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# Young adults' pathways into homeownership in Tokyo: Shifting practices and meanings

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**Abstract**

This paper examines homeownership pathways of young adults in Tokyo, Japan, making use of an original data set of qualitative interviews. By analyzing the narratives of young adults, the article argues that in contemporary Tokyo homeownership pathways are diversifying, due to changing gender roles within households, intergenerational responsibilities and an increasingly questionable potential of homeownership to result in asset accumulation. Thus, while still following housing pathways that result in homeownership, young people are both adapting to the conditions of a *practically* failing but *politically* and *ideologically* resilient homeownership system and challenging its boundaries.

**Keywords**

Homeownership, housing pathways, young people, Tokyo

**Introduction**

The project of single-family mortgaged homeownership in Japan crystalized in the 1950s, and the ideology accompanying it held tremendous power until the mid-1990s (Forrest and Hirayama, 2015; Hirayama and Ronald, 2007). The bursting of the economic bubble marked the beginning of a period of destabilization of the post-war social system, in which life-long employment, male breadwinner family units and a housing ladder

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culminating in ownership of a single-family detached home, framed mainstream adult life courses (Forrest and Hirayama, 2009; Honma, 1980; Izuhara, 2015). Indeed, in recent years, the hegemony of the post-war homeownership system seems to be increasingly challenged in practice. Surveys of young adults' housing preferences trace the declining aspirations toward homeownership among generations that grew up and came of age in an era of stagnating house prices and depreciating land prices (MLTT, 2012). The decline in stated preferences arguably lies with the decreasing accessibility of homeownership for potential homebuyers (Hirayama, 2013). But it is also a sign that homeownership as it was produced under the post-war system, no longer answers the aspirations of contemporary Japanese young adults.

Research focusing on young people's housing trajectories in Japan remained geared toward the decreasing opportunities to pursue the single-family mortgaged homeownership pathway (Forrest and Hirayama, 2009; Hirayama, 2013, 2014). Additionally, increasing attention has been given to alternative housing pathways (such as remaining in the parental home or single renting) (Ronald, 2009). Less attention has been given to how paths into homeownership are diversifying (see Kubo and Yui, 2011) and how the meanings of the tenure are changing. However, more than two decades after the bursting of the bubble economy, evidence suggests that contemporary young adults are *practicing* homeownership in different ways compared to their predecessors. Also, the meanings of the tenure are ostensibly shifting for a generation that primarily experienced the post-bubble period of economic stagnation and accelerated demographic aging.

The questions we address in this article then are how do young adults and their families practice and (re)produce homeownership in the social and material context of contemporary Japan, and what are the meanings of homeownership for contemporary young adults? In order to address these questions, the article draws on the narratives of a group (28 households) of young adults (aged 25–39) living in Tokyo. It considers homeownership pathways in Japan's most dynamic housing market among post-bubble young adults and the implications of changing everyday practices for Japan's housing and social systems.

The article details three pathways into homeownership: that of couples on the verge of parenthood, that of family successors,<sup>1</sup> and finally that of young single homeowners. We argue that homeownership pathways are bound with the efforts of individuals, couples, and young families to carve out meaningful spaces of home in specific housing markets in relation to individual aspirations and kinship roles. Hence, for each of the pathways, we propose to investigate homemaking practices, investment strategies, and intergenerational relations. Since homeownership has historically been the 'superior tenure' in the Japanese housing system (Hirayama, 2007), owner-occupied homes typically offer young people better life quality (Daniels, 2010), the space to build a family or the ability to display one's individuality. However, shifting gender roles within households, accompanying a greater participation of women in the labor force since the 1990s, are slowly changing homemaking practices. Furthermore, the conditions in which homeownership clearly translates into asset accumulation are narrowing, undermining the role of homeownership (and in the case of Japan land ownership in particular) as a store of wealth. This means young adults today either enter homeownership with little expectation of wealth accumulation or make strategic decisions that take advantage of temporally and spatially bound market hot spots. For some, homeownership is specifically tied to duties, responsibilities, and rights of family succession. For these, the investment merits of homeownership are often irrelevant. However, negotiating home space for a young couple/family within the confines of extended family relations both challenges relationships between generations and shapes housing

choices. For example, young successors may choose to rent for longer periods of time in expectation of moving in with parents at a later time.

The article aims to contribute firstly to understandings of Japanese society and the changing meanings of housing and tenure in this mature homeowner society. By focusing on the everyday practices of becoming and being a young homeowner in Tokyo, the paper will identify the ways in which young adults adapt to, and challenge the tenets of the ideologically resilient, post-war housing system. Furthermore, while examining a Japanese case, we reflect more generally on the challenges of mature homeowner societies, in which the reproduction of the tenure has come increasingly under strain. Theoretically, and as a secondary contribution, the article will argue for refocusing the concept of housing pathways (Clapham, 2002, 2005; Clapham et al., 2014) from an emphasis on discourse and individual identity projects, to embodied practices.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we make the case for re-conceptualizing housing pathways with a focus on embodied practice. We then introduce the socio-material context of Japan's housing system and Tokyo's housing market that frame young adults' pathways into homeownership, after which we clarify our empirical ambitions and introduce the study design and methodological choices. Our analysis of the findings establishes each of the three pathways into homeownership and discusses how homeownership practices develop in relation to homemaking, investment strategies, and intergenerational relations. Finally, our discussion reflects on the implications of these findings for understanding access into and through homeownership in contemporary Japan, but also for envisioning the future of Japan's homeownership project. The paper further reflects on some of the implications that the study of homeownership in Japan may have for other homeownership oriented systems.

## **Housing pathways in practice**

In this article, the concept of 'housing pathways' will be used to describe the trajectories young adults follow (Clapham et al., 2014). Clapham (2005) coined the term and defined housing pathways as 'patterns of interaction (practices) regarding house and home over time and space' (p. 27). Although there are many different ways of conceptualizing housing trajectories, the pathways concept best captures the realities analyzed here due to its focus on diversification and non-linearity of housing trajectories as well as its emphasis on the practical consciousness of the individual under conditions of late modernity (Clapham, 2005).

Reflecting its intellectual roots in social constructivism (Giddens, 1984; Jacobs et al., 2004), the pathways concept puts discourse and meaning center stage. Thus, discourses prevalent in a given society are internalized and practiced in reflexive processes of meaning and identity making through the home. However, the conceptual focus on language that defines zones of meaning has obscured the embodied aspects of housing pathways (Clapham, 2011). To bring the material back into housing pathways, we argue that pathways are best understood as successive and relational acts of dwelling (McFarlane, 2011) in a given environment. Without denying the reflexivity of decisions about where and how to live, we contend that the scope of decision-making is bounded by locally specific and interrelated conditions. By focusing on practice and performance as well as discourse and meaning, we can conceptualize housing pathways as socio-material phenomena (Jacobs and Smith, 2008; McFarlane, 2011). The dual meaning of dwelling, both the object (home) that frames daily living and the action of living in a specific materially bound urban environment, captures the nature of housing trajectories as skillful, embodied processes.

Hence, buying a house (or not buying a house) is not necessarily subsumed to a project of the self, underscored by discourses proclaiming the desirability of homeownership. Instead, it is practically negotiated in the urban housing environment in which the plans of municipalities, the workings of housing markets, mortgage practices, the nature of the housing stock, ideals of home life, and intergenerational responsibilities assemble (Jacobs and Smith, 2008; Miller, 2005). Thus, to understand housing pathways one must define the environment made up of historically dependent policies and planning practices, mortgage practices, building and design practices, but also minute practices of homemaking. The following section will attempt to sketch the history that produced Japan's contemporary housing stock and the social and material conditions of Tokyo's housing market in which the young adults participating in this study operated. The findings section will then hone in particularly on homemaking, investment, and intergenerational practices that frame pathways.

## **Socio-material conditions of young adult housing pathways in Japan and Tokyo**

### *The homes of Japan's post-war housing system*

In post-war Japan, housing represented an ideal means by which to pursue both symbolic and material modernization. It constituted a motor driving economic growth as well as a way of giving form to new residential lifestyle ideals (Hirayama and Ronald, 2007). Homeownership was actively promoted through state institutions starting from the 1950s since it promised to create a mainstream, owner-occupier, self-reliant social class. The system effectively incorporated Japan's baby boomer generation along a trajectory structured by a housing ladder that started with company rental accommodation in early life and quickly progressed to the ideal *ikkodate jutaku* (detached house) owned and occupied by a male breadwinner nuclear family.

While the relationship between tenure and form is often obscured in most countries, in Japan owner-occupied houses are significantly different from rented homes across the board. Building companies show remarkable openness toward innovation when providing homes for sale (Ronald, 2011). These homes are made of sturdier materials, have better insulation and more diverse amenities. Floor plans, particularly for custom-built houses and apartment buildings, are adapted to the needs of future inhabitants (Ozaki and Lewis, 2006). Meanwhile, rented accommodations are more likely to be iterations of standardized floor plans, constructed from lightweight factory built subassemblies. These homes offer affordable, yet poor quality accommodation, and the sector has been targeted at young, unmarried adults.

That being said, Japanese homes, both rented and owned continue to be treated as non-durable goods. The land a house sits on is considered significantly more valuable than the house that stands on it, and houses lose their marketable value almost entirely over a period of 40–45 years (Ronald and Hirayama, 2006). Condominiums, also, begin losing value the moment they start being used. Although the market for condominiums is large, particularly in urban areas, the market for used condominiums is less than 20% of the total (Kubo, 2013; Ronald and Hirayama, 2006). In recent years, with the expansion of the condominium stock built of durable steel and concrete frames, renovation (*rifōmu*) has become more common (Barlow and Ozaki, 2005; Yashiro, 2014). However, the public taste for newly built homes has not abated.

### *Social change and entering homeownership in contemporary Japan*

There are two main practical means by which young households become homeowners in contemporary Japan. The first is by building a house on land purchased separately or as part of a subdivision. The second way is by purchasing an already built house or condominium (*manshon*), preferably newly built. Usually, the construction of a house is conducted through a local branch of a large national construction conglomerate, and all elements of the house are decided with an architect before construction begins (Barlow and Ozaki, 2005; Daniels, 2010). In this sense, some homebuyers in Japan directly contribute to making their home.

Mortgaged homeownership is the primary financial mechanism for accessing homeownership. In the post-war period, the Government Housing Loan Corporation was the main issuer of mortgage loans (Hirayama, 2007). However, since its restructuring in 2007, the primary mortgage market has become more dependent on the private lending sector. Within couple and family households, both mortgage and property rights usually rest with the male partner (Hirayama and Izuhara, 2008; Tiwari et al., 2007). Dual ownership of debts and assets is, however, slowly becoming more common (Izuhara, 2015). The gender bias in mortgage practices customarily made it difficult for single women to purchase homes, as opposed to their male counterparts (Hirayama and Izuhara, 2008; Ronald and Nakano, 2013). Yet, these constraints have also been relaxed more recently since single employed women have emerged as a salient market target group (Kubo and Yui, 2013).

The bursting of the economic bubble and the subsequent implementation of neoliberal policies after 1990 impacted diverse aspects of young adult life-course transitions, prompting debates about a 'lost generation' (Brinton, 2010). The casualization of labor facilitated longer stays in the labor market among women (albeit in typically routine, insecure jobs), while decreasing the confidence of potential male breadwinners (Blind and Mandach, 2015). Marriage age increased, and young people spend longer living alone before forming partnerships or families. Some expect to never marry and either carve solo housing pathways or remain living with parents long into their adult life (Hirayama, 2013). Within couples, relationships between partners are also slowly changing, as women have adopted different roles in society and the household (Izuhara, 2015).

Unstable employment and more precarious couple and family formation means young adults are less likely to embark on a typical mortgaged homeownership pathway. Relying on two incomes to buy a home or waiting on parental inheritance (sometimes in vivo) have become common strategies among young couples and starter families (Hirayama, 2013). Furthermore, evidence suggests that more 'traditional' stem family-based modes of (re)producing homeownership have proven resilient (Ochiai, 2004), despite decades of nuclear family promotion. Given the pressures of an aging society and decreasing market opportunities, this form of homeownership, usually tied to intergenerational family duties and obligations, is arguably becoming more important (Hirayama, 2015). These shifts are reflected in homeownership rates. While in the 1980s, over half of those aged between 30 and 39 would be homeowners, less than 40% of the same age group would be homeowners in 2008 (MLTT, 2012).

### *Tokyo's dwelling stock and housing market*

Tokyo represents a highly specific housing market context that makes the experiences of young adults navigating it less representative for Japan as a whole. At the same time, given the emphasis of government policies on making Tokyo the flagship city of Japan (Waley, 2013), the city is a highly relevant context at the forefront of social change. The three

prefectures constituting Tokyo's metropolitan area are also a major hub for young adults, home to 29% of Japan's under-40 population.

The development of Tokyo's dwelling stock in the post-war period was tied to the intense suburbanization process that accompanied the era of economic expansion of the 1960s and 1970s (Kubo, 2013). As land prices in central locations skyrocketed, tracts of single-family housing, connected to the central city by train, were built further out into rural areas surrounding Tokyo. The burst of the economic bubble at the beginning of the 1990s marked a turning point. Due to plummeting land values, and legislation that introduced new building standards in central city locations (Fujita, 2009; Sorensen and Okata, 2010), a condominium (*manshon*) boom ensued. Between 1988 and 2013, the percentage of high-rise condominiums increased from 13% to 29% of all Tokyo metropolitan prefecture housing. Overall, 70% of Tokyo housing stock consisted of apartment units in 2013, with approximately 51% of these in private rental and 30% owner-occupied condominiums (Housing and Land Survey, 2013).

Smaller and, overall, cheaper apartments in central locations were better suited for the smaller budgets but also individualizing aspirations of the post-bubble generations (Ronald and Hirayama, 2009). Availability of new housing spurred a 'return to the city movement' particularly among young singles and couples without children who wanted to take advantage of popular new residential developments and shorter commutes (Lützel, 2008). Local government efforts went into attracting younger families into affordable waterfront areas where larger condominiums were constructed (Lützel, 2008). Meanwhile, the post-war expansive suburbs entered a period of decline, with demographic aging accounting for increased vacancies, but also weakening housing market demand. For these reasons, Tokyo and its metropolitan area can be considered a housing market of hot and cold spots (Hirayama, 2005), with flaring areas of real estate development intermingled with areas of decline. Despite current buoyancy in the market, and even expected house price increases ahead of the 2020 Olympic Games, long-term predictions suggest that population decline will ensue in Tokyo as early as 2020, reducing overall demand for housing in a market that continuously oversupplies units.

The developments described above were conducive to an increase in homeownership among young adults in the last 15 years, despite a sustained decrease in Japan as a whole. For young adults under 25 years old, homeownership increased from 1.8% in 1998 to 4.2% in 2013. For those between 25 and 34, it increased from 11% to 14.2% over the same period (Housing and Land Survey, 2013). Extremely low-interest rates on mortgage loans have further facilitated access to homeownership (variable interest rates on 35-year mortgages fell below 1% in the period when this research was conducted). Nevertheless, the attractiveness of mortgaged homeownership has increasingly become tied to the rise of particularly popular neighborhoods slotted for development. One example is the area around the Tokyo Bay, which is being developed in relationship to the 2020 Olympic Games. Potential homeowners in general, however, are aware that while still potentially offering a place to feel 'at home' (Daniels, 2015) homeownership does not offer the opportunity for asset accumulation it once did. As population decline ensues being able to sell a house at all becomes a paramount preoccupation of young homeowners.

## Study design

This study explored young adult's housing trajectories as they developed at the intersection of personal aspirations, market conditions, and relationships with kin. The fieldwork was conducted in Tokyo and its metropolitan area (including suburban and more rural locations

as well as central city locations). It consisted of semi-structured qualitative interviews with young adults aged 25–39 as well as with family members important to their current housing situation. The age group meant to capture a period in the life course of young adults when they were likely to achieve homeownership. This paper relies primarily on the interviews conducted with young adults, although, since some homeownership pathways are contingent on larger family considerations, interviews with parents and relatives informed the findings.

The study used a convenience sample aiming to achieve variation in household composition, tenure, and economic status. We approached young households through personal networks developed during the research period. Snowballing was generally avoided. Instead, through the use of the extensive networks of the researchers and assistants, we aimed to maximize points of entry and interview young adults from different backgrounds and at different stages in their housing pathways. Overall, the sample was balanced between young adults in more precarious employment and those with more stable employment and incomes. All young adults interviewed were college or university educated. Fifteen households had achieved homeownership, 12 were private renters (with various plans for homeownership), and one household co-resided with parents in a house that they were going to take over in the following year. In terms of household composition, we interviewed 11 one-person households, four couples without children, and 13 couples with children of various ages. We interviewed all the adult members of a household whenever possible. Following the interview, young households were asked to refer important family members for follow-up interviews. Twenty-eight younger households and eight related households participated in the study. In total, 50 persons were interviewed.

Interviews lasted on average one hour and were conducted, whenever possible, in the home of the respondent(s). They inquired into the current housing situation of the household, their residential pathway to that point, housing choices and motivations, and the relationships with parents and kin that underscored housing pathways. An important part of the interview was dedicated to discussing the physical arrangement of the home and everyday life starting from a drawing of the *'madori'* (house plan). A complete housing history was recorded for each household to highlight the relationships between life-course events and housing careers (Heath and Calvert, 2013; Izuhara and Forrest, 2013). Interview transcripts in the original language were coded and analyzed using a pre-determined content analysis framework (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Interviews were summarized in a matrix based on core themes, with interview notes, drawings, and additional visual materials facilitating interpretation. For the purpose of this article, all interviews were anonymized.

### **Young adults' housing pathways: Adapting to and challenging the homeownership oriented system**

The pathways that lead to homeownership among the young adults interviewed illuminate both the path-dependent limitations that a homeownership oriented system imposes on young adults and the ways in which young adults reshape the tenure in practice. The following analysis considers three main pathways that lead to homeownership: entering homeownership following marriage but prior to having children (9 households in sample), entering homeownership in connection to assuming roles of family succession (5 already homeowners, 3 with plans for homeownership), and entering homeownership while still single (2 already homeowners, 9 renters with/without plans for homeownership).

### *Homeownership as prelude to parenting*

Among our interviewees, young couples with relatively stable employment that intended to form families, typically pursued homeownership as the ‘proper thing to do’, following from a decision to get married and have children. Young couples on the brink of family formation sought mortgaged homeownership as a means of improving the quality of their home ahead of having a child. Thus, while some young adults had bought a house when they were still a childless couple, many thought having children was the life-course event that warranted the better quality home offered by homeownership.

Young families preferred owner-occupied homes to rental units due to their physical and material qualities, such as quality of build, amenities, and layout, or the possibilities of customization. In this sense, the bias toward homeownership as the tenure of choice, but more importantly the better quality housing offered by the tenure, informed the choices young adults made about their homes. In choosing homeownership, young people acknowledged that this tenure allowed them to embark on a homemaking project that would not be possible in a rented accommodation. Still, the narratives attest to shifting practices of homemaking in which both a social family life and the possibility of expressing one’s individuality in the home were valued (Daniels, 2015).

These *manshon* were very popular because they have this open kitchen in the middle of the house, so even if my husband is in the bedroom, and my son in the living room I can still talk and keep an eye on both of them while cooking, for example. Nakano (female, 36, not securely employed)

We had the house built. [. . .]. For this living room, for example, we wanted to have two ‘places to be’ (*ibasho*). Because it is a small living space we put the kitchen in the middle with the dining table in front of it, and then on both sides two places to sit. One is a sofa place. The other one is kind of this traditional Japanese raised floor tatami space. This way if my husband has friends over he can drink on one side and I can spend time with my son watching TV on the other. We wanted to make a home where no one would have to make an effort to accommodate the others (*‘muri no shinai ie’*). Matsui (female, 39, husband securely employed)

It is not surprising that women, in particular, voiced these concerns with balancing individuality and sociality since home as a place in which the family can be comfortable (*koko-chiyoi*) and cared for continues to be an important preoccupation for them (Daniels, 2015). At the same time, it is women’s individuality that has been historically denied within the confines of the male breadwinner family model (Vogel and Vogel, 2013).

From a financial point of view, homeownership meant a greater financial outlay for these couples. Whereas their post-war and pre-bubble predecessors (Ronald, 2008b) likely relied on one income following marriage, two, or at least one and a half, incomes were usually necessary for these young couples to enter homeownership in Tokyo (see also Hirayama, 2012). Confirming previous research, women’s participation to the household budgets was usually disregarded both in the acquisition of the house and the mortgage, despite being instrumental in sustaining mortgage payments (Hirayama and Izuhara, 2008; Izuhara, 2015). For most of the young couples we interviewed, husbands held title to the property and were the holders of the mortgage. However, signs of change were also evident in the pursuit of ‘*pea rōn*’ (pair loans)<sup>2</sup> by some couples who also shared the title to property they were purchasing. Financial support from parents, in the form of deposit money, at times, also facilitated entry to homeownership. However, little obligation was attached to these intergenerational transfers.

Opting for mortgaged homeownership was acknowledged to have financial risks. Although occasionally interviewees would slip into clichés, such as ‘buying houses is what Japanese people do,’ many seemed to have given significant thought to the decision of buying and not simply followed established routes. More than just maintaining, or increasing, the value of their property over the long haul, young families bought homes they expected to be able to sell in order to facilitate anticipated future moves. Buying land or homes in popular areas, near stations, or in particularly popular developments gave young people a modicum of peace of mind in this regard.

A basic condition was that we would build something that would not lose value in the short run. We are not planning to live here for a very long time so if you consider moving, it was important that it be a house that can be sold. So as a condition, of course, being in a part of Tokyo that is popular, being close to a train station. And after that, if you plan on selling before too long you cannot make it a too expensive house because you limit the number of people that can buy it, instead we really aimed to build a house that even a run-of-the-mill salaryman can think of buying. Suzuki (male, 38, securely employed)

For some young adults homeownership as an investment, pursued consciously by tracking and targeting market hotspots, blended with the needs of their newly formed families. Normative elements (Gurney, 1999; Smith, 2008) that associate homeownership with saving, and renting with wasting money were clearly expressed by these young adults, confirming that homeownership still maintains its ideological pull (Ronald, 2008b), especially among those over 30 (Furuichi, 2014). However, in practice, the value of homeownership as investment was acknowledged only under certain conditions – for example in areas where the ‘micro-climate’ of the market has been rigged by government intervention, such as the designated areas of investment for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. Furthermore, long-term investment practices seemed to give way to short-term ones, in which subsequent moves were already anticipated at the moment of entry into homeownership.

Well, it’s the kind of house where my children can be free until they are 3 or 4, and then [before the children go to school] when we want to move to a bigger place it’s good to have this house as a base amount of money needed to move. Of course, we could just rent [...] but then instead of saving properly the money would be wasted on rent. [...] We really thought a lot, and asked a lot of people, to buy an apartment that does not depreciate in a short time and can be sold for about the same or even a bit more than we bought. Unless there is a big earthquake of course; but bar that, with the Olympics happening in this area in 2020, it’s enough of a short time span that I am fairly certain we can sell for about the same price that we bought. Tanaka (male, 30, securely employed)

Homeownership was pursued for practical or emotional reasons even when financial loss was acknowledged in the long run. Proximity to helping grandparents (grandmothers), for example, was considered a requirement by many young couples with children, particularly when both parents were working. Indeed, the difficulties of finding nursery places, a phenomenon common in other urban contexts (Boterman and Karsten, 2014) but relatively new in Tokyo, was a primary concern for young Tokyo parents, constraining and guiding housing choices.

There were three conditions for choosing to build this house: to be in a place where, if we want to sell we can (*financial reason*); then to be close to the station (*financial and practical reason*),

and to be close to my mother (*practical and emotional reason*). Matsui (female, 39, husband securely employed)

What these narratives and the practices they describe point to are subtle changes in the way that even the most conforming of homeownership pathways, those of nuclear families, is shifting under the contemporary conditions of Tokyo's housing market. Higher labor participation of women, increased risks when entering the housing market, and changing ideals of home life are primary drivers of these shifts. Meanwhile, on the surface, it appears that the dominance of the homeownership model is hardly challenged, as young adults use the same material elements, houses and homes, financial debt and potential assets, and adapt them to changing needs and conditions.

### *Homeownership for family successors*

The second pathway examined is that of family successors, either eldest sons or simply the child who assumed intergenerational care responsibilities and would inherit the parental house and land. The interview data suggest that these young adults needed to rely less on mortgaged homeownership, as substantial financial and material support was available to them through the stem family. Mortgaged homeownership is an invention of the 20th century. However, homeownership through house building on family land has much older roots in Japan. Despite strong connections between home and family, i.e. in a historical perspective (Izuhara, 2002; Koyano, 1996), the power of the stem family system has been assumed to have waned following decades of nuclear families proliferation. Recent studies, however, have challenged the nuclearization thesis (Kato, 2013), and intergenerational transfers through the family line have been shown to hold an important place in determining the housing trajectories of young adults (Hirayama, 2015).

The narratives of the young adults who participated in this study point to both continuity and change in the ways homeownership through family channels is (re)produced. On the one hand, family succession (*atotsugi*) through the designation of one child to take over family home(s) and land seems to continue to be a common practice, especially in the case of families with strong local roots. The following story of a younger son called back to 'care for the family graves' is perhaps one of the more 'traditional' ways in which homeownership through the family continues to be produced.

About 6 or 7 years ago my father contacted me to say that my elder brother was moving away and wouldn't I consider moving back to take care of the family graves. [*The young couple was living in central Tokyo at the time, while the husband's family lived in a more rural location on the outskirts of the Tokyo metropolitan area*] You know how it is with these country families, in Japan it is really important to have someone to look after the family grave. So I talked to my wife, and more consulted, more coaxed her into moving here. [...] The house was part of the deal. That is if I came back my father had to build us a house. Noguchi (male, 36, securely employed)

In this case, as the eldest son refused the responsibilities of the family line, the youngest son took over. However, what makes the reproduction of homeownership the stem family challenging are the difficulties in managing gender roles within the confines of close intergenerational arrangements. Intergenerational proximity was experienced as a burden, particularly by the wife (daughter-in-law), and expressed as a lack of privacy in one's own home and a need for distance for the young household. Also, the in-laws' denial of childcare and

expectation that the daughter-in-law gives up her work to care for her children full time further exacerbated intergenerational tension in the home.

Well, living close to parents [...]there was a lot of opposition [from my wife]... when coming here... so I guess some amount of distance is necessary [...] it's really best to have some distance... it's not necessarily a pressure living close to my parents... but I think there are times when she feels watched. For me, it's alright to be next to my parents, but for her, I am not so sure. I keep looking back at that decision to move here, and still cannot say whether it was right or not. Noguchi (male/husband, 36, securely employed)

I work part-time and could really use some help from my mother-in-law, but she always takes care of the children of my sister-in-law and complains when I ask for help. She talks behind my back... that I should care for the children more, and not go out to work. Noguchi (female/wife, 36, not securely employed)

Other practices for continuing family lines were more in tune with the young adults' need for distance while maintaining the intergenerational bond of property (Ronald, 2008a). Using longitudinal data over several decades, Kato (2013) identified a trend among post-war generations (the parents of today's young adults) of people moving closer to parents the longer they were married. Consistent with this trend though uncommon among our interviewees, we observed three-generational practices of leaving the parental (middle generation) owned home to newlywed adult children (young generation) and purchasing a different home closer to elderly parents (old generation). The home and land were either left together, with the understanding that the young family would use the home until it no longer suited them. Or the home was torn down and a new one built, in which case the cost of rebuilding fell on the younger generation.

The refusal of daughters-in-law to care for their parents-in-law (see Long et al., 2009; Tsutsui et al, 2014), at times, combined with the tendency of unmarried daughters to stay longer in their parental home. This brought about yet other changes in intergenerational practices since by virtue of time passing daughters assumed caring duties and by association took over family property. Even when (if) they later married, these women were more likely to continue living with their families, in the parental home, or in a new home built nearby on family land, as family successors. This points to shifting generational contracts (Izuhara, 2002), despite 'tradition' or the continued emphasis on familial responsibilities in political discourse (Ochiai, 2014).

This house belonged to my grandmother. When I got married we moved here with my husband and young children. My grandmother was still living, at that time, and needed care, so my mother moved in with us for a while. It was tough. This is when I realized that the fridge was the soul of a household. We decided to have two fridges in the kitchen, in the end, to separate the households. [...] Finally, it came to the point that it did not work any longer, the children were getting older and needed more space, so we built that house across the courtyard for ourselves. The ground floor is our house. The top floor is 3 rental apartments.[...] Now that my grandmother died, this house is my responsibility. [...] My parents' house is also in this neighbourhood. My sister and her family live with them and will inherit the whole house, in time. Souma (female, 45, securely employed)

The need for distance and space to coagulate a new family unit meant some young adults, who expected to assume family duties and the property that came with them, pursued longer careers as private renters. Rental homes facilitated the process for two young individuals

who lived independently for a long time to learn to be a couple. In a context in which cohabitation is not yet an accepted way for young people to form partnerships (Raymo et al., 2009), marriage tends to happen before young adults have had a chance to live together. The abrupt loss of independence was daunting particularly for young women, especially when the impending demands of family succession meant both work and home independence were lost at the same time. Sometimes the need to express individuality took form in temporary homemaking practices that preserved some of the lost autonomy, like decorating a room in the rented house for personal use only.

Well. . . I wanted in a way to preserve my own space. Until now I lived alone for a long time, I never lived with someone else before, and I was really worried I would not have space where I could be by myself. . . I am acting a bit spoiled but . . . I just wanted to have my old room even if in a smaller version [*pointing to the house plan*]. I don't use it very much though [*uncomfortable laugh*]. Takano (female, 32, not securely employed)

The changing aspirations of women (daughters and daughters-in-law) seem to drive change in the practices of homeownership through family succession. However, young men anticipating taking over family duties also manifested a desire of building an autonomous family unit away from the scrutinizing eyes of parents. For these young men the parental home was already a suitable property, so buying a house was seen as unnecessary. In other words, in the context of an aging society, the expectation of inheritance or in vivo transfer seems to preclude some young adults from pursuing a career as mortgaged homeowners.

I am not really thinking about buying a house at the moment. Well, that's because there is already my family home and thinking about the future, and I mean *really the future*, we are starting to think about living together [with the parents]. At the moment, though, we really want to be just the three of us living together. But yeah. . . if there was not my parental home I would think about buying. Takahashi (male, 30, securely employed)

### *Homeownership as individual lifestyle choice*

The meaning of homeownership as middle-class *family* mainstream housing has been challenged in the last decades by the growth in single living. Nowadays, the practice of singles buying homes has become more common. Previous research has shown that especially men but also women saw the smaller, cheaper, and centrally located condominiums as good investments in a secure shelter (Kubo and Yui, 2011) (particularly given the discrimination against older singles on the rental market). The increase in quality of life, the possibilities of pursuing hobbies, or a social life in the space of one's home were prominent motivations for choosing homeownership among the young adults who participated in this study. These single owners clearly challenged the ideals of the owner-occupied home as the home for the family, spatially intruding into families dominated neighborhoods.

In our study, singles buying homes at an early age (before 35) were well employed, if not wealthy, young adults. For them, homeownership was a lifestyle choice challenging the norms associating the tenure with nuclear family formation. At the same time, it sets them apart from their peers being an indication of status. Investment rationales also appeared important, usually in connection with future landlord aspirations, more than speculative strategies. Furthermore, it was the chance to cultivate an individual identity through the pursuit of personal interests as well as a social life within the space of the home.

I bought this house [had it built] because I thought it would be quite cool. I would surprise all my friends and family. My dad actually did say that I am doing things backwards first getting a house and then a wife. I didn't tell anyone before I got it, and had it built to specifications. Like you see this cupboard that is like a wine cellar – I ordered that. And downstairs there is a study – where I keep all my manga magazines and books. I really wanted to have a study. Hosono (male, 33, securely employed)

Either because it was not financially feasible or because it seemed impractical to tie all one's financial resources in a devaluating asset, homeownership for many 'middle class' young singles in their 30s remained a rare practice. The possibility of mobility, career-wise and marriage-wise, provided by rental housing as well as the possibility of accumulating liquid financial resources by keeping housing costs low made private rental a better choice.

I spend less than 20% of my income on this [rental] apartment. And really at 33, anything could happen in my life. I could up and go to Dubai for all I know. So I thought it's much better to have the money in my bank account [...], and let the whole buying a house thing rest for a bit. And in any case, who would give me a loan with my freelance job? I earn quite well, especially recently, but unless I have some substantial amount saved I don't see how I can buy a house. Even if I am told I should, all I can say is I can't. Misaki (female, 33, not securely employed)

Rental housing, however, rarely provided a suitable home, in which both personal and social needs could be accommodated (Ronald et al., 2018). Although living in rental housing for considerable periods of time throughout their 20s and early 30s, the young adults we interviewed inevitably saw their rental experience as temporary. Despite the growth in single living, especially in urban areas like Tokyo, meaningful home spaces for single dwellers in the rental sector are few. The majority of young renters we interviewed lived in units that were little more than places to deposit one's belongings and one's body at the end of the day. The single dweller as a household type did not seem to deserve a comfortable place to live. Single rental housing still seems to fit the post-war single dweller, as someone who is not yet married, whose life revolves around work and building up relationships around the workplace that would allow him/her to form a partnership and a family.

## Discussion and conclusions

This article has set out to explore the socio-material dimensions of early adult homeownership pathways in the context of Tokyo's housing market. It focused on owner occupation in a mature homeownership society (Hirayama, 2013) in order to identify changing practices among contemporary young Japanese. This second post-bubble generation cannot necessarily be considered a 'lost-generation' but an adapting one, and our analysis illustrated different ways in which this is happening. Firstly, despite narrowing opportunities, mortgaged homeownership in contemporary Tokyo remains the eminent choice among young *families*. The superior material qualities of owner-occupied homes, as well as practical and emotional factors, shape home purchase decisions, despite the increasing struggle to maintain the asset value of homes and land. By pursuing spatially and temporally bound market hot spots, or strategies that emphasize short-term housing investments over long terms ones, young adults practically negotiate Tokyo's market for owner occupation.

Secondly, homeownership that is partly or completely dependent on family resources and family succession is an important path, especially in Japan's aging society. It assumes less reliance on mortgage finance and less of a need to consider the financial feasibility of

homeownership. Still, the need to assume (or re-negotiate) intergenerational responsibilities puts strains on young adults' couple relationships and the ideals of home as private space for the family unit. Balancing these different practical, financial, and emotional aspects of homeownership leads some young couples to pursue longer rental pathways, in anticipation of taking over family responsibilities.

Finally, homeownership seems to be a distinct marker of the single's identity project, pursued by young adults with sufficient financial means as a way to distinguish themselves, but also as an investment in secure shelter for the future. The need for a meaningful home space for singles also makes homeownership a desirable choice, especially since the rental homes for singles remain utilitarian spaces, lacking privacy and character.

By focusing on the practical aspects of young adults' housing pathways, the article has sought to empirically illuminate how housing pathways are essentially cumulative processes by which young adults carve out meaningful spaces of home within specific housing markets. Far from being cognitive processes of choice, this article has shown that pathways (into homeownership) are practical ways of *being-in-the-world* (Obrador-Pons, 2003) and navigating the urban housing market environment (Jacobs and Smith, 2008). The focus on micro-level everyday practices exposed the incremental reshaping of home(ownership) *in practice*, that is slowly modifying the homeownership ideal at the basis of the post-war housing system in Japan. The bounded nature of home practices identified above may make them less generalizable compared to macro-level systemic narratives. However, they open the possibility to discuss new roles for homeownership in a system in which the dominant position of *mortgaged homeownership for the male breadwinner family* is no longer tenable, despite considerable inertia.

Envisioning new ways of producing homeownership in a context like that of Japan means acknowledging three key drivers of social change: changing gender roles and individualizing aspirations of young people (Suzuki et al., 2010), the demands of a rapidly aging society, and a stagnating economy. Reinforcing family norms (Ochiai, 2014) and the normative role of homeownership will neither bring back post-war stability nor resolve the growing caring needs of elderly generations. Instead finding ways of shielding home acquisition from the vagaries of market ups and downs and high exposure to mortgage markets as well as rescuing the rental market from its residual position are important avenues to consider for policy-makers.

The case of Japan's mature homeownership system offers lessons to other homeownership oriented systems in which the impossibility of sustaining homeownership access for the young generation has prompted debates about the future of the tenure. Although the conditions of continuous house price stagnation that Japan has experienced are arguably unique, exposure to financialized mortgage markets is a feature of many these systems. The findings of this research point to the locally contingent qualities of homeownership that make it a desirable choice, not necessarily in ideological terms but in everyday, practical ways.

Ideals of autonomous house buying households without ties across generations have been at the base of 'western' liberal systems in similar ways to Japan. The current situation of increased intergenerational dependence poses serious questions about the meanings of solidarity and the levels at which this solidarity should manifest. As this research has shown, conflict and constant negotiation are integral parts of solidarity within families, and they take form in everyday home practices, both ones that bring generations closer and others that try to maintain distance.

In conclusion, this article has illustrated the different skillful ways in which young adults in Tokyo follow homeownership pathways, adapting to the tenets of Japan's homeownership system while slowly pushing its boundaries. It has shown the usefulness of considering pathways as an analytical tool that is sensitive both to the non-linearity of contemporary

housing trajectories and to embodied practices. At the same time, it has connected the findings from a particular mature homeownership society to larger debates about the future of homeownership systems in general.

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### Notes

1. Although Japan has instituted a system of equal inheritance in the post-war period (Izuhara, 2002), both previous research and the data collected in this study suggest that families continue to designate one child to take over family land and housing, while other children may or may not receive monetary inheritance. The housing pathways of young adults who do take over family fortunes differ markedly from those of their siblings.
2. Mortgage loans for which both partners of a couple hold responsibility. The value of the house is split into two and each of partners becomes individually responsible for that part. Also applicable to a parent–children ‘pair’.

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