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State and family in modern Japan: a historical perspective

Sheldon Garon

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Abstract

Japanese often present their ‘family system’ as a timeless national tradition. Instead this article examines changes in Japanese family structure from the late nineteenth century to recent years, focusing on interrelationships between the Japanese managerial state and family. Specifically it charts (1) the state's role in establishing the household as the primary site of welfare provision and (2) the gradual shift from the patriarchal household to a family system centred on the woman as household manager and mother. The development of the woman-centred family occurred in dialogue between urban women activists and the state, which increasingly perceived the advantages of mobilizing married women to raise healthy children, organize neighbourhoods, care for the family's elderly and take responsibility for saving the family's money.

Keywords:

Notes

1. Following East Asian practice, Japanese surnames precede given names.

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Japan as Number One
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