CHAPTER FOUR

CONTEMPORARY PATRIARCHY AND THE HOUSEWIFE IN JAPAN

Following our discussion of the birth of the modern housewife in Chapter 3, this chapter will examine the birth of the contemporary housewife in postwar Japanese society and the transitions in her situation, including the great changes that took place during the country's period of high economic growth. We will examine from various angles the problems housewives face today and attempt a coherent explanation of the nature of these problems. To project the course that Japanese housewives can be expected to travel, we will also look at conditions in other capitalist societies in East Asia—a subject taken up in detail in the following two chapters.

The factors leading to the development of the contemporary housewife were industrialization, the transformation of patriarchy, and changes in the meaning housewives attached to their household duties, which has led to new contradictions. The meaning that the agent, the housewife herself, attaches to her role is a factor because her consciousness in the process of social change is a key element. How the agent responds to the paradigm she is given within the social framework becomes an independent and significant variable. Married women's participation in the labor force has frequently been explained only in terms of economic variables such as labor market conditions and household economic needs. Even though Marxist feminists bring patriarchy into the mix of variables, all too often they assume an agent envisioned as a dependent factor.

1. Postwar Economic Growth and New Forms of Industrialization

A vast amount of work, primarily in economics, has been produced on the entirety of Japan's period of high economic growth, and a survey of this literature is beyond the scope of this book. Instead, we will confine our discussion to factors directly related to the contemporary housewife. Among the forces contributing to the emergence of the contemporary housewife are “push” factors, such as the conversion of household needs into a giant market, represented by the diffusion of electrical household
goods, and “pull” factors enabling housewives to work outside the home such as labor policies and transitions in the makeup of the labor force. We will also discuss the development of a new urban lifestyle that led to a huge expansion of expenses housewives had to meet.

1.1. The Spread of a Contemporary Lifestyle

A giant market supplying household goods was created during the period of postwar industrialization. This was the basic condition that generated the birth of the contemporary housewife. In 1963, a government commission took up the subject of “Optimum Use of Women's Labor Power (Fujin rodoryoku no katsuyo).” The following points were raised in one member’s remarks during an interpellation session: “A striking rise has occurred in the level of education and in women’s desire to work; at the same time home life has become modernized and the birthrate is dropping. This, in turn, has lightened housewives’ burdens related to housework and rearing children.” This was a good description of how new conditions were already in place for the birth of the contemporary housewife. We will turn to a simple examination of these conditions.

(1) The Marketization of Housework

Wide acceptance of electrical household appliances was an important indicator of the birth of the contemporary housewife. A wealth of statistics illustrates the diffusion of these goods. Using a diffusion rate of 60–70% as a standard, we can see that, as shown in Figure 4.1, the diffusion rate for washing machines and refrigerators had reached this level by the mid-1960s. The 1963 national White Paper on the People's Livelihoods (Kokumin Seikatsu Hakusho) pointed to a survey of household budgets indicating that expenditures on furniture and fixtures appeared to be reaching an equalized level, even among different income groups. The emerging new lifestyle included: public water supply systems replacing the well and the pump; the traditional kitchen, a dimly lit room with an earthen floor, being superseded by a bright electronic system kitchen; processed and frozen foods replacing seasonal foods; the old kitchen stove and kerosene lamp giving way to gas and electrical appliances; and ready-made garments were replacing made-to-order clothes. It was as though consumers were guided by the slogan “Shopping is a virtue.” People were burying their homes in an avalanche of goods. Middle-class households that once employed maids to do housework were now relying on electrical