parents. The parent-child relationship in Japan, identified as nonverbal yet emotional, constituted a tradition of child rearing in Japan that matured over a long period of time in the



Tokugawa era, and for better or worse, has come to influence child raising in the present day.

## — Conclusion

- 1, In Tokugawa Japan parents were attentive to their children's education.
- 2, Attentive, because of sense of responsibility to hand down their family estate and business from ancestors to successors, children.
- 3, In Tokugawa society, this sense of family continuity penetrated from samurai to the farming class.
- 4, Parents educated their children earnestly, and their education was indifferent to school education except samurai and leaders of merchants and farmers, however, their feeling became the base of modern education in Japan.

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