CHAPTER 10

Beyond Blood Ties

Intimate Kinships in Japanese Foster and Adoptive Care

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In a television broadcast from 2010 featuring a family with six unrelated foster children, the narrator notes the bonds of the heart or spirit (kokoro no kizuna) among these family members (NNN News 2010). The foster father tells the camera, “Eating together, sleeping together, you become parent and child; you become siblings. I always say even if your last names are different, you’re still siblings. It’s interesting; it’s fun, that transformation.” The narrator closes dramatically: “Even without a blood tie (chi no tsunagari nakutemo), this big foster family is energetic!” The dramatic tension of the broadcast hinges on the assumption that at first glance, this foster family looks like a “normal” large and lively family, while the surprising revelation is that the children are not related to each other or to their foster parents by blood. Kinship connections have emerged over time through shared food and contact. The viewer is left impressed with possibilities for alternative intimacies.

Intimacy has become the prevailing trope for public discourses surrounding foster care and adoption in Japan, focused particularly on the ways that caregiving and mundane everyday practices—like eating, sleeping, and bathing together—can create kinship ties where there were previously none. This focus on intimately created kinship is itself a modern rhetoric for understanding relatedness that articulates with twentieth- and twenty-first-century ideals of the nuclear family bound by love (McKinnon and Cannell 2013). But intimacy can also be a measure of exclusion: in Japan, non-blood-related children are sometimes seen as irredeemably “other,” a type of difference articulated by references to “the child of a stranger” (tanin no ko) who is impossible to love. A stigma surrounds
children who become wards of the state when their own intimate biologi-
cal kinship relationships are seen to have failed them.

In contemporary Japan, people often claim that “blood ties” are central
to Japanese kinship. In this chapter, I argue that the very notion of blood
ties cannot be understood outside of culturally and historically specific
understandings of intimacy. Rather than indicating exclusively biogenetic
relatedness, discourses surrounding blood ties in Japan point to culturally
legible ways of articulating intimate connections. These discourses are part
of broader conceptual frameworks through which people understand what
it takes to be considered “family.” Claims that Japanese people value blood
ties in families reflect a relatively recent and historically specific narrow-
ing of family ideologies, which focus increasingly on genetic relatedness.
These transformations also speak to broader concerns regarding kinship
practices among people who are not socially recognized as “family,” pos-
sibilities for intimacy with unrelated children, and stigma against children
of unknown origin. While I argue, on the one hand, that blood ties them-
theselves are conceptualized as a type of intimacy, in this chapter I also show
how discourses surrounding blood ties reflect anxieties that intimate ties
will fail to generate durable family bonds.

This analysis is based on ethnographic research in Japan from 2008
through the present. Seeking to understand the interactions among
Japanese family ideologies, kinship practices, child welfare systems, and
well-being, from 2009 to 2010 I conducted participant observation at a child
welfare institution (a “children’s home”) and a self-help organization for
young people who had grown up in child welfare institutions (both located
in the Kanto region) and with members of a similar self-help group in the
Kansai region.¹ I spent extensive time with foster families in both areas
and interviewed foster parents, adoptive parents, and people who had
undertaken infertility treatments in order to conceive. My objective was
to understand how people conceptualized their own family desires and
practices vis-à-vis what they framed as “normal” Japanese family ideals,
and I explored how ideologies about “Japaneseness” were mobilized to
explain contemporary welfare systems and practices.

JAPANESE CHILD WELFARE AND ITS
“CULTURAL” UNDERPINNING?

As of 2016 of the 45,000 children who were wards of the Japanese state
because their parents could not—for some reason or another—take care of
them, over 30,000 were cared for in child welfare institutions, which range
in size; the smaller institutions house around 30 children, and the largest
around 150 children.² Additionally, almost 3,000 newborns, infants, and
toddler were cared for in child welfare institutions for babies (*nyūjin*). In contrast to large-scale welfare institutions, family-based or small-scale care serves a minority of children; a Japanese government report records 4,973 children placed in family foster care (11 percent of children in state care), with 1,261 more children living in “family homes,” houses with a maximum of 6 foster children that are run either by registered foster parents and a hired staff member or by child welfare institution staff members (MHLW 2017, 1). Many children spend a large portion of their young lives in institutions; the average stay for children in state care is almost five years (MHLW 2014). Under increasing international pressure from the United Nations, the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare has stated an objective to increase its rate of foster care placements to 30 percent by the year 2029 (MHLW 2010; UNCRC 2010). The family foster care placement rate in Japan remains significantly lower than in many other “developed” nations, with Korea registering around 44 percent; Germany and Italy, around 50 percent; England, the United States, and Hong Kong, above 70 percent; and Australia, over 93 percent (MHLW 2014, 23).

Although the Japanese government is working to increase family-based child welfare provisioning, it has not promoted adoption as a possible child welfare intervention. However, prospective foster parents have the option to register with the intent to adopt, a possibility if the child’s birth parents relinquish parental rights. Japan’s child guidance center employees generally do not pressure birth parents to relinquish their rights, so it is common in Japan for people hoping to adopt to register, instead, as foster parents caring for children unavailable for adoption and who then stay in foster care long-term (Goldfarb 2013; Bamba and Haight 2011). Although the legal frameworks are entirely different, adoption and fostering are often spoken of as similar for this reason; foster parents often enter the process resolved to fully incorporate an unrelated child into their family.

People in Japan tend to cite Japanese cultural preferences for blood ties as an explanation for why fostering and the adoption of an unrelated child are still relatively uncommon. I have argued elsewhere that these cultural explanations are insufficient, rooted as they are in ahistorical and timeless qualities of Japanese culture; they fail to recognize that cultural trends are historical products and that Japanese family ideologies have changed over time. Cultural explanations tend to neglect the capacity of policies and practices to shift and instead conflate current child welfare practice on the ground with an intransigent notion of timeless culture as a barrier to change (Goldfarb 2012, 2013).

Certainly, systemic transformation is possible, and changes due to the efforts of local actors are in clear evidence; some areas in Japan with dedicated local government intervention in child welfare practices have seen
significant increases in foster care placements, most strikingly Shizuoka City, where foster care rates increased from 14.9 percent in 2005 to 46.9 percent in 2015 (MHLW 2017, 16). It is also worth noting that many more households are registered as foster parents than are currently caring for a foster child; across Japan in 2016, 8,445 households were registered as foster parents without the intent to adopt, with only 3,043 households actually caring for a child; 3,450 households registered with the intent to adopt, with only 233 households currently caring for a child (MHLW 2017, 1). There are thus many more people who hope to foster and adopt than have the opportunity to do so, a situation that is due in large part to systemic privileging of biological parents’ rights, on the level of both social work practice and family court decisions (Tsuzaki 2009).

Rather than focusing naively on Japanese culture as an explanation for child welfare practices, I attend here to the notion of “blood ties” as a culturally and historically specific idiom for expressing the possibilities for connection, ties that simultaneously mark boundaries of exclusion and stigma. Contemporary use of the concept of “blood ties” must be understood in historical perspective, alongside social policy transformations and in conversation with common discourses about what makes “family.” It is necessary to attend to daily intimate practices that are understood, in Japan, to constitute family—regardless of biogenetic relatedness.

WHY “BLOOD TIES” HAVE COME TO MATTER IN JAPAN

Despite ubiquitous public discourses regarding the importance of “blood ties” to Japanese culture, the valorization of blood ties within Japanese families is relatively recent. Before the Meiji Restoration of 1868 and the creation of the koseki system of family registration, family practices across Japan were extremely diverse. Even after the Meiji Restoration, when the extended family form of the ie became the basic, legally recognized unit of society, scholars of Japanese family practices have long noted the “flexible” ways families incorporated outsiders as a strategy to perpetuate the ie. While kinship practices in China and Korea are often described as focused on maintaining the patriline, the ie system in Japan is not historically oriented around upholding a literal male bloodline. Indeed, “blood ties” have not historically been a significant metric for accounting for membership in a Japanese ie. Although primogeniture (inheritance passing to the eldest male child) is one characteristic of historical ie ideology, in practice, inheritors might be younger sons, a daughter, a daughter’s husband, the child of an extended family member, an unrelated couple,
employees, or even (in the past) servants or slaves. Adoption of such people has long been a central characteristic of Japanese ie maintenance (Bachnik 1983; Hozumi 2004; Nakane 1967; Norbeck and Befu 1958).

The degree to which ie-oriented mentality persists today is a topic for debate, although my own research accords with the view that the ie—at least the inherited family name and the need to care for ancestral graves—remains important to many people, particularly but not only in rural areas of Japan. This is in spite of the post–World War II American occupation’s reframing of the Japanese constitution, in which the ie system’s legal grounding was abolished and individuals, not families, were made the basic social unit (Paulson 1984). The type of adoption long associated with ie maintenance (“regular adoption,” or futsū yōshi engumi) remains widespread; in such adoptions children or adults are incorporated into a family registry without cutting legal ties with the family of origin. However, the adoption of young children who are unaffiliated with the family is much less common. Only in 1988 was a legal system created to adopt children “for the sake of the child,” rather than for the sake of family continuity; in such an adoption the child’s ties are legally cut with the family of origin, and he or she is entered into the family registry as the “actual child” (jisshi) of the adoptive parents (Hayes and Habu 2006). This type of adoption, called “special adoption” (tokubetsu yōshi engumi), is marked as non-normative in its very legal designation.

At their base, “regular” and “special” adoptions are entirely different practices. Adopting a known adult or a relative’s child might make sense to ensure family continuity. However, the practice of making a young child from an unknown family into kin strikes many Japanese people as strange. People tend to consider it risky—given that the child’s family history is often unknown—and pathetic (kawaišō), both because the adopting couple is perceived as desperate to raise a child and because the child has been abandoned by his or her family of origin. An old adage, “You don’t know from which horse the bone comes” (Doko no uma no hone ka wakaranai), is known to many of my interlocutors and is sometimes cited in order to explain distaste for the adoption of a child from an unknown family. Most centrally, my research subjects—many of them adoptive parents themselves—told me time and again that the incorporation of non-kin into families is fundamentally an unfamiliar practice to Japanese people, who value blood ties in families.

When and how, specifically, did blood ties become commonly cited as the basis for Japanese kinship? Research on the transformations of Japanese family practices often points to spatial regimes that have emerged since the mid-1800s, most particularly in the twentieth century with the
increase of nuclear families. These include the decline of multi-generation households, housing structures with units divided from the surrounding community and further divided into private bedrooms, and a gendered division of labor and availability of household appliances that, for middle-class households, ended the use of outside domestic laborers in the private space of the home (Ochiai 1997; Ronald and Alexy 2011; Sand 2003).

In his exploration of the emergence of modern “myths of Japaneseness,” Oguma (2002) argues for the mutual influence of family ideologies and national policies of inclusion and exclusion. Oguma links Japanese openness to non-blood-related ie members with Japanese expansionist rhetoric about incorporating non-Japanese others into the national body. However, after World War II, Japanese myths of self were reoriented not as inclusive, containing heterogeneous and diverse peoples, but were reframed as homogeneous, exclusive, and “mono-ethnic” (ibid.; Dale 1986; Harootunian 1989; Lie 2001; Robertson 2002). These national discourses of self, focused on narrow conceptions of Japanese bloodlines, have likely played a role in shaping contemporary perceptions of Japanese selves as valuing blood ties within families. Further, as Japan’s birthrate has declined, there are fewer “undesired” children in families. While a childless couple might have in the past adopted a child of a sibling or a cousin, decreasing family size makes this practice less pragmatic.

These processes have contributed to changing family ideals, in which the concept of “blood ties” has new ideological salience—even as blood ties are often understood as pointing to something beyond biological relatedness. Ochiai (1997, 76–77) describes the ideal type of contemporary Japanese households as those in which families are intimate and by their very intimacy, also exclusive, with their boundaries narrowing to encircle a (generally) nuclear family separated from public spheres; in such a family emotion binds members, and kin are separated from non-kin. Scholars of infertility treatment in Japan have further argued that the availability of advanced reproductive technology enabling couples to have their own biological children means that the standard of having a biologically related child has become a coercive norm (Shirai 2010, 2013; Tsuge 1999). Family in Japan has been progressively medicalized and biologized, such that “blood ties” have increasingly come to refer to narrow concepts of genetic relatedness, even as “blood” often simultaneously points to the expansive or “symbolic” interconnectedness that anthropologists of kinship have long examined (Carsten 2004; Schneider 1984). These transformations have, I suggest, contributed to the contemporary centrality of blood ties in discourses of Japanese family. While blood ties are often described
as a characteristic of Japanese national-cultural family values, we should see this as an “invented tradition” (Vlastos 1998).

LOVING THE CHILD OF A STRANGER

In the accounts of my interlocutors, it is evident that the meaning of “blood ties” exceeds conventional understandings of biogenetic relatedness. Blood ties mark membership in an intimate, known sphere, in contrast to those who are experienced as different, embodying the alterity of an unknown family, and imagined as potentially unlovable. Blood ties are thus discursively engaged to summon a sense of intimate proximity or distance.

Yamaguchi Akihiro and his wife had pursued infertility treatment for many years before conceiving and giving birth to their son. From the start of our interview, Yamaguchi described how difficult it was for his wife to undergo many attempts at artificial insemination and finally in vitro fertilization before becoming pregnant. When I asked him whether they had ever considered adoption, he said they had not, and even if his wife had never conceived, they would probably still not have thought of adoption. Referring to one of my earlier questions about the ways blood relationships are perceived in families, Yamaguchi explained:

Maybe one can say that Japanese people value blood ties? For me too, as expected [yappari], I wanted my own child, but what about a child that a stranger has given birth to [tanin no unda kodomo]? A child that is not blood related to me, the question of whether or not I could love that child [aiseru ka dō ka]—that’s really something I don’t know. That’s not to say that after five or ten years, if we still couldn’t have a child—maybe then I could accept adopting; maybe at that time my feelings would be different. Maybe I could love that child. But we never had to go that far, so I don’t know the answer.

Yamaguchi implies that desperation and the passage of time might widen the range of lovable children. A lack of blood ties is not a categorical quality prohibiting the feasibility of adoption but one that shifts with circumstances. At the same time, the articulations of love and blood ties indicate the centrality of affect in Yamaguchi’s understanding of “blood.”

Takano Saki, a woman who had been pursuing infertility treatment for over eight years, cited the same logic when she described a conversation with her husband about the possibility of adopting. Her husband had one basic fear: whether he could love another person’s child [hito no ko, aiseru
She had that concern for herself as well, but she had heard enough accounts from foster and adoptive parents that she was reasonably sure she could come to love the child of a stranger. She wasn’t sure about her husband:

The ability to come to love the child, well, that’s obviously the best, isn’t it? But not being able to love... Like, what about when there is trouble, or when the kid is rebelling, the sort of thing that happens with one’s own child anyway—the idea of thinking, despite oneself, “It’s because the child was adopted.” In order to adopt... you have to be absolutely certain you won’t do that.

Takano’s inability to ensure both her and her husband’s capacity to unconditionally love the child of a stranger was ultimately a central factor in their decision not to pursue fostering or adoption.

This lack of confidence in being able to love the child of a stranger appeared many times in my interviews, particularly in cases where people did not have regular contact with unrelated children. The narrowing confines of the family—in which members have limited contact with non-kin and child rearing is increasingly an isolated project—have likely contributed to this uncertainty. One’s own child might seem “lovable,” but why would the child of a stranger be in any way appealing? Concerns with lovability were prevalent enough in the extensive surveys and interviews conducted by sociologist Shirai Chiaki that she used it as a category of analysis: “I don’t have the confidence that I will be able to love a child that is not my own” (Watashi no kodomo de nakereba aiseru ka jishin ga nai) (2013, 73). Shirai places this sentiment under the category of “social and psychological distance,” arguing that people tend to perceive their own kin as having qualities of intimacy (shitashimi), friendship, and camaraderie (nakama kankei) (ibid., 79), in opposition to the child of a stranger that one is not sure one can love. A preference for blood ties is, then, related in an important way to rather narrowly circumscribed groups of people who are perceived as lovable by virtue of their intimate proximity.

STIGMA OF ORIGINS

In addition to concerns driven by intimate proximity, the issue of origin looms large for many foster and adoptive parents. In line with the adage quoted above—“You don’t know from which horse the bone comes”—children who have been for some reason abandoned by their families are often thought to have “bad” or “dirty” blood (ketsuen ga kitanai) (Goodman 2000; Nishida 2011). Children who are not cared for by kin are
often considered “pathetic” specifically because they exist outside of and excluded from networks of care that are understood as normative and proper.

In an extended joint interview, two foster mothers, Hara Kazuko and Funabashi Tomomi, elucidated different aspects of lingering stigma against children from state care, specifically surrounding exclusion from proper kinship. Hara and her husband had two foster sons, and while they had told their family about the children, they represented the boys to their neighbors as the children of kin. “If the neighbors looked at the children and thought, ‘Ah, they are that kind of kid,’ it would just be pathetic [kawaisō],” Hara said. “Is there less prejudice toward children of kin, then?” I asked. Hara considered. “It’s just that people would think, ‘Those kids were raised in a child welfare institution; . . . it’s that—there is no one to take them in [ukeire ga nai]. It’s that kind of situation. It’s different, having people think, ‘What kind of child is that, I wonder [dōiu ko nano ka na tte]?’ versus thinking, ‘This is the child of kin [shinseki no ko tte].’” Hara’s contrast between pathetic children with no one to take them in and children living within an extended kinship network enacts starkly divergent models of family solidarity and care. By Hara’s representing her foster children as children of kin, the children are socially converted from “pathetic” and abandoned with mysterious and unsavory pasts, to cared for and socially legible members of a known family. Otherwise, the question of the kind of children they are remains underdetermined, a source of speculation and suspicion.

Funabashi Tomomi, the other foster mother participating in this interview, had herself worked in a child welfare institution and did not feel negatively about children in state care. However, experiences with neighbors and friends had made her aware that her children were perceived negatively. She learned shortly after taking in her first foster son that rumors surrounding the family had been circulating within their housing complex. She had brought the eighteen-month-old boy to play in a nearby park. The little boy was running around the park and picked up a twig and threw it. A woman Funabashi had never met but who lived in the same complex was watching her own child play in the park. Observing Funabashi’s son throw the twig, she commented to Funabashi, “Just as one might expect [yappari], children raised in that kind of place are violent [ranbo], aren’t they?” Dismayed by this attitude and now aware of rumors, Funabashi and her husband decided to move. It wasn’t good, she said, for a child so young to be subjected to that kind of stigma.

Later on, Funabashi happened to meet a woman who lived in her old housing complex. The woman, referring to Funabashi’s foster children,
commented, “Wow, in your household you’re raising them properly [chanto sodateru], aren’t you?” Funabashi, who is a soft-spoken woman, made clear her indignation. “It’s as if she _wanted_ to say, ‘Wow, you’re not hitting and kicking your children, are you!’” Referring to Hara’s account, Funabashi said she understood why it might be preferable to present one’s foster children as the children of kin. Indeed, she and her husband had decided not to tell anyone—including the children themselves—that they were not biologically related.

These logics about “bad blood” and a “pathetic” background constitute what Goffman has called a “stigma theory,” an “ideology to explain [a person’s] inferiority and account for the danger he represents” (1963, 5). One who experiences stigma, Goffman writes, “is likely to feel that the usual scheme of interpretation for everyday events has been undermined. His minor accomplishments, he feels, may be assessed as signs of remarkable and noteworthy capacities in the circumstances” (ibid., 14). Despite Funabashi’s children’s supposed dark pasts; despite the strangeness of the act of fostering and the ascription of that strangeness to the foster parents themselves; despite prevalent myths that non-related parents are more likely to abuse children than biologically related parents—she was “properly” raising her boys. The mere ordinariness of her care for the children provoked wonder and surprise.

Having listened to Funabashi’s account, Hara elaborated her own perspective about prejudice (henken). “It’s about the conditions that caused a child to need to go to a welfare institution in the first place, right? You find out about the children’s backgrounds, and they’re not normal situations; that’s why they’re in the institution.” Hara argued that making family relationships better would obviate the need for state care. For her, socioeconomic distress, illness, and broader social constraints—like Japanese laws prohibiting dual custody, which make caring for children difficult for a single parent—seemed to be less significant than poor kinship relationships. The very presence of a child needing state care draws a discriminatory gaze because the child illuminates something dark and flawed within the family that does not accord with contemporary notions of intimacy and affection. In Hara’s account, intimacy itself takes on a normative and transformative power. Hara continued:

As a result, there’s the sense that because it’s _these_ children [from “bad” families], one assumes that the child will do something bad. It’s totally normal to think that, isn’t it? Sorry, but it’s just normal [Mōshiwakenai kedo, futsū de]. . . . The idea of doing a certain thing. . . . Well, for example, the type of family line that ends up with love triangles or something. . . .
the end, you have this sort of situation, and that's why you have these sorts of children. I guess you could call it prejudice, but normally when one thinks about it, I mean you’re not supposed to put it in words, but in the end there it is. Sorry, sorry [gomennasai, gomennasai ne].

Hara ended her statement laughing rather bashfully, after having articulated that which should not properly be confessed: her sense that prejudice and bias toward children from child welfare institutions is entirely normal, rooted in conventional notions of improperly intimate families whose pedigree marks children as problematic. For Hara, these children are understandably stigmatized because they represent a particular “danger” (Goffman 1963, 5), the danger of broken family ties that necessitate state intervention.

SECURITY AND CONFESSION

Concern with a child’s origins is often articulated along with a pathos that both characterizes these children and attaches to the people who would consider taking them as their own. Although these worries are often articulated as a lack of “blood ties,” the meanings behind “blood” center on emotion, specifically the sorrow of loss and abandonment. Despite the fact that foster and adoptive parents believed that care, intimacy, and physical proximity contributed to children and caregivers becoming “family,” this original disconnection and loss—a child’s abandonment by his or her birth parents and a couple’s inability to conceive—contributed toward insecurity regarding the child’s status in the family and the ways the family would be viewed by outsiders.

This pathos haunted the account of an adoptive mother, Hamabata Toshiko, who had not “confessed” to her teenage son that he had been adopted. Hamabata’s narrative elaborates the ways that similarities (in shared habits, behaviors, and blood type) mitigate the perceived otherness of her son, while differences (physical appearance and the traces in bureaucratic records) highlight an otherness that is visibly evident and eventually impossible to conceal. In Hamabata’s quandary, we can better understand the importance for many Japanese families of visually embodying a “normal” household. Material markers of otherness problematize the hope of many foster or adoptive parents that intimate proximity will seamlessly transform difference into sameness (Yngvesson 2010; Goldfarb 2016).

Hamabata told me that it took her and her husband a long time to consider adoption. “It just has a very . . . dark feeling [kurai kanji], doesn’t it? Doesn’t it make you feel a little unpleasant [iwakan]?” she asked with a
slight laugh. “I’ve heard people say that,” I answered. “It’s not the sort of thing you could say easily in public,” Hamabata went on, “but . . . it’s like, ‘pitiable, pathetic’ [karaisō].” When she and her husband finally decided to adopt a small boy from a child welfare institution, she described her surprise at the joy with which the children’s home staff sent him off. Later, I realized her surprise was rooted in her sense that adoption was fundamentally a dark, pathetic practice, connected to the dark past and pathetic experiences of the children in question and the pathos of the adopters like the Hamabatas, whose inability to conceive led them to welcome [mukaeru] unknown children from unknown families.

A common concern of Japanese foster or adoptive parents is that their non-normative family practices would be, in some way, evident to all. I interviewed Hamabata at a cafe in the town where she lived, a decision I quickly regretted. After peeking into two cafes near the train station, both of which were full, we ended up at a coffee shop where, Hamabata told me in a whisper, the mother of one of her son’s schoolmates worked. We conducted our interview in awkward sotto voce, Hamabata pointing to the word “adoption” (yōshi engumi) on my list of interview questions rather than speaking it out loud. While Hamabata engaged in social welfare volunteer work and had a long-term foster care relationship with a young woman who was now living independently, Hamabata had not told her son that he himself had been adopted through the foster care system, and she and her husband kept this fact a secret from non-foster parent friends and neighbors. When the boy first came to their house, they had traveled to a distant hospital to care for him when he got sick, hoping not to run into anyone they knew. After they formally adopted him and changed his name, they switched schools.

With some concern in her voice, Hamabata told me that as her son grows older, he looks more and more dissimilar to her and her husband. But, she said, his mannerisms (kuse) are the same, and his voice on the phone sounds like her husband’s. Hamabata noted that this happens with married couples that start to look alike (niteiru fūfu)—a natural result, she said, of eating the same food and living together. Troubling physical dissimilarities were thus balanced by slightly less tangible similarities, signs of long affiliation. In addition, Hamabata told me, both her son’s and her husband’s blood types are B, while she is an O. Since her husband is B, and it was thus biologically possible for their son to also be a B, it’s all okay (daijyōbu); otherwise, she said, they would certainly have had to confess the truth (kokuchi suru) to their son by now.15

But this secrecy lived on borrowed time. Irrefutable proof of the Hamabatas’ son’s origins lay in his household registry, which documented all the addresses where he had lived during his life: a baby home, a foster
home, another children’s welfare institution, and finally the Hamabata household. He had recently taken his household registry with him to apply for his driver’s license, and when he returned from that errand, he left the registry unfolded on the dining room table. Hamabata knew that he understood the implications of the registry, just as she was aware that he surely remembered something of the time before he came to their household as a five-year-old. (“Do you remember anything from when you were five?” she asked me.) Yet she was sure he could not bring himself to ask her about it, and she could not make herself broach the subject with him. His registry remained open on the family table, the site of eating and care that had made him come to resemble the Hamabatas to begin with, untouchable proof of that which could not be said.16

Although Hamabata articulated her relationship with her son as one of increasing intimacy and similarity as time went by, she could not imagine “confessing” the truth of originary disconnection, a stance that surely contributed to the pathos she ascribed to their situation. While Hamabata was aware that her silence was at odds with contemporary understandings of a child’s “right” to know his or her own background—and while she knew that her son knew the truth, making his status a “public secret” in their household—she was unable to articulate this reality. Another foster parent mused, in an interview, that what makes it so hard to confess a lack of blood ties is the knowledge that the child wants to believe he or she is the parents’ biological child. A failure to confess thus might express a desire to protect the child from presumed deep disappointment.

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Recall the example with which this chapter begins: the “big foster family” in which parent-child relationships emerge and unrelated foster children become siblings over time. Neither biogenetic connections (this foster family contains six unrelated children) nor legal ties (their names are different) are necessary to transform these children and caregivers into family, as long as there exist the bonds of heart or spirit (kokoro no kizuna) (see Schneider 1980). According to this account, although these family members were initially unconnected, through the intimate practices of daily life they became family, and from an outside gaze, they came to look like any large household. They were recognizable as “family” precisely because of the bonds that connected them (Goldfarb 2016).

Many of the public narratives surrounding alternative kinships in Japan hinge on the idea that intimacy bridges differences to constitute family. Indeed, awareness that the intimacy of family living can make a child into the kin of foster or adoptive parents is precisely the reason why
many Japanese child welfare officers hesitate to place children in family-based care in cases when the child’s biological parents are unable to care for the child. Child welfare officers themselves often fear that new intimate ties will replace a child’s tenuous bonds to biological kin, proving problematic if the biological parents ask for the return of custody (Goldfarb 2012; Omori 2016).

While kinship in Japan is often currently framed in terms of the presence or absence of “blood ties,” this chapter has illustrated how blood ties themselves signify much more than a biogenetic relationship. The concept incorporates shifting intimate boundaries, which have transformed historically through demographic transitions, changes in housing styles, and along “modern” notions of love and affection as characterizing kinship. While blood ties are often invoked to speak to the social legibility—or illegibility—of family forms, blood ties themselves powerfully point to current idealizations of intimacy and emotion within families. An insufficient degree of intimacy made my interlocutors concerned that they would not be able to love the child of a stranger. Similarly, the pathos of unknown origins and original disconnection shaped the perception that children from state care—as well as their foster and adoptive caregivers—were “pathetic” or justifiably perceived in a negative light. Intimacy is thus a shifting measure of inclusion and exclusion in contemporary Japan, both delimiting kinship to those who are known, proximate, and lovable, and expanding these boundaries through caregiving and daily household routines that create new kinships where there were none before. Blood ties in contemporary Japan are social constructs through which people attempt to assure themselves of intimate connection, all the while knowing the impossibility of such certainty.

NOTES

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1. Kanto describes the plain that includes Tokyo and surrounding prefectures. The Kansai area includes Osaka, Kyoto, Kobe, and Nara.
2. Included in this forty-five thousand children, around thirteen hundred children were placed in specialized facilities because of disability or the need for medical care.
3. In many cases, babies might be placed in institutional care shortly after birth and live there until age two or three before they are moved to a child welfare institution, placed in foster care or adoption, or reunited with biological family members. Child-development and neuroscience literature have illustrated the potential for developmental harm resulting
from early institutionalization (for instance, Browne 2009; Johnson, Browne, and Hamilton-Giachritsis 2006; Rutter and ERA 1998; Zeanah et al. 2003; for analysis, Goldfarb 2015). The prevalence of infant institutionalization in Japan has drawn criticism from Human Rights Watch (2014), after years of censure from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Japan became a signatory in 1994 (UNCRC 2010), the Japan Federation of Bar Associations (2009), and local Japanese activists. See Goldfarb (2013) for further details.

4. The Japanese government is also facing increased international attention owing to a critical report on Japanese child welfare practices by the Tokyo office of Human Rights Watch (2014).

5. We can understand the ie as a type of extended family, but it is more accurately a corporate group connected to enterprise and religious responsibilities for graves and ancestral spirits.

6. The American abolition of the ie was an effort to curb Japanese imperialism; there were deep ideological connections in Japan among the ie, the Japanese emperor, and Japan’s imperialistic initiatives. However, despite these legal transformations, the family registry system (koseki seido), which was not abolished during postwar Allied reform projects, continues to shape everyday sensibilities about legal family forms and bureaucratic documentation practices, what Kroghness calls “koseki consciousness” (2010).

7. In the case of “regular adoption,” the adoptee is entered into the adoptive parents’ family registry along with a note listing the names of the adoptee’s biological parents. The adoptee maintains rights and responsibilities for the natal family, including the right to inherit.

8. Numbers for this type of adoption have hovered between three hundred and four hundred per year for the past twenty years (Hayes and Habu 2006, 137).

9. The adoption of adults in contemporary Japan also has some connotations that some consider “unsavory”: elderly people might conduct adoptions to decrease the overall amount of inheritance tax applied to an estate (inheritance tax decreases the more inheritors there are) or adopt with the promise of exchanging inheritance for elder care. Extramarital lovers can be adopted; in such a case the portion of inheritance designated for a legally married spouse and children would decrease. One member of a same-sex couple might adopt the other in order to assure inheritance rights (Bryant 1990). Finally, adult adoption maintains a reputation for being pitiable because families without sons to inherit often adopt the husband of a daughter, a process called mukōyōshi, in which the man leaves his natal home, enters the family registry of his spouse, and takes her name. Even though men who are adopted into their wives’ families are generally not candidates as heirs in their families of origin, mukōyōshi is commonly considered undesirable for a man because within the generally patriarchal framework of the Japanese ie, women normatively take the man’s name, not the reverse.

10. All personal names are pseudonyms, listed with family name first.

11. This is a perception that people who were raised in child welfare institutions sometimes keenly feel. One of my interlocutors, who had spent her entire childhood in institutions, once confessed to me that she doubted she would ever be able to get married. She felt that her past in institutional care, in addition to the fact that her younger brother was disabled, made people think that she had “bad blood” and would be an undesirable addition to a family.

12. Consistent with child abuse statistics in North America that show biological parents as the most likely perpetrators of child abuse, Japanese statistics indicate that the most common abuser is a child’s biological mother and then the biological father. However, Funabashi’s account exemplifies the common misperception that a lack of blood relationship indicates a lack of emotional investment and thus an increased likelihood for abuse (Goodman 2002; JaSPCAN 2010).
13. The leading reasons children are taken into state care are abuse, neglect, parental mental illness, and parental refusal to care for the child (MHLW 2017, 59).

14. Hara’s mention of love triangles refers to children being born out of extramarital affairs who would then be placed in state care.

15. When a foster or adoptive parent uses the phrase shinjitsu kokuchi, which literally means the disclosure or notification of truth, one understands this to refer to the “confession” of adoptive or foster relationship specifically to the child in question. The phrase is often shortened to kokuchi, as in, “Have you told [kokuchi shita]?” “No, I haven’t [shitei nai].” Those who hope to destigmatize adoption refer to this process as “telling” (teringu, using Japanese pronunciation for the English word), a term intended to reference discussion rather than a morally loaded sense of confessing something scandalous or unpleasant (Rakugi 2006).

16. To a certain extent, one of my interlocutors told me, debates surrounding the “confession” of adoption in Japan are irrelevant: “Setting aside whether it’s good or bad for anyone else to know, no matter what, if you look carefully at the family registry, you will be able to find out.” The family registry contains different “proof” from the household registry; the former lists all unmarried children who share the family name, and special adoption is marked with reference to the constitutional bill that ratified the process (Hayes and Habu 2006; Krogness 2010).

REFERENCES


Beyond Blood Ties


