Japanese Housewives’ Roles in the UK: Care of Young Children and Education

This chapter examines the housewife’s role in the education of her children as a vital role carried out by wives who accompany their husbands overseas. It looks at how this role is carried out and modified while living in the UK, beginning with the care of young preschool children, before focusing on children of school age.

CARE OF PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN

The role of motherhood for housewives in Japan was introduced in Chapter 2, which looked at the role of women within the family. According to Iwao, the term ‘okāsan’ (mother) conjures up images of bliss, security and warmth (1995: 126). It is the embodiment of inexhaustible love, and the role of a woman as a mother has often been said to exceed that of wife (ibid.). Writing in the 1970s, Vogel went as far as to say motherhood was a woman’s ‘ikigai’ (purpose in life) and even her ‘self definition’ (1978: 41).

There has also been a traditionally-shared idea in Japan that a woman is not seen as fully adult until she gives birth. This can be related to a Japanese saying, ‘Women are weak, mothers are strong’ (Iwao 1995: 125). Work on middle-class educated mothers in Japan has suggested that contemporary society still clings to the notion that motherhood is a woman’s most important attribute and that her life should be child-centred (Sasagawa 1996, 2001, 2002).
The most widely accepted view amongst urban middle class mothers has been that children should be at home until the age of three or four (Lebra 1984; Tobin Wu and Davidson 1989; Peak 1991; Ben-Ari 1997a; Rohlen and Le Tendre 1998; Hendry 2003; see also Inoue and Ehara 2000: 22–23). This relates to a Japanese proverb, ‘the soul of a three-year old lasts till a hundred’ (Hendry 1986: 17; 2003: 46). Ideally, a child should be surrounded by family and in close proximity to the mother (Hendry 1984: 106), allowing close physical contact for her to bestow the large amounts of affection considered necessary to enable the child to develop normally (Ben-Ari 1997b: 16).

The ideal Japanese mother's life is carefully orchestrated around high standards of care for the young child (Rohlen and Le Tendre 1998: 6). Vogel described the constant care and attention given by Japanese mothers to their children (1978: 24) and the ‘dependency’ (amae) that Japanese children tend to develop on their mothers as a result has been much written about, notably by Doi (1986). During this fieldwork, next to my Japanese counterparts, I have often felt negligent. The depths of a Japanese mother's small and compact handbag, seem to contain items for every childcare eventuality, be it a plaster complete with cartoon motif for a minor injury, or a packet of tissues.

The fact that motherhood remains a vital part of the work of today's housewives has not been displaced by the increase in women's participation in the labour force. This grew from 48.6% to 50.4% between 1986 and 1997 and the increase has been especially evident amongst women of child-bearing age (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2000 and see Ishii-Kuntz 2003: 200). For women between the ages of twenty-five and twenty-nine, the labour force participation increased from 56.9% in 1986 to 68.2% in 1997, and the number of women interested in pursuing a homemaker role on the birth of their first child decreased from 33.6% in 1987 to 20.6% in 1997 (ibid.).

According to Sasagawa, however, even if today's women are not ‘house-bound’, they remain ‘child-bound’ (2001: 31). Despite changes in the attitudes of individual women, Japanese society still requires mothers to bear the whole responsibility for her child's growth and emotional development and most housewives in Japan continue to see motherhood as their prime function (ibid.).

A series of measures from the 1990s have attempted to address the gender imbalance in childcare that has made work outside the home