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THE SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF ADULT MORTALITY IN  
PEASANT HOUSEHOLDS IN PREINDUSTRIAL JAPAN

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The force of adult mortality is great, but its consequences for children are different depending on the sex and age of the adult who dies. This paper explores the effect of adult mortality in peasant households, using as the source of data population registers covering a village in central Japan from 1671 to 1871. Heads of households and their spouses are selected as the population to be examined. The research finds that adult male mortality has a large and variable effect; adult female mortality a small and constant one.

The difference between the consequences of adult male and adult female mortality arises from the structure of decisions about marriage, succession, and inheritance in a stem family household system. A child's future is greatly affected by the death of his father, especially when his father dies between the ages of 40 and 59. When this happens the

assets of the child's household are likely to disappear and its members to be dispersed. Hence the child is precluded from following the expected avenues of entry into adult status through marriage and succession to household headship.

When the father is under 40 or 60 or older when he dies the effect is not so great. The former results in some diminution of status. The child's mother is unlikely to remarry in the same household; his deceased father will be replaced in the line of succession by a sibling; and though the child will remain in the household he or she will become a marginal member of it. In the latter case the death of a father is of little consequence, for by that time the child's future household and career status has already been determined.

The death of a child's mother, by contrast, has little effect on his or her future career, and this effect is independent of the age at which she dies. A mother in the childbearing years will be replaced by another woman of similar age, without affecting the child's prospects for succession. The roles of an older mother may be taken over by an adult daughter until the entry of a bride, without affecting either her or her siblings' marriage opportunities.

The analysis also examines the effect of the death of persons marginal to the household, those not household heads or their predecessors or successors. Deaths of such individuals actually improve inheriting children's chances, for they serve to rationalize household structure by removing those extraneous persons whose presence hinders opportunities for marriage.

Hence, in the stem family household system in preindustrial Japan, adult mortality may rearrange succession patterns and may diminish children's chances in life without actually creating orphans per se.

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