Japanese Housewives’ Roles in the UK: Caring for the Family and Maintaining Links with Japan

Providing a home environment, which becomes an important point of reference to Japan, and taking care of the health of the family were unanimously considered to be the most important roles in accompanying a husband to the UK by my informants. Further important roles carried out by housewives in Japan include managing the household budget, maintaining good relations with family and friends and, in relation to the company, managing the husband’s personal and business relationships by gift-giving and sending nengajo (New Year cards). Taking care of elderly parents is also a role that befalls women. How women carry out these tasks while resident in the UK, however, indicates not only changes brought about as a result of the overseas transfer assignment, but also changes taking place in contemporary Japan.

WOMEN’S PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR HOUSEWIFE ROLE WHILE LIVING IN THE UK

No women interviewed for this research undertook paid work outside the home in the UK, as discussed in the Introduction. When I asked women in questionnaire and interview what their work was in the UK, some wrote ‘none’, but the majority replied ‘housewife’ (shufu) or ‘full-time housewife’ (sengyō shufu). Two informants were engaged in post-graduate study but they also had to balance their duties as a housewife with their studies.
When asked in questionnaire, ‘If you are a housewife now, what kind of work does that involve (housework, childcare, etc.)?’ the following were given as tasks while living in the UK:

- Housework (kaji) or general overall housework (kaji zenpan)
- Washing (sentaku)
- Cleaning (sōji)
- Washing up (sara o arau)
- Cooking (shokuji)
- Preparing family lunch boxes (bentō o tsukuru),
- Shopping (kaimono)
- Gardening (gădeningu)
- Taking care of the property (fudōsan kanri)
- Decorating the home (ie no decorēshiyon)
- Taking care of husband’s and family health (shujin ya kazoku no kenkō kanri)
- Providing a home environment (seikatsu kankyō eru)
- Associating with neighbours (kinjo no otsukiai)
- Childcare (ikuji)
- Taking children to school (kodomo no gakkō no sōgei)
- Taking children to music, gym, ballet, etc. (kodomo no narai koto no sōgei)
- Associating with people from husband’s company (shujin no kaisha no kata to no tsukiai)
- Taking care of the family budget (kaji no kateikeizai no kanri).

With two exceptions, they are roles that are carried out by housewives in Japan. The exceptions are taking children to school and to out-of-school activities such as music lessons, gym or ballet, and this will be explained in Chapter 6.

According to the 2001 Sociological Survey, the average amount of time per day spent on housework and childcare in Japan over a one-week period is five hours two minutes (http://www.stat.go.jp/data/shakai/2001/shousai/yoyaku.htm).¹ Japanese women living in the UK said that they spent between six to ten hours a day on housewife tasks, but this depended on whether they had children. Women without the responsibility of children to care for said in fact that they did as little as two hours, mainly on domestic tasks such as cooking and washing up.

Some claimed to spend longer on housewife tasks in the UK than they would in Japan. For those with children, an important cause