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Uno/Passages to Modernity

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Introduction

This book takes up the problem of the growth and expansion of day-care facilities in Japan during the first three decades of the twentieth century. As institutions that educated and nurtured very young children for long hours on a daily basis, day-care centers could have aroused strenuous opposition from parents, families, communities, or government authorities. In addition, the foreign origins of day-care heightened the possibility that Japanese would reject child-care facilities during the nationalistic prewar era. Thus the establishment of day-care facilities, their widespread public acceptance, and their expansion in early twentieth-century Japan are phenomena that call for historical explanation. Exploring justifications for child-care centers and their institutional development sheds light on the genesis of modern Japanese attitudes toward motherhood, childhood, and child-rearing—not only the beliefs of the middle-class founders and lower-class users of day-care centers, but those of private relief specialists and officials in the home and education ministries as well. Above all, tracing the growth of institutional day-care in the prewar era provides insights into the prewar attempts to (re)define female gender and household life in the initial decades of twentieth-century Japan.

This study originated as a desire to explore the history of the kyōiku mama, the contemporary Japanese “education mother” who spares no effort to ensure her offspring’s success in passing school entrance examinations that for over a century have served as the gateway to prestigious and secure employment in adult life. Reflecting increased interest in Japanese education in the West, the education mother has recently been the object of much attention and predominates among the images of Japanese womanhood both overseas and at home. One writer described the kyōiku mama as follows:

No one doubts that behind every high-scoring Japanese student—and they are among the highest scoring in the world—there stands a mother, supportive, aggressive, and completely involved in her child’s education. She
studies, she packs lunches, she waits for hours in lines to register her child for exams and waits again in the hallways for hours while he takes them. She denies herself TV so her child can study in quiet and she stirs noodles at 11 P.M. for the scholar’s snack. She shuttles youngsters from exercise class to . . . calligraphy and piano, to swimming and martial arts. She helps every day with homework, hires tutors and works part-time to pay for juku [preparatory, or “cram,” schools]. Sometimes she enrolls in ‘mother’s class’ so she can help with the drills at home. . . .

The community’s perception of a woman’s success as a mother depends in large part on how well her children do in school.2

The education mother shuns employment outside the home or other time-consuming activities that would interfere with full-time devotion to the academic success of her child. To the extent that her self-image depends on her child’s achievements, her satisfaction in life is vicarious. Acceptance into a top-ranked school brings glory to child, mother, and family, while scholastic failure reflects poorly on herself and the household.

Descriptions of the behavior of the contemporary education mother who dedicates her life to the academic success of her child contrast strikingly with the daily routine of the majority of Japanese mothers of poor to average means who inhabited the rural villages and towns of the pre-World War II era. Accounts of prewar farm women’s daily lives report diligent labor contributing to the household’s livelihood and barely mention time spent on child care, let alone dedication of long hours to anxious pampering of youngsters who were preparing for entrance examinations. The following translation epitomizes rural esteem for productivity rather than tender mother-child ties in prewar household enterprises:

The young wife was more skilled in weaving than the three young daughters, and she came to be recognized as the best weaver in the village. Her father-in-law and mother-in-law were pleased with her work. But because she was such an excellent weaver, they begrudged her taking any time away from the loom. They would complain, “Our young wife takes a lot of time in the toilet.” Or, “She sure takes a long time feeding the baby.” “She’s so dumb. She’s doing the washing again. It’s better for the family if she lets the old woman do the washing, and does some weaving instead.”3

Thus young farm mothers typically rose early in the morning, worked long hours in the fields and at by-employments, and often did much of the cooking,
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laundry, and housekeeping as well, but had little time for child care. In fact, in three-generation families a young married woman was not referred to as “mother” but as the “young wife” (yome), while in two-generation households she immediately became the “housewife,” or mistress of the house, without waiting for the senior wife’s retirement.4

These contrasting images—intensely child-focused contemporary motherhood and the caring but productive motherhood of the previous era—became the point of departure for this study. Initially, the most obvious means of examining attitudes toward modern motherhood seemed to be analysis of the content of the major early twentieth century women’s periodicals, Shufu no tomo (The housewife’s friend), Fujin no tomo (The lady’s friend), and Fujin kōron (Women’s central review), but the overabundance of material coupled with the difficulties of access precluded my pursuing changes in conceptions of motherhood in this way. Eventually, I realized that attitudes toward motherhood would emerge in the more readily accessible and compact literature discussing child-care centers. At the time I began research for the dissertation on which this book is based, the major sources, such as annual reports of day-care centers, settlements, and Home Ministry yearbooks, were scattered in university and public libraries as well as at social welfare institutions throughout the country, although the Great Tokyo Earthquake of 1923, the firebombings of the great cities at the end of World War II, as well as floods, fires, typhoons, and bureaucratic housecleanings, have thinned what were once very abundant materials. Thanks to the Shakai Jigyō Shi Kenkyūkai (Social Work History Research Group) centered at Nihon Joshi Daigaku (Japan Women’s University), many of these sources have been collected and reprinted since the mid-1980s, when my investigations began. These and other pioneering efforts to make sources more accessible provide a solid foundation for further research in the future.

There are many possible approaches to the study of child-care institutions; however, the ones adopted here were selected to advance an understanding of the central focus of this study—the social history of womanhood and childhood—especially changes in conceptions of motherhood and family life that are embedded in the arguments for and practices of Japan’s modern day-care centers. Institutional developments such as the size, curriculum, personnel, and organization of day-care centers and their relationship to the newly developing field of relief work (later, social work) are not ignored, nor are the connections between attitudes toward child-care centers and larger intellectual and social trends, including the nationalism of the era, desire for social or national progress, the rise of feminism, anxiety over the social problems resulting from industrialization,
and the search for solutions to such problems that motivated founders and staff members. Nonetheless, challenged by the paucity of works in Western languages treating the social history of modern Japan, especially that of women, children, the household or family, and the urban lower classes, I highlight motherhood and childhood in this study to contribute to the development of these subfields and expand the range of interpretations of modern Japanese history, Japanese society and state, and Japanese modernity.

Inspired by two fine day-care histories by Japanese scholars, the approach of this study nonetheless differs from those works in its concern with changes in conceptions and practices of motherhood, childhood, and family life more than the development of day-care centers as welfare and early childhood educational institutions. In addition, my approach has been influenced by trends in recent scholarship in women’s, gender, and children’s history beyond the Japan field.

First, while many earlier works in women’s history in the West viewed female adults as well as children of both genders as inhabitants of the private world of the home, much recent research, notably that on gender and state—for example, works concerning women and the welfare state, women and political theory, and gender and social policy—has reevaluated women’s relationship to the public world. In contrast to previous works on women and the state that emphasized the control exerted by modern states over women, a number of later works have called attention to the impact of women on the state.

Second, recent studies in children’s history have considered how the efforts of modern states and private reformers have refashioned, at times unintentionally, children’s place at work and at school, which in turn helped reshape attitudes toward children and their positions in households, society, and the nation. As in the case of women’s history, studies emphasizing state intentions or the state as an agent of social control have predominated. For example, Jacques Donzelot and Philippe Meyer are suggestive in their respective explorations of the ideological thrust of French “helping” institutions on households, but Donzelot does not fully consider the impact of external institutions or initiatives on processes such as child-rearing within the family. Other works treat reformers’ institutions and legislation as middle-class interventions into lower-class life. A handful of very recent studies, however, have stressed lower-class agency, including that of children. These attempts to explore childhood from the perspective of children and the lower classes are noteworthy, although the agency of preschool children, regardless of class or nationality, promises to be still more difficult to research and analyze.
Third, recent trends in women’s studies and feminist theory have influenced the conceptual framework and methodology of this study. While historians have traditionally explored continuities and discontinuities in ideas, institutions, and practices, postmodernism has given new impetus to the exploration of opposition or rupture not only in the facts, events, and ideas being studied, but also in the conceptual frameworks scholars employ in analyzing their subject matter. The interrogation of commonly accepted dualisms is another legacy of this new feminist literature; it has produced new insights by questioning dichotomous ways of conceptualizing gender, that is, “public man, private woman,” “male subject, female victim,” “productive male, reproductive female,” and even the dualism “male, female” itself.

My approaches to motherhood, childhood, and social reform draw selectively on the themes, conclusions, and methods of writings in social history and women’s studies, including those cited above. Most valuable, in my view, has been methodology that takes discontinuities as a point of departure and questions existing dichotomous conceptualizations. Thus the disjuncture between the images of the productive village woman of the modern era and the education mother of the contemporary era suggests that the study of changes in motherhood and therefore of womanhood in modern Japan might start with a reexamination of “man outside, woman inside” (otoko wa soto, onna wa uchi), an aphorism in decline. Rather than regarding this fading contemporary gender dualism that associates Japanese men with outside, or productive, work and Japanese women with inside, or domestic, work as a timeless truth, this study searches for signs of its historicity.

Based on examination of discourses concerning the establishment and operation of day-care centers and on analysis of shifting patterns of child care within households in the opening decades of the twentieth century, this study argues that although household divisions of labor by gender and age existed in early modern Japan, a more rigid female specialization in certain types of domestic work—in housekeeping and child-rearing as opposed to childbearing and expected participation in more varied forms of productive labor—developed during the modern era, especially for young married women. And over time, the activities of children also became more narrowly specialized. Beginning with middle-class children, but later for increasing numbers of lower-class children, participation in housework, child-rearing, and productive labor diminished while time spent at school increased. Children became dependents and consumers rather than income earners and productive workers in their households.
Thus Japanese modernity, a complex series of intertwined changes in society and culture that has been most commonly defined in terms of industrialization, demographic trends, class stratification, and nation-state formation, also involved significant changes in womanhood and childhood, and by extension in gender and household or family life as well.

In exploring how day-care centers (one type of institutional care for preschool children) took root and flourished in pre-World War II Japan, this study emphasizes two major factors: the congruence between nineteenth-century Japanese child-rearing patterns and day-care and the role of nationalism in generating strong, consistent Japanese support for child care. Chapter 1 discusses the approach of this study to the problem of day-care in modern Japan—useful concepts for its analysis, standard explanations for its development of day-care, and above all, the pressing issues of the times when it was introduced into Japan. Chapter 2 discusses late nineteenth-century patterns of child care and how these influenced Japanese responses to the institutional care of young lower-class children in the early twentieth century. It argues that widespread nurturing of infants and toddlers by household members other than mothers at all levels of nineteenth-century society fostered Japanese receptivity to day-care facilities among both their middle-class proponents and lower-class users after the turn of the century. Chapters 3 and 4 introduce the two early centers that became models for later facilities. Futaba Yöchien and Kōbe Seneki Kinen Hoikukai (KSKH; Kobe War Memorial Daycare Association), established in the first decade of the twentieth century, associated day-care with fulfillment of national goals—the political goal of incorporating lower-class children and parents into the Japanese nation-state through moral education and the economic goal of raising national productivity through promoting parental employment and family economic improvement among the urban lower classes. Chapter 5 discusses institutional growth in the next decade that resulted from acceptance of early arguments linking institutional child care with social and national progress at a time when both the Home Ministry (Naimushō) and the imperial institution were encouraging the establishment of private philanthropic and relief works. The KSKH emphasis on economic improvement proved more appealing, although it was not incompatible with the educational aims of Futaba Yöchien. In an era of government and elite preoccupation with the growth of Japan’s industry, military power, civilization, and international prestige, this linkage helped marshall broad support for day-care, including from powerful segments of the state bureaucracy. Chapter 6 discusses the founding of the first municipal day-care centers after World War I. Officials hastened to consider means of ame-
Introducing the conditions of the poor after the nationwide 1918 Rice Riots raised the specter of widespread popular uprisings of the needy.

Ironically, the steady expansion of institutional child care in modern Japan took place despite a continuing diffusion of new conceptions of womanhood from the 1870s emphasizing the centrality of the mother’s role in nurturing infants and older children. This paradox of prewar day-care—the growing emphasis on mothers’ unique role in child-rearing that seemingly contradicted the central purpose of a new institution that cared for young children outside the home—is in part related to the emergence of class variations in prewar Japanese notions of womanhood. While Western notions of educating women for their responsibilities as socializers of a new generation of citizens gained a foothold among the highly educated, nationalist elite at the beginning of the modern era, early modern willingness to harness the productive labor of lower- and middle-class women lingered due to a broad consensus supporting economic development and national strength. Yet as the twentieth century progressed, higher girls’ schools and women’s magazines reinforced the domestic identity of middle-class women, and advice recommending paid work for married women of the prosperous classes disappeared. Their main calling became the rearing of Japan’s future leaders and management of their households according to modern scientific principles. However, lower-class urban and rural women were held to less-stringent standards of maternal and wifely achievement, because their children were destined to become laborers, conscripts, and the mothers of future citizens. Sound physical and moral development were required, but meticulous socialization and careful education of lower-class children were less crucial to the nation’s future. Thus private interests and the state encouraged the founding of day-care centers in the cities for lower-class children and their parents from the first decade of the twentieth century.

If there is a gap between images of Japanese women today and their past activities, a second disjuncture can be found between contemporary children who are students and consumers and prewar children of various ages who engaged in important domestic and productive activities for their households. This rupture suggests that it is worthwhile to take a fresh look at age as well as gender in re-examining changes in household and society during the formation of Japan’s modern economy and state. To this end, my study will examine changes in childhood as well as motherhood in early twentieth century Japan. To the extent that children’s contributions to its maintenance and economy declined, the boundaries between children and adults became firmer, which increasingly differentiated children from adults as the modern era progressed. To the extent that all
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children, not just those of warriors and rich merchants and peasants, completed compulsory education in the modern era, variations in the early life course of the various classes diminished; over time, increasing uniformity of the life course during childhood became one factor in the emergence of a common national culture. However, as in the case of womanhood, it appears the rate of change proceeded at a faster pace for middle-class than lower-class children.

The rise of day-care centers as well as the reconstruction of womanhood and childhood in modern Japan were linked to a long-term, deep-seated, and at times almost desperate drive for national progress. Insecurity vis-à-vis the powerful industrialized and imperialistic Western states spurred the post-Restoration transformation of Japan. Modern Japanese leaders fully realized that the forging of a strong new nation necessitated the creation of a new people who could meet the varied challenges of modernity as colonists, conscripts, workers, and patriots on the homefront rather than a people whose primary identity derived from membership in a household or local community. That is, national salvation depended on socialization of ordinary Japanese children and the resocialization of ordinary Japanese adults to a new national orientation. And throughout the prewar era, most advocates of Japan’s progress expected that private and municipal day-care centers would function as the allies of adult members of households, public schools, and other state-sponsored organizations in shaping children who would loyally serve the needs of national advancement and the imperial state.