The relationship between the Japanese company, the salaryman and his wife has been well illustrated by studies such as Allison’s (1994) analysis of corporate masculinity. It is a situation that has developed relatively recently since the Second World War, when middle-class women who moved to urban areas with their salarymen husbands took pride in their position and status as housewives (Salamon 1975; Vogel 1978; Kanda 1982; Ueno 1982, 1987; Imamura 1987; Madoka 1988; Hendry 1993; Allison 1996). Their husbands were commonly referred to as ‘corporate warriors’ (kyō senshi) and worked all hours outside the home, seeing little of their family, while their wives concentrated on their housewife tasks and developed strong bonds with their children.

If these clearly-defined roles were deemed important in allowing the husband to carry out his work function for the sake of the family, the company and, in a wider sense, the nation, they have been seen as doubly important when husbands are transferred overseas. The notion of the wife as caretaker of the family who can provide a comfortable and Japanese home environment so that her husband can concentrate on his job has been promoted if not directly by Japanese companies, at least implicitly, and also by Japanese society, including husbands and wives themselves. As this book will show, the cooperation of Japanese wives in accompanying their husbands overseas has in fact been vital to the overseas transfer process, and ultimately to the Japanese economy in the post-war period.

There are in fact two possible types of personnel transfer within Japanese companies, tenzoku and shukkō. Tenzoku is mainly used in
reference to domestic personnel transfer (Hamada 1992). It literally means ‘change of belonging’, and refers to the system whereby an employee must formally resign from the parent company (honsha) in order to be hired permanently by its kogaisha, or ‘subsidiary company’. This is often the head office’s way of preventing the core personnel of the parent company from being too elderly (ibid.: 142). Shukkō on the other hand, refers to a temporary transfer of personnel which can be domestic, or, in the case of kaigai shukkō, overseas.

It has been said that for many Japanese (male) managers, overseas transfer is seen as a positive career progression – an indication of good future career prospects and the launch pad for future top management (Hamada 1992; Morgan, Kelly, Sharpe and Whitely 2003). In the case of one particular bank for example, it was estimated that between twenty and thirty per cent of the managing directors had international experience in this way (Morgan, Kelly, Sharpe and Whitely 2003).

An opposing view however, is that overseas transfer represents ‘a temporary sidetracking of their long-term career marathon in a Japanese corporation or at its worst, a dead-end job’ (Hamada 1992: 136). Some expatriate Japanese workers in the 1980s felt that being overseas was almost like being in exile, since they were invisible to powerful people within the company and unable to sustain a network of relations between peers and managers upon whom their career success depends (Sakai 2000; Morgan, Kelly, Sharpe and Whitely 2003). The term ‘terai mawashi’ conveys a further negative view. It means to be ‘helplessly passed from one place to another’, and was commonly used to describe those employees who were seen as being transferred from one mediocre overseas post to another without being returned to Japan (White 1988: 149).

Views towards overseas assignment may have changed with the collapse of the bubble economy in 1990, especially in financial institutions as they have struggled to adapt (Morgan, Kelly, Sharpe and Whitely 2003). On one hand, it has been suggested that there is a feeling of disillusionment amongst some expatriate Japanese workers about how they will be able to use their international experience once back in Japan (ibid.). On the other hand, as Japanese companies seem to be changing their emphasis from the generalist to the specialist, there has also been a change in attitude towards prospective employees who may have specialist knowledge that comes from overseas experience. This may in fact have promoted the flexibility to transfer to other companies, including non-Japanese companies.