Life Outside the Confines of ‘Housewife’: Enriching Aspects of Overseas Transfer

This chapter shows the ways in which a husband’s temporary assignment to the UK offers women means of self-fulfilment and enjoyment outside their housewife roles. It explains the barriers to making non-Japanese friends in the UK, but shows how many women are successful in doing so, and demonstrates the ways in which women play an important role in volunteer activities. In acting as ambassadors for their country, the chapter argues that Japanese wives play a vital part in the promotion of Anglo-Japanese relations during the overseas transfer process.

WOMEN’S ACTIVITIES BEYOND HOUSEWIFE ROLES IN THE UK

It has been suggested that many of the varied and wide-ranging activities that women engage in outside the home – baking, cooking, sewing and handicrafts – are skills that can be justified as being helpful to their housewifely role (Imamura 1987: 89). Yet, since their salarymen husbands are frequently absent from the home, they also have ‘a good deal of control over their lives’ (ibid.: 234) and as such are able to take part in a wide range of activities that are separate from their housewife functions. Pursuing personal skills and accomplishments that provide challenge and personal satisfaction goes far beyond the more immediate role of attending to the needs of the family (Hendry 1993: 235).
Housewives in Japan, for example, have been involved in grass-roots politics (Leblanc 1999) and volunteer activities (Nakano 2000; Bestor 2002), and mothers in Japan commonly look to community activities as a way of channelling energies that are not being used in a workplace outside the home (Sasagawa 2001). They have joined to form cooperative groups, including consumer groups that have resisted pressure to buy goods produced in ways that are harmful to the environment (Hendry 1993: 236).

Japanese women living in the UK also enjoy a rich and full life that extends far beyond housewife duties, and many of my informants reported that relatives, friends and neighbours in Japan envy their lifestyle and the opportunities it presents. Though free time may be limited for women with younger children, for others without children, with children at school during the day, or with grown-up children, there is an abundance of opportunity for extra activities that women take up enthusiastically.

Women join gyms, play tennis, they engage in a wide range of crafts, such as tapestry, decoupage, cross-stitch, china painting and bead craft. They learn cooking, sugar craft, taking specialist courses in bread making and go to wine-tasting sessions. They learn flower arrangement, play golf, sing in choirs and play the piano and flute. They go shopping, and on outings with their friends, and they lunch together.

Women engage in such activities however, not simply to fill their time or for frivolous entertainment. They are an important way of meeting the Japanese friends who are vital to their experience of living in the UK. As in the case of women in Japan (Imamura 1987), women also use the various activities in which they take part as a means of self-fulfilment. They use the opportunity to gain skills that they are able to put to use on their return to Japan, as well as skills for practical day-to-day life in the UK, and to learn more about British culture. This includes the study of English as well as other European languages, and the study of English history and taking part in other activities that will enable them to get the most of their time in the UK.

Cookery classes cannot be dismissed as being simply related to the housewife role, since they too can be an opportunity to learn more about the host country and its people. Many Japanese women learn British seasonal cookery such as cookery for Christmas, including traditional Christmas puddings and mincemeat. When such activities are carried out with a British counterpart or teacher, a further social element is also added. Attending cooking classes also enables women to learn how to use British ingredients when Japanese ingredients are