

A comparative study of rural families and family property in China and Japan¹

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Abstract: It is interesting to compare rural families and family property in China and in Japan. The family (*ie*) in Japan is an entity mainly concerned with farm production, and it is made up of elements such as the family name, family property, family business, family status and ancestral sacrifices. The family property is exclusive (it is inherited by the eldest son alone) and perpetual. In contrast, the Chinese family (*jia*) is mainly concerned with continuing the lineal blood relationship. Family property, as the economic support base for the family, is in principle inherited equally between brothers. However, in the case of Kaixiangong Village Area 13, cited in this paper, family property seems to be treated similarly to family property in Japan. For example, in multi-son families of the 1970s, to avoid dividing the family property, only one son inherited it, while other sons married and moved in with their wives' families. Although this system appears similar to the Japanese family property system, it is essentially different in nature. This paper, taking Kaixiangong Village as an example, focuses on housing, both as a unit of living and as part of family property, and analyses the process of change in rural families and family property in Southern Jiangsu Province from an historical angle. Observation of the change in housing in Kaixiangong Village over the past hundred years reveals that the division of family property was limited, and the growth in the economic accumulation of individual families led to a steady increase in family property.

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Introduction

Small-scale peasant economies were formed in both Japan and China in very early times. However, the social and economic organizations that supported these small peasant economies were established in very different ways in the two countries. In Japan, village communities were formed according to geographical grouping, while in China they were based on clan groups formed by blood ties (Nakamura 2000). On the other hand, as indicated in the research of Fei Xiaotong, the economic network centred on markets and towns also offered strong support to small peasant economies in China (Fei 2002).

Thus the principles of small peasant family structure were different in Japan and China. Furthermore, as the Chinese clan enlarged, so the ways of inheriting family property came to differ greatly from those in Japan. This paper first compares the concepts of clan, family property and inheritance in the two countries; it then presents a case study in Japan; finally, Kaixiangong Village is used as an example to illustrate the changes in the small peasant clan in the Southern Jiangsu rural area of China in the last century, by means of an analysis of the separation of the clan and inheritance strategies.

1. Clan and family property – a comparison between Japan and China

Family inheritance in Japan

In Japan, the small peasant economy was established in the early Edo times (mid-seventeenth century). At that time, a clear distinction was made between samurais and peasants, both in status and in housing space: samurais lived in cities while peasants lived in villages. Land rent was paid on the basis of a ‘village’ (*mura*) by way of a peasant joint responsibility system. On the proviso that land rent was paid, the Bakuhan (the system of shogunate rule) permitted the *mura* control over their legal, administrative and judicial mechanisms, leading to the formation of ‘self-ruled villages.’ Peasants were ruled by the same clan group up until the Edo period (1603–1868), when they gradually became independent as *hon-byakushou* (peasants who had land use rights and were included in the Bakuhan land register, paying rent and tax to the tax through their *mura*). Hence the small peasant economy of *hon-byakushou* was established and families (*ie*) were formed. The land that they had formally contracted was now regarded as the family property of *hon-byakushou*, and the family name, family business, family status and right of sacrifice to ancestors were inherited by one son alone. Such practice became a tradition (Sekiguchi 1989; Okama 2009).

Family property was the material condition needed for the *ie* to survive. One-son inheritance usually meant property passing to the eldest son, but in some cases, when conditions did not allow for this, the second son, younger sons or sons-in-law (without a blood relationship) also inherited. Therefore,

the right of sacrifice to ancestors was not governed by the concept of blood relationship. This is totally different from circumstances in China (Nakane 1987). In addition, although the head of a family enjoyed absolute power, if he damaged the interests of the *ie*, he faced possible rejection by other clan members, a situation in which the *mura* could also intervene.

In brief, the *ie* tried to maintain two aspects of continuity: family status, which included the family name, family business, custody and guardianship of family members and right of sacrifice to ancestors and the maintenance of ancestral graves; and family property.

After entering the contemporary era, the promulgation of the Meiji Civil Code reinforced the rights of family heads. In addition, although the administrative organization was restructured, the *mura* was maintained. Heads of households and the *mura* served as important means by which Meiji government policy could penetrate rural areas. Meanwhile, family property as the basis of the *ie* survived. The novel *Mon and Kura* (which records family names and the process of accumulation of land as a kind of family property) was a symbol of the prosperity enjoyed by family property (Wada 1972–74). During the process of democratization after World War II, the Meiji Civil Code was modified and an inheritance system based on equal division was established. However, in actuality, the one-son inheritance system is still dominant today, except in those regions where farmland is regarded as property. In recent years, though its importance has been drastically reduced, the *mura* has been instrumental in saving Japanese agriculture, acting as a ‘village-scale agricultural cooperative’: therefore, it remains a relevant field of study. In view of this, rural clans and their family property remain important factors for *mura* agricultural reproduction; without them, it would have been impossible for Japan to maintain six million hectares of farmland and six million farming families (with some decrease in recent years).²

Stirpism in China and the inheritance of family property

Chinese families (*jia*) and family property are very different from those in Japan described above. In China, direct government rule extended only to district level up to the time of the Qing Dynasty. It was country gentlemen who formed the link between the government and the broad mass of the peasantry. Therefore, under such ‘double-track politics’ (Fei 1999), the *jia* could not become a unit of land ownership. It could not become an entity like *ie*, which was an essential feature of agricultural production and management at a regional level and as a permanent form of family business. Japanese clans, both materially and psychologically, took agricultural production as their main purpose, whereas the main purpose of the *jia* is the continuation of the

² Males other than the eldest sons became peasants or odd job workers. After entering modern times, when the domestic labour market became saturated, some of them left mainland Japan (as immigrants to Hokkaido in Japan and emigrants to foreign countries or regions, such as Korea, Manchuria, Hawaii, North America and South America).

lineal blood relationship. Family property (real estate, money and chattels) is only one (albeit very important) element of the *jia*'s financial support base.

Various arguments exist on the subject of family property. Gao Yongping explained this issue with the property inheritance principles of 'stirpism', or 'doctrine of the family line' (Gao 2006; Shiga 1950). Here the family line means

a male adult, who does not live together with his brothers, as well as all his continuous (single-pass) ancestors and all his underage sons (or even adult son, in the case of an only child), who form a group of males related by blood (or intended male blood relation group.) (Gao 2006:173)

Family lineage is the only factor in the continuation of clan pedigree and property inheritance. When a father is the head of his family line, he naturally has the right to make decisions on family property with others outside the family. But for issues involving inheritance of family property, the case is different. In the case of an only son, he inherits directly from his father and no division of property is necessary. This was the case in Fei Xiaotong's study of Kaixiangong Village (see note 2). However, if property is inherited by more than one son, family division will take place. The ownership of the family property will be equal to the number of sons when a family is divided up. The father never has the right to distribute the property other than by dividing it equally among the sons. From this we know that the family property, no matter how much that property is worth, will be divided equally among the new family lines when the sons grow up (usually to be married and have their own children). As a result, new family lines emerge from equal-division inheritance.

In discussing the differences between the Japanese *ie* and the Chinese *jia* with respect to inheritance, a case study of a Japanese family line is presented here, followed by a study of the special characteristics of Chinese *jia* and family property inheritance as shown in Kaixiangong Village. This paper also includes a description of a Chinese family's spiritual³ and daily life, as well as the way in which they organized production.

2. Inheritance of *ie* – the introduction of modern sericulture in Japan

In order to compare the inheritance of *jia* in China with the concept of *ie* in Japan, I draw on the research results from Hasebe (Hasebe 2009a).

Family name, family business, family status and family property in Japan

This case study concerns a rural family (family K) in Kamishiojiri Village, Nagano County, during the period from the beginning of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century. The village is a highly

³ With regard to spiritual life, worship of ancestors is a major rite. For example, the No. 14 family needs to prepare two tables of feasts on the spirit festival in mid-July, by the lunar calendar. One table is for their own ancestors, and the other is for their former neighbour's ancestors, since they use the site of their neighbour's house.

developed district, known for its crop farming and sericulture. In the 140 years since family K divided from its clan (Family Z) in 1727 (see table 1), seven family heads had maintained the inheritance of their clan name (Kaheiji).⁴

The management periods of each family head are as follows. The family head of the first generation had the longest period of management, 37 years; the second family head had 27 years; the third family head had only seven years because he died at the age of 33. His brother helped manage the family as ‘transitional family head’ for 14 years; the fourth family head, who was the son of the third, managed his family for 32 years; after that, the fifth family head had 15 short years and the sixth 17 years. From the discussion below it can be seen that the inheritance of the family clan occurred in a difficult situation involving a high mortality rate. As regards inheritance, the first family head chose to retire at 60 to pass the management position to the next generation, and so did the second family head, who retired when he was 54 years old and died at 72. The other four family heads all took on their management position owing to the death of the previous head.

Table 1: The inheritance of family K (Hasabe 2009a, partially summarized)

G	Name	YOB	Period as family head			Way of inheritance	Remark
			Start	End	Years		
①	T. F	1703	1727	1763	37	Seduced	Divided from family Z with land, started silkworm egg business
②	Y. A	1736	1764	1790	27	Seduced	
③	Y. N	1763	1790	1796	7	Died at 33	Enlarged silkworm egg business
③'	N. Y	1770	1796	1809	14	Divided from family	Set up silkworm egg cooperative and became a centre (transitional family head)
④	H. K	1788	1809	1840	32	Died at 53	Maintained family business, important role in administrative aspect of the village
⑤	N. N	1813	1840	1854	15	Died at 41	Inherited family business and village cadre position
⑥	N. Ch	1820	1854	1870	17	Died at 50	Ditto
⑦		1850	1870				Set up sales company to make and sell silkworm egg paper

Notes: 1) G for generation; YOB: Year of birth.

2) As described later, ③' is ③'s younger brother. After ③'s death, ③' became the transition family head. This family head title will be given back to ④, ③'s son, when he becomes an adult.

What kind of family property existed during this period? From the year 1727, when the first generation divided from its family clan, to the year 1731, when it inherited nearly half of family Z's land and became *hon-byakushou*, the land holding of the family had reached a middle to upper level in the village. Moreover, family K started a silkworm egg business in cooperation with family Z at the end of 1740. They not only made silkworm egg paper, but also

⁴ For more on the situation of families K and Z, see Hasebe (2009b).