

“Merry Isaacs White, *Perfectly Japanese: Making Families in an Era of Upheaval* (University of California Press),” *Monumenta Nipponica* 58(2): 198-200, summer 2003

The cover of Merry White’s new book, *Perfectly Japanese: Making Families in an Era of Upheaval*, features a photograph of a Japanese mother and son. The mother, middle-aged, rather stocky, and yet neatly groomed, stands proudly (if demurely) beside her son (appearing to be in his mid-twenties), who wears faded jeans and a leather jacket and sports a Mohawk haircut and goatee. He affectionately slings his arm around his mother’s shoulders, the other hand resting casually in his front pocket.

As I carried the book around with me on the Tokyo commuter trains, I noticed Japanese passengers peering at the cover with curiosity, intrigue, even consternation. The photograph clearly captured their attention and seemed to be both familiar and yet confounding—transgressing widely held ideas of familiarity and Japaneseness. This is precisely the topic of Merry White’s book: markedly and undeniably shifting family configurations in postwar Japan and the way that these fit uneasily within dominant, state-sponsored demands for the perfect “Confucian” family. The book is about families managing new realities (working women, consumerist values, new freedoms for teenagers, and an aging population) while still holding on to the historical script of the cohesive, disciplined, and nurturing family.

White writes *Perfectly Japanese* in the wake of two decades of apocalyptic pronouncements (on the part of the Japanese government, social commentators, and some social scientists) on the fate of Japan in the twenty-first century. Japan’s declining birth rate, late marriage age (27.7 for women, 30.4 for men [p. 139]), and rapidly aging population have been cause for great alarm, and the phenomenon is often laid at the feet of the family—the procrastination of marriage and women’s “selfish” prioritization of their own personal and professional desires over the project of child-rearing. In response to these condemnations, White examines a century of the linked projects of state-making and family-making, revealing a gap between national ideologies and actual family practices that has continued through each succeeding period. By heeding the feminist call to distinguish “family” (an historically and socially constructed idea) from “household,” a group of individuals pooling resources through production, reproduction, and consumption, White reveals the ideological nature of the family construct and the labor and resourcefulness entailed in maintaining it. In the last section of the book (“Consuming as Survival”), she cleverly subverts the conceptual distinction between familial “labors of love” and anonymous commercial services made available through the marketplace, by showing how convenience stores (offering everything from underwear to floral-ordering services), vending machines, and coffee shops (“home away from home”) are absolutely vital to the functioning of the loving, “family-oriented” home.

The book begins with the Meiji state’s first attempt to standardize the concept of family in the attempt to instill (and administer) a unified national culture. The family prescribed by the Meiji government was hierarchical and patriarchal, privileging the vertical relations between parent and child and viewing the home as a productive enterprise as much as an emotionally-bounded unit. Illustrating this ideal is the story of an Osaka

merchant family (whose story White re-constructs from a family tree and interviews with the family's descendants) in the latter part of the 19th century. In 1879, Ichirô Murayama, the eldest son, inherited the family business from his father. Discipline in the family was strict, and family life extended well beyond the bounds of the nuclear family to include the business, a fleet of servants, and the various branch families that had split off from the main family line. Ichiro's wife played a subordinate role to her mother-in-law, who criticized the young woman for allowing her daughter to finish high school.

As a contrast with the Murayamas, we meet the Fujimuras, a household of three, whose parents, Aya and Gorô belong to the second postwar generation, born in the 1970s. Between the eras of the Murayamas and the Fujimuras, of course, a series of important historical changes has occurred: Japan's rise to world power, its defeat in World War II, and the American imposition of a new body of laws prescribing marriage rooted in equality, reciprocity, and choice. Aya, a computer programmer, and Gorô, a cartoonist, share housework and childrearing, and Gorô has made arrangements with his employer to work at home so that he can participate more in family life, including picking up his daughter at daycare everyday.

The portraits of the two families are in some sense symbolic, meant not as examples of "typical" families but rather as "bookends" evoking postwar social change and the new possibilities in family life. In the chapters that follow, White shows how contemporary families juggle historically-rooted ideals with contemporary demands, often inventing "self-created systems" in order to meet these disparate demands (p. 41). Families continue to be "guided by the demands of modern institutions," in particular the company, the school, and the state (p. 73). In the central section of the book, White discusses child-rearing, negotiated divisions of labor, and care for the elderly among contemporary families, and the manifold tensions and contradictions that arise in official versions of the happy family. The picture that emerges is a familiar one: husbands are wedded to the company, which explicitly expects wives to manage all aspects of the home in order to maximize male productivity. It is women who still perform the vast majority of household labor (according to one statistic White cites, fewer than 40% of Japanese men have ever changed a diaper or put a child to bed). Child-rearing continues to be at the center of family life. Children, once considered heirs and sources of labor, continue to be cherished, but now as objects of long-term investment and instruments of upward mobility. The "vertical" construction of the family remains. Furthermore, the belief that a good child is "made" not "born" (p. 134) incites women to ever more prodigious efforts to insure their children's success, including the tradition of *taikyô*, or "in utero learning," such as the currently available English-learning system in which a pregnant woman straps a sound device to her belly (p. 134).

In the context of these chapters we learn the way in which women stretch the limits of the prescribed family in order to pursue their own work or fulfillment outside the family domain: the *tenuki* ("no hands") *okusan*, who owns an American, Sears-style refrigerator and freezes an entire week's worth of meals; the "yenjoy" girls (often referred to as "parasite singles") who delay marriage, live at home, and spend their disposable income on socializing and consumer goods; the complex childcare arrangements women make in

order to be able to work overtime; and the increasingly common decision to only have one child.

Some may be tempted to read this book as evidence that the perfect Japanese family never existed, or that it is rapidly fragmenting—an inevitable result of the demands of globalization and post-industrialization. But the book offers a more complicated message. Indeed the continuities are equally as striking as the shifts and improvisations White describes in family life: child-rearing still comes as a central priority for women, an “identity-conferring” experience; children (not couples) continue to be at the center of family life; and children are still largely raised in the context of family environments, with remarkably few births taking place out of wedlock. White’s data suggests that the increasingly common decision to have only one child reflects a continuing recognition of the importance of child-rearing (the desire for fewer but “better” children) rather than a disavowal of these priorities. There is remarkably little evidence of women’s anger towards the state or the contradictory expectations placed upon them.

The gift of White’s book is that she avoids the modernization-style narrative—still lurking in the shadows of some Japan studies—which implies that Japan is perpetually on the verge of “Americanizing,” as evidenced by its rebellious teenagers, working women, and emerging criticism of the managed economy. Instead, White shows how families continue to struggle with, and at times uphold, old-fashioned narratives of family cohesion and motherly nurturance, even as they cut corners, improvise, and re-shape the ideal family in order to make their lives livable. She suggests the demographic crisis will be managed through shifts and continuities, but not a complete turn-around from all that has come before.

White might have addressed more explicitly some of the political tensions underlying Japan’s changing demography and family structure: Is the cost of supporting a rapidly aging population being distributed unequally? How long can women go on doing the impossible (caring for both the young and the old while working and doing virtually all household management)—and do they themselves perceive the current system as an injustice? How will increased demand for commercial services to cope with family needs polarize the social classes? Has there been agitation for change? Still, precisely because White focuses more on accommodation of social demands than on protest against them, her analysis offers an important counter-weight to both the dire forecasts usually brought to bear on the problem of Japan’s demographic transformations and the unrealistic predictions of revolutionary change.

Perfectly Japanese should be of great interest to researchers interested in the modern family, the management of the family by the state, and postwar social change in Japan. In addition, because it historicizes the ideal of the contemporary family and is grounded in rich ethnographic data (as well as statistical overviews of postwar trends in marriage, divorce, birth control, etc.), the book can also be an ideal undergraduate teaching tool.

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