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## The Changing Transition to Adulthood in Japan : Timing and Order of Events in the Life Course

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# The Changing Transition to Adulthood in Japan: Timing and Order of Events in the Life Course

Yoshimi Ando

## Abstract

This paper explores the historical changes in the transition to adulthood in twentieth century Japan, using the National Family Research of Japan 1998 (NFRJ98) dataset. The study finds that through comparison of successive birth-cohorts, both later age of school completion (due to spread of higher education) and later age of marriage resulted in a delayed transition, retaining almost the same duration of a transition period. Order of the events has always been uniform through the second half of the last century. Leaving home used to synchronize well with the first job among those who grew up in Japan's economic booming era in the 1960s. Today, however, it synchronizes more with the first marriage among the younger cohorts. The final section discusses implications of these observed trends in light of changes in the Japanese family system as well as the life course itself.

**Key words:** Life Course, Family Change, NFRJ98, Postwar Japan,  
Young Adult

## Introduction

*What is happening to the Transition to Adulthood?*

Transition to adulthood in this paper refers to a sequence of socially age-graded and culturally defined life events that people

experience when becoming adults, such as school completion, getting their first-job, leaving their parent's home, and marriage. There are global concerns about youth's problematic situations that are related to the transition to adulthood, such as late marriage, fertility decline, rising unemployment, risk behaviors i.e. adolescent pregnancy, substance use, and criminal behaviors (Jones and Wallace 1992; Brown et al. 2002; Fussell 2002). Innovative transition behaviors are taking place in many modernized and industrialized societies. For example, delayed timing of transition has been discovered in many modernized and industrialized societies. These phenomena in particular are considered to be brought by prolonged education, late marriage or cohabitation, non-marital birth, and declining fertility (Fussell 2002). It is considered, however, that in non-Western societies there should be different characteristics and contexts. The mechanisms and meanings of transition have much to be explored (Xenos et al. 2001).

#### *The Japanese Experience*

Then what are the Japanese experiences in the transition to adulthood? There are some similarities to the experience of the Western transition, i.e. prolonged formal education, increasing numbers of the jobless, late marriage, and sharp decline of fertility rate. But there are differences, too. One of important Japanese issues on the transition to adulthood is considered to be young people called "Parasite Singles". They are public and policy concern because they remain in their parents' home, part-time employed (even willingly), and stay unmarried (Miyamoto et al. 1997; Yamada 1999). In order to understand the mechanism of the adulthood transition and to improve situations of young people who undergo the transition, extensive

studies on its historical change and diversity are needed. Perhaps it is necessary to relate it to historical change in the Japanese family system. Particularly, dissolution of the group-oriented stem family system ("IE") in the rapid economic growth era in 1960s. I will discuss this point in the final section of this paper.

*Data and Method*

Data used in this study is from National Family Research of Japan 1998 (NFRJ98), conducted by the Japan Society of Family Sociology in January and February of 1999. Its survey objects are individuals who reside in Japan, of both sexes, aged between 28 and 77 at the time of sampling in 1998. This sample composition is designed for five or ten birth cohort comparisons ranging from 1920 through 1969. Self-administered questionnaire method was used. Effective sample size is 6,985 (Return rate was 66.52% out of 10,500)<sup>2</sup>. To minimize retrospective errors and biases in our analysis on early life experience, we limit our sample to the subgroup aged 57 (born in 1941) and younger (N = 4,531; Men = 2,155; Women = 2,376).

Life course events analyzed in this paper are school completion, first job, first home-leaving, and first marriage. Information of these events was collected retrospectively at the time of survey in the NFRJ98.

In the following sections, the timing of each event history will be examined by calculating survival function (Kaplan-Meyer Method)<sup>3</sup>. Order of those multiple transition events will also be explored. In both analyses, three ten-year interval birth-cohort comparisons will be used in order to examine historical changes in the transition experiences. Since event information on the life course from NFRJ98 is

rather limited, however, this paper will provide only a preliminary examination and discussion for the final goal of my study.

### *Basic Questions*

Two major research questions are posed in this study are: 1) How has the Japanese transition to adulthood been changing over the twentieth century, through inter-cohort comparisons of the timing and order of life events? And why? 2) How is the changes in the transition to adulthood, specifically the home-leaving pattern, related to the changing Japanese family system? In the next section, let us begin with the timing of events in the transition to adulthood among twentieth century Japanese people.

## **Timing and Order of Events in the Transition to Adulthood**

### *Delayed Timing and its Factors*

Through three birth cohort comparison, three major historical changes can be found in the timing of transition to adulthood. Firstly, as shown in Figure 1, the median age at most of the events examined here — school completion, first work, home-leaving, and first marriage — has risen for both men and women, through three successive birth-cohorts. The only exception is the age of women at first employment, which shows no change at all.

Secondly, because both the age at entry into the transition period marked by school completion and the age of the exit from it, with marriage, has risen simultaneously, the adulthood transition takes place relatively later in the life course for the younger cohorts. Thirdly, the duration — the length from age at which the transition begins through age at which it ends — has stayed almost the same.

## The Changing Transition to Adulthood in Japan

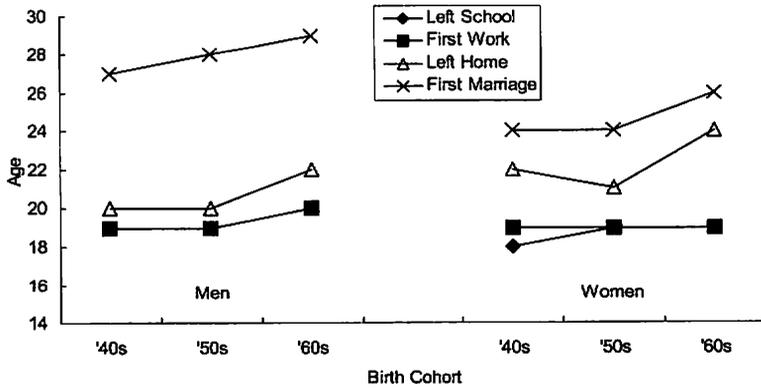


Figure 1. Timing of Events in the Transition to Adulthood(Median Age)

Though our data does not permit us to determine causes of the observed delay of timing, one cannot go around discussing the effect of educational advances, which is considered to be one of major changes in the life course in Japan.

As shown in Figure 2, the diffusion of secondary education

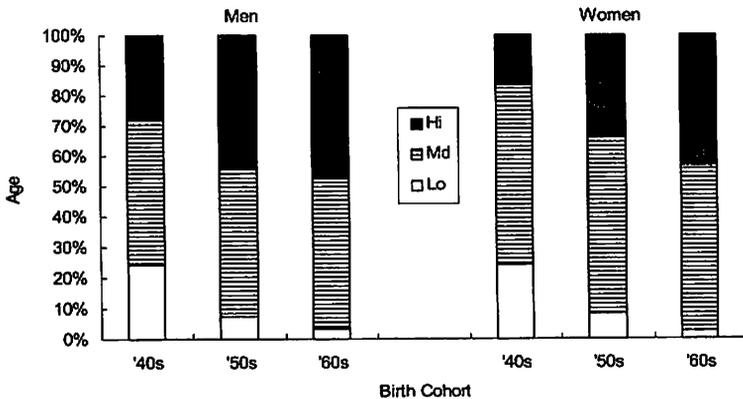


Figure 2. Educational Attainment

(indicated as “Md” in the chart) through three birth cohorts was dramatically rapid. Tertiary education is spreading remarkably, though not so rapid as secondary education did. School completion age is differentiated by educational attainment level.

Another point to be mentioned should be first marriage. By looking at each cohort’s behavior closely with in-group distribution of this event, the youngest cohort shows surprising delay, especially for men. About one fourth among this group are still unmarried.

Although discussion of possible factors of rising marriage age would be too complicated to cover within this paper, only a couple of available variables that have strong relationships with age of marriage can be shown here, which are education and family background. Our data shows that the later marriage is associated with higher educational attainment level (Figure 3).

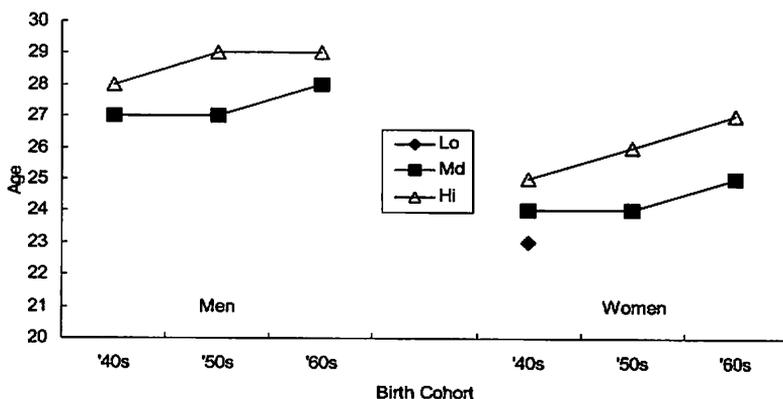


Figure 3. Median Marriage Age by Educational Attainment

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'Family background' here is a composite variable produced from one's father's educational attainment and occupation when the respondent was at the age of fifteen. For men, a weak relationship can be found between one's family background and age of marriage. Men whose fathers have secondary educational attainment tend to marry later than other men. A similar relationship exists among women, but it seems even weaker than men except for '60s cohort. For this cohort, daughters of middle-level educated fathers marry much later than the rest of the cohort (Figure 4). It seems that highly educated women of the '60s birth cohort from urban middle class family are postponing marriage. Furthermore, their behavior is quite different from their cohort mates' and their predecessors' as well.

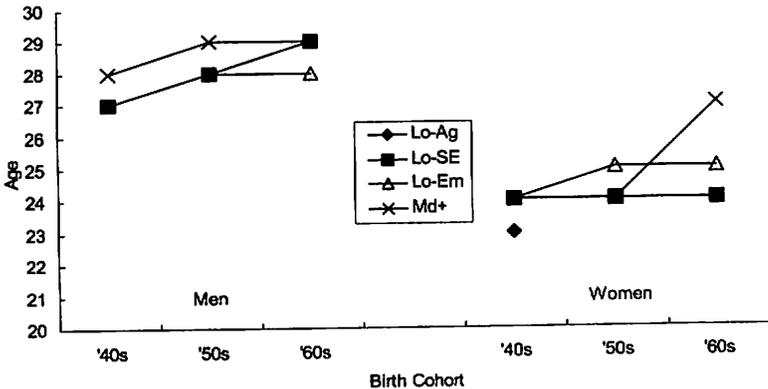


Figure 4. Median Marriage Age by Family Background

*Normativeness of Event Order*

Order of three transition events – school completion, first job, and first marriage – will be examined here. Two major points are discussed here with regard to order of events in the transition to adulthood in Japan.

Firstly, a pattern with marriage precedes either school completion or first work ('NML' in Figure 5) has always been very rare. This makes a big difference in the transition to adulthood between Japan and the Western countries such as the U.S. Dennis P. Hogan (1981) once documented that after World War II, more men in the U.S. finished their formal schooling later and married earlier, and that marriage was more likely to occur prior to school completion and/or first work.

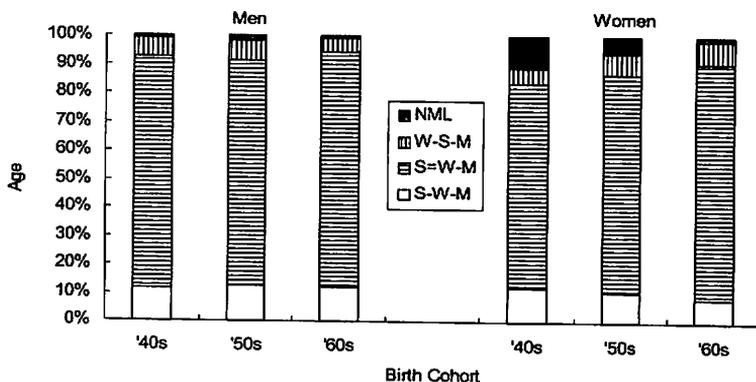


Figure 5. Order of Events in the Transition to Adulthood

Secondly, as shown clearly in Figure 5, one particular pattern is School-completion and first Work occurring at the same time, followed

by Marriage (S=W-M). It has been dominant through three birth cohort among both men and women. Moreover, among women, it has been even more standardized.

These findings are noteworthy because Japanese society became more Westernized (or more exactly, Americanized) when our sample was growing up. After comparing the ordering patterns in transition to adulthood between Japan and the U.S., one study speculates that Japanese society maintained a strong social norm controlling the order of these transition events even under the rapid social change after the war (Hogan and Mochizuki 1985). This hypothesis was posed long ago and seems to also be supported by updated data of NFRJ98, but is yet to be proven. Our data, however, shows that the standardization of ordering of transition to adulthood events has spread within the whole population ('40s cohort and later) even under the period of change, which seems to be contrary to its goal of Westernization.

### **Home-Leaving and Its Synchronization with Other Events**

A special attention is paid to synchronization of home-leaving with the rest of transition events. In doing so, we can get a clearer picture of transition to adulthood and its historical change. It will also permit us to relate the transition to adulthood to the broader historical change of the Japanese family system since the war. One of its dominant formulations is that the Japanese traditional stem family has shifted to Westernized conjugal family through modernization and industrialization. And there are several other arguments that challenge it. Our discussion will hopefully contribute to understanding

home-leaving behavior in the successive birth cohorts.

*Age of first home-leaving*

There are clear gender differences for leaving-home experience. Men are more likely to experience home-leaving than women. That is easily understood because most women leave home with marriage under the Japanese patrilocal residential preference. For men, the survival curves are quite similar among three cohorts and one-fourth of men has never left home (the chart omitted). For women, on the contrary to men, the youngest '60s cohort's home-leaving has delayed considerably as compared to their older cohorts. And about 17% of them are still living with their parents.

*Synchronization of Home-Leaving with Other Events*

How does home-leaving take place in accordance with other major events in the transition to adulthood? What event(s) synchronize with home-leaving? As shown in Figure 6, men tend to be much less likely to leave home for marriage, while the majority of women follow that

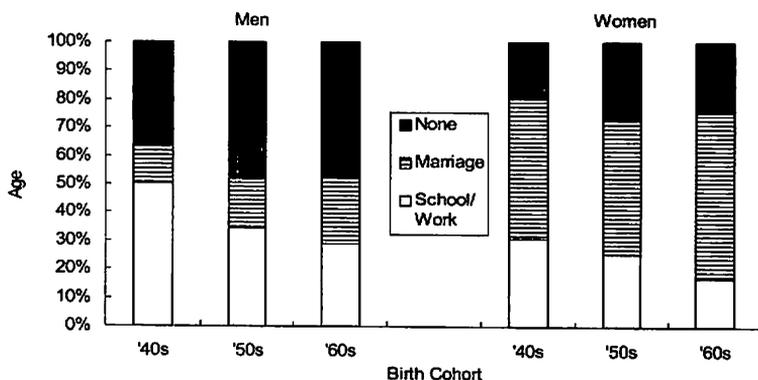


Figure 6. Synchronization of Home-Leaving with Other Events

pattern. For both men and women respectively, the proportion of home-leaving at marriage has jumped for the youngest cohort. At least this is the standard transition behavior among women nowadays.

The reasons for men's home-leaving change persistently through the three cohorts. Although about half of each of the cohort men seem to leave home for other reasons than adulthood transition events, half of the '40s cohort left home at school completion and first job. This calls attention to the historical context in which the '40s cohort underwent the transition to adulthood, that is, the early stage of Japan's rapid economic growth decade.

On the other hand, for the two youngest cohorts of men, non-synchronized home-leaving that consists of the majority of the entire cohort may have occurred at entrance to upper school, e.g. college or vocational school, in seeking advanced education.

The reasons for home-leaving are unknown due to lack of relevant variables in the NFRJ98 survey. These results of event synchronization presented here are very much alike those of past surveys that asked reasons for home-leaving behavior, such as one that was done by the Ministry of Health, Welfare, and Labor in 2001. Next, we will look further into intra-cohort variations with particular attention to home-leaving behavior in this era.

#### *Home-Leaving as a Family Strategy in the Context of Social Change*

We are going to explore what creates differences in home-leaving behavior among young people. What was the effect of educational experiences? What was the effect of one's family background?

Figure 7 shows that synchronization of home-leaving with other events is sharply differentiated in relation to educational attainment.

For men, the lower education is associated with more likely home-leaving at school completion and/or first job. Among all, almost two thirds of the '40s cohort with low education followed that pattern. Again, a similarity is found among the mid-level educated from the '40s cohort.

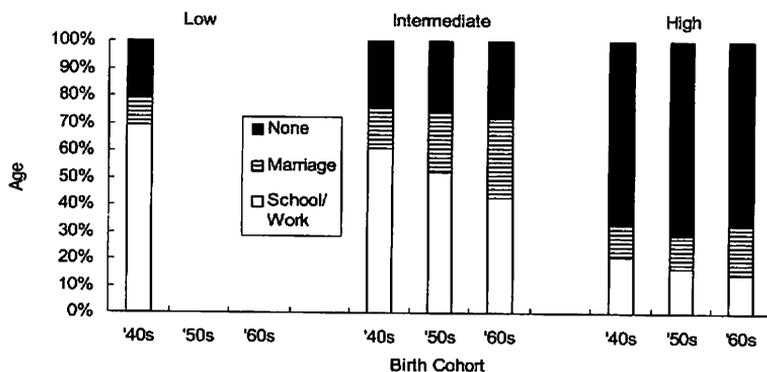


Figure 7. Synchronization of Home-Leaving by Educational Attainment(Men)

Note: The sub-groups of "Low" education for '50s and '60s birth cohorts are omitted due to insufficient sample size for cross tabulation.

It should be noted that about three fourths of '40s men are intermediately educated and below. And 69.4% from the low education and 61% from the intermediate fall in this category, which means about 91% of the home-leavers at school completion and/or first job consists of low and intermediate level school graduates.

These two sub-groups from '40s cohort men might represent a huge body of labor force that migrated from rural regions to industrial centers through aggregate job recruitment system in the '60s.

On the contrary, most of the highly educated men left home

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without any connection to adulthood transition events. One can speculate that many of them left home at enrollment in tertiary education.

For women, the home-leaving pattern is quite different between the education levels (Figure 8). Among primary school graduates, the '40s cohort shows a similar home-leaving pattern with school/job. Thus, for both '40s men and women, the dominant life path to take after finishing education at the primary level was to leave home to enter a job.

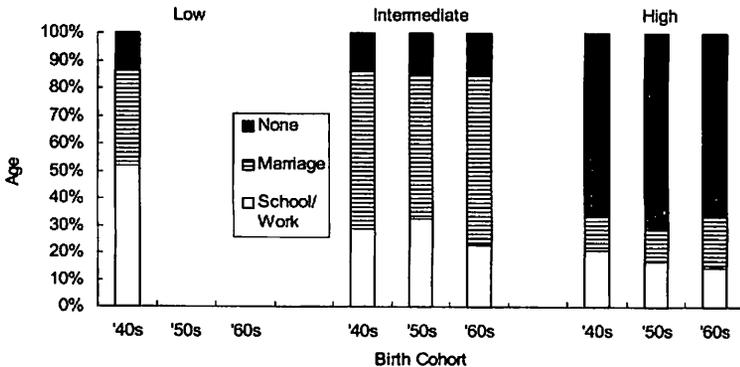


Figure 8. Synchronization of Home-Leaving by Educational Attainment(Women)

Note: The sub-groups of "Low" education for '50s and '60s birth cohorts are omitted due to insufficient sample size for cross tabulation.

Among high school graduates, home-leaving at marriage and/or first job has always been the majority. In addition, distinguishable increase of school/job related home-leaving may reflect advances in educational attainment among the female population.

These high school graduates, after having a clerical job in a company, left work to get married before they get too old for

marriage. (Also, under the Japanese employment system, employee's salary increase over time so unmarried female employees may become a burden to cause deficit for the company to keep hiring them.)

There is a distribution of home-leaving patterns among highly educated women similar to that of men for its dominant non-synchronized home-leaving. But, marriage has become the major reason to leave home for the '60s cohort.

Figure 9 shows a breakdown of synchronization of home-leaving behavior by family background. Here, for the purpose of highlighting the agricultural background, other categories are combined. It is obvious that the majority of '40s cohort men from agricultural background left home at school completion and/or first job. A similar tendency is found for the same subgroup among women, but its association is weaker than men.

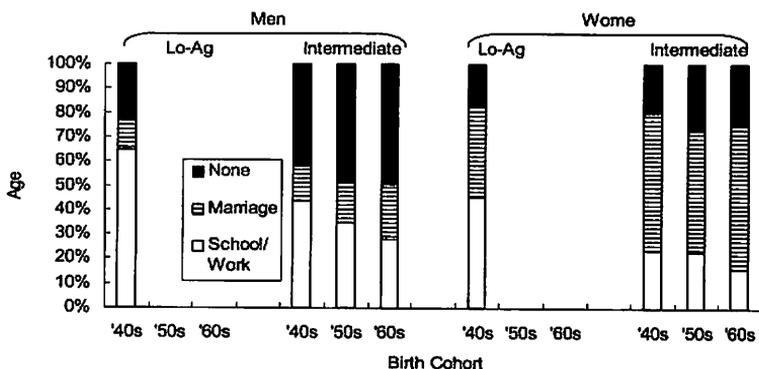


Figure 9. Synchronization of Home-Leaving by Family Background  
 Note: The sub-groups of "Lo-Ag" for '50s and '60s birth cohorts are omitted due to insufficient sample size for cross tabulation.

*Overview of Findings from NFRJ98*

We have found that through comparison of successive birth-cohorts, both later age of school completion (due to spread of higher education) and later age of marriage resulted in a delayed transition, retaining almost the same duration of a transition period. Order of the events has always been normative through the second half of the last century. Home-leaving used to synchronize well with the first job among those who grew up in Japan's economic booming era in the 1960s. Today, however, it synchronizes more with the first marriage among the younger cohorts.

For the rest of the paper, I will discuss some implications of these observed trends in light of changes in the Japanese family system as well as the life course itself. Although some of the points that I will try to make are based on the results obtained in my analysis, I will extend my discussion and let it cover what should be included in the future agenda.

### **Implications: Societal and Family Change and Transition to Adulthood**

When looking back upon changes that have happened to the Japanese family since World War II, it is during the period of rapid economic growth in the 1960s and early 1970s that most of the visible and virtual changes occurred in the Japanese family. Our proposal here is to look at the family as an active agent that has brought an explosion in nuclear family units in the urban areas. In doing so, I will argue that the Japanese traditional stem family norm was at work in governing youth's home leaving behavior (and perhaps

migration to urban centers) during the postwar industrialization. And that does not deny that the governmental labor policy and the industrial force pulled the youth population out of rural sectors.

But, before discussing the postwar family changes in Japan, let us provide a brief description of the Japanese traditional stem family system.

*Japanese traditional stem family system and youths as commodity*

In the traditional stem family system which is thought to have prevailed throughout the entire country with a few exceptional regions, there is a very simple fact that all children but an heir, regardless of whether sons or daughters, are to leave their parental home when they grew up old enough to start working. That is the most important rule in this system and what the stem family system is all about. For a family, it is quite a natural act to push out non-heir members.

Then, where would those pushed-out members go? Some became boarders and worked as farm workers (for boys) or house maids (for girls) for rich and prestigious families (usually big landowners), while others leave their community and were recruited by such families in other communities. Except for rich families from the upper social class, children of peasant family were a commodity that was exchanged in the local labor market. This is how the labor market in local agricultural regions operated before mass recruitment of laborers by industrial centers began in the Meiji Era. After industrialization began in late nineteenth century Japan, industrial agents joined the buyers of the young labor commodities and took over the labor market soon after.

This job recruitment system survived after the World War II, but

with a slightly different version. The national government established Public Employment Security Offices around the country. And schools, companies, and the government, tied up strongly with each other, established an employment system in which employers were able to hire junior high school graduates at the time of graduation. This system worked successfully in the time of labor shortage during the rapid economic growth era.

*Transition to Adulthood and the Family in the Economic Growth Decade*

By taking this push-out rule pertaining to the traditional family into account, the following hypothesis can be understood quite naturally. When those who reached age for home-leaving during the economic booming era in early 1960s, the same old rule told them to leave home and get a job outside their community. Even though they were strongly pulled out of rural communities by demands of the industrial job market, their home leaving behavior was one that was expected in terms of local family strategy. Thus, our rural-born junior high and senior high school leavers from 1940s cohort represent one typical pattern of the transition to adulthood in that era.

This reminds us of what late Tamara Hareven, a distinguished family historian, documented. She discovered that the traditional family ties and strategy played an active role in promoting the early stage of American industrialization in late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Hareven 1982). Though there is much to be done about documenting this historical episode of Japanese version, the hypothetical idea presented here will produce a feasible study in the future. At this point, there is no evidence in our data to contradict the hypothesis.

Based on the discussion here, our findings on the transition behavior in the '60s seem to better fit what I call a revisionist theory of the postwar family change. They argue that, rather than transformed into the nuclear conjugal family, the Japanese traditional stem family system was preserved in rural agrarian regions, while children of that family system migrated to industrial centers, became employed workers, and married. By having children, they eventually formed nuclear households (Ito 1994; Ochiai 1997). Their larger cohort population, forming the second generation in Japan's demographic transition, contributed to the explosion of the proportion of nuclear households. The '40s cohort was literally pushed out from their family of orientation and rural community by the force of family strategy.

To enhance our statement, let us compare home-leaving in this era with that of today when the family has lost the reason to force out its members any more.

*A Real New Age: The Third Generation in the Demographic Transition*

Our '50s and '60s birth cohorts belong to the third generation in the Japanese demographic transition and many of them are children of '40s cohort discussed earlier. We have documented that considerable innovations are happening to their life course. Their educational level advanced as compared to that of their parents. Their age of the transition events is rising up. Among the events, marriage seems to be the most difficult event for them to experience.

We have no sufficient evidence to explain their behavior. But when considering their familial context of the transition, we can think of many reasons why the family today does not have to let its members leave home.

The numbers of siblings are drastically declining. Children do not have to compete with their siblings for the family resources, financial or residential. They enjoy relatively high standard of living and housing as compared to back in the '60s. There are plenty of job opportunities within a commuting distance thanks to transportation innovation. All these family conditions for young adults today will fall into this conclusion that there is no reason for them to leave home. The family does not have to maintain the old rule any more. Some families might expect exchange of present benefits of coresidence and future care of elderly parents between parents and their offspring.

It is our '50s and '60 cohorts, not their parents, that are standing at a big fork whether to go by the stem family rules or to be a real innovator of new family lifestyles.

Perhaps the major critical point at which children really ought to be independent from their parents seems to be when they get married. Thus, home-leaving and marriage tend to be planned according to projected life style of the family of procreation, rather than needs of the family of orientation. That is how late marriage naturally brings late home-leaving.

*Late Transition as a Result of Disappearing Traditional Family and Community*

Let us make a final point as to delayed marriage in terms of family and social change perspective. Today, factors that contribute to late marriage timing have been discussed broadly in the literature. Staying single, young people are enjoying far more freedom than the married. They, especially for women, do not have to deal with cumbersome relationship and obligations with in-laws. These are the advantages of being single. And one might argue that declining

attraction of marriage is the major contributor to late marriage. We would not deny this argument, but there seems to be an additional factor. Young singles tend to get much less pressure to be independent from their parents by getting married and leaving home. Parents tend to think their children's marriage is the children's own business. It is not something parents arrange for them like what used to be. Parents never feel embarrassed in the neighborhood when single grownup children stay home until after they should have got married.

Another reason for late marriage might be brought by disorganization of the IE system. Today parents do not have a social network in the neighborhood or larger community as they used to. In the past, when the arrangement marriage system worked well in mate selection, parents used their neighbors as a resource to match make their children. Community tie was very strong and neighbors and relatives worked often together in the same job, mostly agricultural or fishery. Through the network, it was much easier for parents to find a fiance(e) for their son and daughter. But, nowadays, when most people are employed outside their community, even in local villages where most residents used to be peasants before, it is quite difficult to know who your neighbors are. Parents know of no possible fiance(e) through their acquaintances to introduce to their offspring. The small (scarce?) network (whether kinship or local) that parents have is one reason that arranged marriage has almost disappeared in Japan after the rapid economic growth era. (Also young singles prefer to find their partner on their own, rather than turning a help to the parents or relatives, which they would be too embarrassed to do.)

We have discussed some implications of transition to adulthood in

relation to the family change on a heuristic basis. But more research is needed in this field of inquiry.

## Conclusions

This paper explored the historical changes in the transition to adulthood in twentieth century Japan, by using NFRJ98, a nationally surveyed data. We found that considerable changes occurred to the Japanese transition to adulthood throughout the second half of last century. Our major findings are as follows: delay of timing and standardization of ordering in the transition to adulthood; separation of home-leaving from family strategy.

We tried to relate these observed trends to changes in the Japanese family system. By comparing two contrasting cohorts, '40s cohort's characteristics governed by the traditional family rules during the rapid economic growth decades and '60 cohort's emerging pattern, we concluded hypothetically that the real change in the family system was considered to happen between those two cohorts' experiences. Particularly, it may well be argued that the Japanese traditional stem family norm was at work in governing youth's home leaving behavior (and perhaps migration to urban centers) during the postwar industrialization. In order to test these working hypotheses, more specifically focused explorations on this matter are needed.

## Notes

- 1 Acknowledgement: This paper is based upon my presentation at the East-West Center (EWC) on February 3, 2004 when I was an Obuchi Japan Foundation Fellow at the EWC. I am grateful to the

EWC for generous support and to the audience for questions and comments on my presentation. I also gratefully acknowledge the use of the National Family Research of Japan (NFRJ98) conducted by the National Family Research committee of Japan Society of Family Sociology.

- 2 Originally, this survey covers various topics on the family, such as interaction between family members, opinions about family ideology, elderly care behaviors and attitudes, etc.
- 3 Through this method, a person who has not experienced any particular event can be included in the computation. The month and year when the event was experienced are asked in the schedule. But, for considerable numbers of the respondents months of some event occurrences are missing. That is why only years of occurrences are used in this study.

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