

Metaphors of a Pillar in English and Japanese

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1. Introduction

Metaphors of *haishira* 'pillar' and *daikokubashira* 'central pillar' are frequently used in Japanese, meaning 'an important person in an organization', or 'an essential element in a theory,' etc. Especially, the latter expression occurs referring to 'the head of the family' or 'the breadwinner', as in (1),

- (1) *ikka-no daikokubashira-ga taoreta.*
(lit. The central pillar of the family fell down.)

which means 'The breadwinner of the family passed away.' Until quite recently, when we heard the term *daikokubashira*, we usually considered that the word stood for the father or husband. Nevertheless, the image of *daikokubashira* has gradually been changing, as is understood from (2).

- (2) *chichioya-ga daikokubashira datt a jidai...*
(...when fathers *were* the central pillar or a breadwinner
of the family.)

The use of the past tense in (2) clearly shows that the conception of the father or husband as the head of the family is now fading away in people's minds. (3) and (4) are examples, in which the referent of the term *daikoku-bashira* is not 'father' or 'husband.'

- (3) watashi-mo tomobataraki-o hajimete jyuyonen
(I)- (also) (a working mother) (to begin) (more than ten years)

imaya daikokubashira--no tsumoride-iru....
(now) (a central pillar) (to assume)

(I have seen myself as a central pillar since I started working to support my family more than ten years ago.)

(*The Chunichi-shinbun*, September 3, 1989)

- (4) ...fuufu-o daikokubashira- ni
oku...

(a husband and wife) (a central pillar) (to be regarded as)

(A husband and wife should be regarded as a central pillar of a family.)

(Sato, 1989)

In (3), the term *daikokubashira* refers to the contributor herself, who is a working mother. On the other hand, the term in (4) stands for a husband and wife as a unit. In this way, the referents of the term *daikokubashira* have become ambiguous, owing to the recent change in ideas of the family in Japan.

In addition to the reason for the changing referents of the term *daikokubashira* in Japanese, three reasons will be shown why the term has been used so frequently to stand for the head of the family from historical and architectural viewpoints, comparing the term *daikokubashira* with the term 'pillar' in English.

2. The Etymological Enigma of *Daikokubashira*

The etymological origin of the term *daikokubashira* has not been clarified yet, though it has been understood that the term stands for the central pillar in a traditional Japanese house, in which rich people with a higher status usually lived. Yamagata (1980) illustrates two hypotheses about the etymology, which most major Japanese language dictionaries cite. One is that it comes from *daikokuten* 'the god of wealth' to whom residents pray at the central pillar. Another is that it has derived from the term *daikyokubashira* by a phonological change. The obliterate word *daikyoku* meant 'the center of the world or a certain area.' Incidentally, other names of *daikokubashira* are *nakabashira* lit.'a central pillar', *teishubashira* 'a husband's or master's pillar',

and *imibashira* 'a pillar to observe the rite of purification', to cite a few among many.

3. Architectural and Symbolic Characteristics of *Daikokubashira*

Daikokubashira was usually set up at the boundary between the mud floor on the ground and the heightened timber floor, according to Ike (1986). The pillar generally has the most important function of supporting the load of a roof in a traditional Japanese house, which is generally called a timber-framed house. Some *daikokubashira*, however, do not have this function. The reason why the pillar was set up as demonstration, despite the lack of a structural function is that it had a symbolic significance, as well as a decorative purpose for the demonstration of the residents' higher status.

Symbolic and religious significance can be explained with a few examples. Mizoguchi and Kobayashi (1979), who collected stories about vernacular houses in Japan, explain that a foundation stone, on which the *daikokubashira* was set up, was left as it was, even when the house was demolished in some parts of the Noto Peninsula of Northern Japan. The reason is that there was a belief that the soul of the person who built the house was dwelling in the *daikokubashira* and its foundation stone. Another example is in Ike (1986). In some mountainous parts of Aichi prefecture in Central Japan, a master carpenter with the future residents of the house offered some rice gruel at the foot of *daikokubashira*, praying for the prosperity and longevity of the family at the time of the framework-raising ceremony. Further examples showing religious or symbolic significances of *daikokubashira* are found in other books about vernacular houses in Japan. According to these books, for instance, a household altar was sometimes fixed at the *daikokubashira*, since the pillar was believed to be a god who protected the house and the dwellers from the evil spirits. Some idols of gods such as *daikokuten*, *eibisugami*, etc., were also set there to pray for the wealth and prosperity of the family. Incidentally, the scene in which the patriarch of a family is sitting near the pillar is often found in novels issued before the Second World War. More recently, houses for sale have sometimes advertised with a catchphrase of *daikokukashira-no aru ie* 'a house with a *daikokubashira*' by real estate agents. All these pieces of evidence show how symbolically and religiously significant *daikokukashira* was for the Japanese in the past. Therefore, it may be claimed that the symbolic characteristic, as well as the powerful structural characteristic of supporting the load of the roof, has greatly contributed to the formation of the present-day images of *daikokubashira*.

Incidentally, it should be noted that there are sometimes more than one *daikokubashira*, because of the structural necessity. They were called differently, depending on their locations. Dialectal differences of the pillars in various sites in a house are also reported.

The next point which should be mentioned is that the original use of *daikokubashira* in building a house does not go back so far, in spite of its apparent antiquity. Mizoguchi and Kobayashi (1985) cite a remark by a resident of a traditional house, saying that his house was built in far older days when there was no *daikokubashira*. In addition, no example of the use of the term *daikokubashira* before the Edo period is recorded in major dictionaries of the Japanese language. The earliest one recorded in these dictionaries is in *Koushoku-ichidai-onna* written by Saikaku Ihara (1642-93). The beginning of metaphorical use of the term may be far later than the literal use, since the examples of the metaphors used in the earliest days are all from the writers of the Meiji period in those dictionaries. Therefore, it may be concluded that the original use of *daikokubashira* as an element for building a house is not so old, contrary to our assumption.

4. Hashira vs. Pillar

Some investigation of the term *hashira* 'pillar' is necessary in order to have a deeper understanding of the term *daikokubashira*.

From ancient times, the term *hashira* was used as a numeral, attached in front of the terms representing some kinds of gods in Japanese. For example, in the *Kojiki*, written in the 8th century, which consists mainly of a mythical story of the emperor family, many instances of this type of usage are found, as in (5).

(5) *koko-ni futahashira-no kami hakarite-noritamahaku*
(here) (two pillars of gods) (to discuss with each other)

waga umeruko yokarazu
(we) (to have given birth) (not good)

(So two (lit. pillars of) gods discussed with each other, and said,
"Our child is not good...") (*Kojiki*, 712)¹

"Three pillars of gods", who are main figures in the story, are *Amaterasu*, *Susanou*, and *Ohokuninushi*, according to Yoshidai (1992). The remnant of the numerical use is still found in counting the annual number of persons who died of the after effect of atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In the same story, the expression *ten-no-mihashira* 'a heavenly pillar' stands for a pillar where gods go to pray.² In Japan, there are many festivals for praying for the peace of the country and the prosperity of the nation. They seem to be related to the sacred pillar. *Hashira-taimatsu* in Kyoto and *Onbashiramatsuri* in Suwa, Nagano prefecture, are the most famous among these.

It may be presumed that from these usages, another meaning referring to a god, or a person with a high rank was derived. The usage is still alive in the term *shinbashira* 'a true pillar', which stands for the head of *Tenrikyo*. *Tenrikyo* is one of the popular new religions in Japan.

Nowadays, on the other hand, the term *hashira* frequently occurs in various kinds of written and spoken materials, meaning an important person who plays a central role in a group, such as a political party, corporation, family, etc. It also stands for an important element in a certain claim, etc., as well. Probably, the contemporary meanings have derived from the older usages, too. As was shown in this section, therefore, the term *hashira* has a longer history than the term *daikokubashira* in its metaphorical usages. Here lies a great difference between the two terms.

Hashira discussed above is not the one found in a framework of a house, but the one outside a house. Nevertheless, it may be assumed that the image of a sacred *hashira* overlapped with that of a pillar which supports the load of a house in our ancestors' mind. Above all, it may be asserted that the image of a sacred pillar was projected into that of *daikokubashira*, which is the largest structural pillar in a traditional house. My claim is, therefore, that the origin of the metaphorical meanings of the term *daikokubashira* is greatly influenced by the image of a sacred pillar. This assertion may also apply to the rise of the symbolic images of *daikokubashira*.

Next, pillars, especially columns, in Europe and America should be discussed for comparing them with *daikokubashira*. Generally, columns and the other pillars are not structurally so important, since many of them in European buildings are not supporting the load of a roof, in spite of their magnificent appearance. In traditional European houses, walls, instead of pillars, usually support the load of a roof, which is one of the characteristics of European masonry houses, according to Yoshida (1985). He, further, argues that columns in Occidental buildings are solid, and wide in diameter so that they themselves will not fall down. As evidence for his claim, it is pointed out that columns in ancient Greek temples are still standing, even though the other parts of the building have almost completely collapsed. If

columns have the function of supporting the load of a building, he asserts, they should fall down with the other parts. Nevertheless, because of the magnificent appearance of columns, buildings with columns were built to show the authority and wealth of the dwellers and the builders with various kinds of decoration. In this sense, pillars, especially columns, have a symbolic significance. It is said that Napoleon, Hitler, Mussolini, etc., liked to construct this kind of building with columns. Columns are also found in Colonial style houses in America.

5. Differences in Metaphors of *Hashira* and Pillar

It seems that the terms *hashira* and *daikokubashira* are more frequently used as metaphor than the term 'pillar' in referring to the central and important figure of an organization or family. One of the common features of *daikokubashira* with a pillar is that they both are a symbol of wealth and authority. However, there is a difference in that pillars in Japan, ie., *hashira* and *daikokubashira* have been regarded as sacred, whereas those in Europe and America have not. Before Christianity was widely accepted, of course, there might have been some belief related to a pillar, as is seen in the following quotations from the Old Testament.

- (6) Which shaketh the earth out of her place, and the pillars thereof tremble.
(Job, Chap.9, 6)
- (7) The pillars of heaven tremble and are astonished at his reproof.
(ibid., Chap.26, 11)

From (6) and (7), for example, we can presume that there might have been a belief that both the heaven and the earth were supported by a number of pillars. The belief in a pillar, however, was rejected when the age of the New Testament arrived, because idol worship came to be regarded as a serious sin at the same time. This fact may be related to the lesser metaphorical use of the term 'pillar', in comparison with those in Japanese, in addition to the fact that columns and pillars have the lesser structural function in supporting the load of a roof, as was discussed above.

As a result, it may be claimed, the term 'breadwinner' has been used more frequently than the expression 'a pillar of the family', though the metaphorical use of the term 'pillar' is sometimes found as in (8).

- (8) a. ... our people have always mustered the determination to construct from these crises the pillars of our history.
(President Clinton's Inauguration Address)
- b. Next Giorgio La Malfa, head of the small Republican Party and long considered a pillar of rectitude, resigned his post after being informed that he, too, was the target of an investigation.
(*Newsweek*, March 8, 1993)

6. Father as *Daikokubashira*

As was shown in the Introduction, until quite recently, most Japanese thought that *daikokubashira* in a family was the father. Many of us still have this image. Despite this fact, according to one of the most popular encyclopedias, the term was used to stand for a housewife in some districts in Japan. Moreover, in the most prestigious dictionary, *Nihon--kokugo-dai-Jiten*, it is defined that the term *daikoku* meant 'a wife of a Buddhist priest', 'a wife', 'a mistress', etc., in addition to 'the god of wealth'. These pieces of evidence show that formerly the term *daikokubashira* sometimes stood for some women. Then, why is the expression so often understood to refer to the father? One of the answers is that this image was reinforced by the government's policy from the Meiji era (1868-1912) till the end of the Second World War. To elaborate on the point, the emperor was symbolized as *daikokubashira*, the father of the Japanese. In other words, the image that the emperor as a patriarch who has brought up and educated the nation as his sons and daughters was strengthened by the government during this period. The same image was projected into the family, in which the father as the patriarchal *daikokubashira* controlled and protected the rest of the family members. This policy was necessary for the establishment of 'ie', a controlling system of family as the smallest unit of the country.

In short, the metaphor of *daikokubashira* was exploited to reinforce the ideology of the nation state under the emperor. That is the reason why the term began to be used only to refer to the father in and after the Meiji era, despite the fact that it formerly referred to some women as well.

7. Metaphors of Construction

Metaphors of construction are often found in contexts discussing family matters. It may be assumed that all people in the modern world have the conception, A FAMILY IS A BUILDING. In Japanese, for example, the

- (12) ..., recession weary Americans are beginning to realize that the foundation for a stable society must be built at home. (*Time*, November 9, 1992)

In the special edition of *Life* about families in 1992, too, the phrase, 'home builder' is found with reference to a person whose role is to help families to solve their own problems. Therefore, also in English, there is a reflection of the concept, A FAMILY IS A BUILDING. As was mentioned in previous sections, however, the term 'pillar' rarely appears in referring to a central and important member of a family, as far as the examples I have collected are concerned. The term 'breadwinner' is most commonly used, instead. The reason may be attributed to the fact that the terms 'pillar' and 'column' have not been exploited as slogans for the construction of a nation state or a family, unlike the case of pre-war Japan, in addition to the two reasons already mentioned.

In summary, it may be claimed that the following three reasons are relevant to the rare use of the term 'pillar' and 'column', referring to an important member in a family.

1. The terms 'pillar' and 'column' have not been used as slogans for the construction of a nation state, as the term *daikokubashira* has in Japan.
2. The terms have no sacred and spiritual aspects, unlike the term *daikokubashira* in Japanese.
3. Many of the pillars have no structural function of supporting the load of a house, unlike *daikokubashira*.

8. Current Trends in the Use of the Term *Daikokubashira*

As was indicated in the introductory section, the referents of the term *daikokubashira* have been changing, and the term can refer to a father, husband, wife, mother, homemaker and a couple as a unit. The same trend can be seen in the use of the term 'breadwinner' as well. This tendency may be attributed to the current change in the idea of a role in a family, influenced by various kinds of reevaluation of family values in almost all the democratic countries. As a result, the assumption that a father works outside, whereas a mother is at home for housework and childrearing has been

deconstructed gradually. Besides, doubts have been cast on the innateness of maternal love, even in Japan. Concomitantly, various states of home and family at present have come to be discussed. For example, Okonogi (1991) claims that some persons are living in a house without the atmosphere of a home. He calls that kind of family *hoteru-kazoku* 'a hotel family', implying that that sort of home is the place where family members come back only to sleep at night with little mutual communication. Kawai, a famous psychiatrist in Japan, moreover, emphasizes that family structure in contemporary Japan lacks a person who plays the central role in the family, using his own term, *chukusei* 'the emptiness of the center.' He argues that none of the family members are considered to be 'in the center of a family,' hinting that no one plays a central role in the family, as a patriarch in older days did. He, furthermore, asserts that the situation in a family is like the 'climate', since each member must always carefully observe a change in one another's emotion like the climate. The indefiniteness in the referents of the term *daikokubashira* must have resulted from such contemporary situations.

9. Concluding Remarks

Observing different architectural and symbolic characteristics of pillars in Japan, and in Europe and America, we have mainly discussed differences in metaphorical uses of the terms related to a pillar in English and Japanese. The following three points are clarified in this discussion.

1. *Daikokubashira* in Japan has a more important function than a pillar or column in Europe and America, in that the former has structural characteristics of supporting the load of a roof, whereas the latter usually does not.
2. *Daikokubashira* was regarded as more religiously sacred than a pillar. The fact led to the enhancement of the symbolic images of *daikokubashira*.
3. The symbolic image of *daikokubashira* was used to emphasize the patriarchal image of the emperor and the head of the family, whereas a pillar or column in Europe and America was not, in spite of its magnificent appearance. The use of the term *daikokubashira* as a slogan for the construction of pre-war Japan is attributed to a greater use of the term *daikokubashira*.

Incidentally, as was discussed in section 8, nowadays, the term *daikoku-bashira* has been used to refer to some variety of family members, reflecting the fact that there tends to be no central figure in a family. Consequently, a symbolic image of the term may fade away. In such a situation, will the term *daikokubashira* standing for a family member become obliterate? Or will it have a new meaning reflecting different characteristics of future families?

Notes

1. Chamberlain's translation of this part is:
Hereupon the two Deities took counsel, saying "The children to whom we have now given birth are not good." (P.229)
2. Chamberlain translated this expression into "the heavenly august pillar."

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