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妻 (tsuma) is not 奥さん (okusan)

Hidden Figures in Japan: Japanese Housewives

By

Xingyuan Zhang

In

Political Science & Language and Culture (JAPN&ARAB)

Submitted to the

Department of Political Science and Language and Culture

Trinity College

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مقدمة:

تتحدث هذه المقالة عن المشاكل التي تواجهها النساء اليابانيات في المجتمع الياباني، والتي تتمثل في إجبار النساء اليابانيات على أن يصبحن ربات منزل تحت ضغط المجتمع. هذه الظاهرة مشابهة لتلك التي تواجهها النساء في المنطقة العربية. في الأردن، حتى عام 2023، شاركت فقط 14% من النساء في القوى العاملة الاقتصادية، بينما نسبة مشاركة الرجال في القوى العاملة تبلغ 62.8%. (حسب إحصائيات البنك الدولي) على الرغم من أن نسبة مشاركة النساء في القوى العاملة الاقتصادية تزداد كل عام، فإن نسبة النساء الأردنيات ما زالت بعيدة جدًا عن نظرائهن من الرجال الأردنيين. لذلك، تأمل هذه المقالة أن تساعد مشاكل وقمع النساء اليابانيات في المجتمع في إلهام النساء في المنطقة العربية أيضًا.

يختلف المجتمع الياباني عن المجتمع الأردني في بنيته التوعوية. لا تتأثر التقاليد الاجتماعية للمجتمع الياباني بالديانات التقليدية فقط، مثل الشنتوية والبوذية، بل يرث المجتمع الياباني أيضًا الكونفوشيوسية والكونفوشيوسية الجديدة. تشكل الوعي في المجتمع التقليدي في الأردن تحت تأثير التعاليم الإسلامية السائدة وقليل من المسيحية في المجتمع الياباني، تحت تأثير النيو-كونفوشيوسية، يتم تعليم النساء بأن النساء بأن يكنّ تابعات للرجال، تمامًا كما يكون الأبناء تابعين لأبائهم والوزراء تابعين للملك. (أزوما، 2020) النساء ليس لديهن مكانة تابعة فقط، ولكنهن أيضًا مسؤولات عن عائلات أزواجهن. منذ عصر مييجي، كان المعيار الاجتماعي

للنساء هو أن تكون زوجة صالحة وأماً جيدة. وفي اليابان، بعد الزواج، تأخذ النساء زمام المبادرة لمساعدة أزواجهن في حياتهم المهنية وتعليم أطفالهن في الدراسات. وفي ظل هذا الوضع، لا تتمتع المرأة اليابانية بالحق في اتخاذ خيارات مستقلة على الإطلاق. ولم يعد المجتمع يطلب منها المشاركة بشكل مباشر في العمل الاقتصادي، بل أصبح مطلوباً منها البقاء في المنزل لرعاية زوجها وتربية الأطفال. علاوة على ذلك، فإن توقعات المجتمع الياباني من المرأة هي مساعدة الأسرة على التطور بشكل أفضل من خلال نموذج رعاية الزوج وتربية الأطفال، حتى يتمكن الزوج من العمل بشكل أفضل ويمكن للأطفال الدراسة بشكل أفضل لتحقيق هدف مشاركة اسهام الأسرة الصغيرة في تطوير المجتمع.

وبخلاف المجتمع الياباني، لم يتأثر المجتمع الأردني بالثقافة الشرق أوسطية، ولم يتأثر بالثقافة الكونفوشيوسية. ومع ذلك، مثل معظم دول العالم، فإن المجتمع الأردني هو مجتمع أبوي، وللمرأة الأردنية أيضاً مكانة تابعة في المجتمع. كما يتوقع المجتمع من المرأة الأردنية أن تدعم الأسرة بشكل أفضل بدلاً من العمل خارج المنزل. كان من المتوقع من النساء إكمال الأعمال المنزلية ورعاية الأطفال. وفي المقابل، عادة ما يتعين على الرجال العمل خارج المنزل فقط. إن هذا التوزيع للعمالة هو في الواقع غير معقول على الإطلاق. على الرغم من أن نسبة النساء المشاركات في العمل الاجتماعي تتزايد سنة بعد سنة، إلا أن نسبة النساء المشاركات في العمل الاجتماعي لا تزال أقل بكثير من نسبة الرجال.

Introduction

Japanese housewives, referred as “Shufu” in Japanese, represent a large group of people in Japanese society. The reasons for their emergence, the problems they face, and how to solve the problems they face today are all very complex issues that are worth thinking about. It always can be started with simple questions: how did a large number of Shufu appear, and how are women being pressured into taking on social roles of Shufu? In order to understand these issues, both from the perspective of world feminist theorists and Japanese feminist theorists, these theorists can generally be divided into two groups which are Liberal Feminism and Marxist Socialist Feminism.

Liberal feminists have a very complete theoretical system. First, they start by affirming the value of women’s labor and supporting women’s labor. Some schools of liberal political theory hope to ensure that women have the right to choose freely under the framework of the social contract. Therefore, women should not be forced to complete all housework, and women should have the right to choose to take on social responsibilities. John Stuart Mill believes that women should be given the right to create social value, so that they are not just trapped in the family and become full-time housewives. Women should also have their own right to choose whether to become housewives or work outside of the house and own their own independent properties, so that women will not be trapped by the family and can gain a foothold in society by themselves. (Mill, 1869) The situation that Mill analyzes also applies to Japanese society, where it is more common to see housewives than in the United States nowadays. Under this social structure, it is usually difficult for housewives who take on the main tasks of the family to leave their husbands and obtain financial independence in society. In society, in the long run, the demand for women

working outside of the house has become lower, and women have to submit to family work and be subservient to their husbands or fathers. Traditional Japanese culture has a long history of problems with housewives. Although modern Japan has received a lot of influence from Western culture (especially from the United States after World War II when Japan was deeply influenced by the United States), Japan still retains profound traditional cultural thoughts about home (“Ie” in Japanese), especially from the Neo-Confucianism concept. Under the influence of this concept, the image of “ryōsai kenbo” as a good wife and loving mother was established. With this influence, women are no longer individuals with free choice, but are appendages of their husbands under the patriarchal system. Their purpose in life is to become wives who clean and help their husbands complete their work better, and mothers who take care of and educate their children. Therefore, it is important to affirm the value of a homemaker and a married woman as an individual.

From a liberal way of approaching the reasons for Japanese women choosing to be housewives, in 1955 we can turn to Ishigaki Ayako, who published a statement in *Fujin Kōron*, a famous Japanese women’s magazine. She said women should no longer be restricted to the domestic sphere and being a housewives should no longer be seen as a women’s only way of life. Women should also spend time on social responsibilities, so women also need to get out of the house and find social jobs (Ishigaki, 1955). Although Ishigaki Ayako’s remarks can be seen as encouraging women to get out of the house and no longer regard the family as the only and all, she ignored the oppression of patriarchy and capital in Japanese society neglected that men also need to bear housework responsibilities. Ishigaki Ayako simply expected women to be perseverant and strong, and to balance household responsibilities and social work so that they can take care of the

family and children at home, and have the same social status brought by work as “men” outside. However, she ignored the inequality between men and women brought about by the patriarchal society, and she believed that housework was a part of women’s natural responsibility. However, it is undeniable that her article did allow Japanese women to see other possibilities besides being housewives, making them realize that they can also work outside the home “like men”. Meanwhile, her remarks provoked counterarguments from various feminist theorists.

Most of Ishigaki’s opponents believe that Ishigaki’s approach of treating housewifery as a second career is devaluing the value of housewifery. In the view of opponents, the value of a housewife does not require going out to work, and housewives inherently work at home and generate value. This can be seen through remarks made by Sakanishi Shiho in April 1955, also in *Fujin Kōron* magazine. Sakanishi herself is a housewife. She believes that the value of Japanese women, or the value of being a housewife, is to care for their husbands and raise children, and this life is no lower than men going out to work. Women’s duty is to manage the family well, and the value women receive can also be reflected in the family. (Sakanishi, 1955) Sakanishi’s remarks are actually in line with Japan’s traditional social requirements for women, just like the concept of a good wife and mother in Neo-Confucianism we mentioned earlier. However, there is also an objection based on the perspective that housework is not a woman’s vocation. For Japanese women to become housewives, which is only a hidden social rule under tradition, although social rules are not necessarily correct.

Then in June 1955, Shimazu Chitose published an article in *Fujin Kōron* magazine: Housework is not a housewife’s duty. This article could be considered as bringing new ideas to the entire

debate. Shimazu mentioned that housework is not something women are born to do but is imposed on women through social requirements. It is not that Japanese women do not want to work outside the home, but they are unable to do both family and career work. Shimazu also mentioned the wage gap between men and women. Even though men and women do the same job, women are still seen as people who do not need that much salary because women are not seen as the breadwinners of the family. (Shimazu, 1955) Shimazu's point of view is still applicable to Japanese society today.

Takeda Kyōko's article "Shufu is the true representation of liberated human beings" was published in Fujin Kōron magazine in April 1972. In this article, Takeda affirms the value of life as a housewife, so housewifery can also be a life choice. At the same time, Takeda highlights more possibilities for housewives. A housewife can be not only a full-time housewife, but also a part-time housewife. Part-time work can help a housewife become more financially independent, although the social situation is still difficult for housewives to gain fully economic independence. Therefore, being a housewife could be a kind of lifestyle. (Takeda, 1972) Takeda's theory is very relevant to today's Japanese society. Housewives are usually no longer full-time housewives in the traditional sense, but they often work part-time jobs to earn living expenses. Many Japanese housewives today find full-time jobs between graduation and marriage. After getting married and having children, they become full-time housewives, and then they can start working part-time outside the home when their children are growing up and entering college. This all sounds great but, under the pressure of society, can becoming a housewife really be the result of free choice? Are housewives really liberated beings?

There may be many reasons why Japanese women choose to be housewives, but it must not be classified as a housewife's free choice. The current situation of society makes it difficult for housewives to realize the so-called freedom of choice for Japanese women to become housewives. Thus, in May 1972, Hayashi Kaoru criticized Takeda's views on housewives as liberated human beings. Hayashi disagreed with Takeda's view of housewives as they could make their free choices. In Hayashi's point of view, Takeda idealized the situation, and the housewife has no real choice. Hayashi believed that a housewife's choice, whether she works outside the home or chooses to be a full-time housewife, should be determined by the family's financial situation, especially when financial burdens appear. Without a higher level of financial situation, it is difficult for housewives to talk about free choices and liberated human beings. (Hayashi, 1972) Indeed, in Japan's society, the widespread phenomenon of housewives and the fact that Japanese women are the main ones doing housework all point to the conclusion that becoming a housewife is hardly a choice of one's own, but a social choice. Under the pressure of society, women have to choose to become housewives. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to draw the conclusion that housewives could be liberated beings. Hayashi's conclusion could be considered as the typical Marxist Feminist way of approaching the reasons for Japanese women being housewives.

Financial independence and freedom of choice are interrelated. In Isono Fujiko's April 1960 article in the Asahi Journal, called "Confusion in Liberation Theories of Women," she affirmed for the economic value of housewives. (Isono, 1960) Isono believes that many of the tasks that housewives do, such as turning cloth into clothes, are just like tailors on the street, and they also bring production value to their husbands, and this value does not require the same payment as

paying tailors. However, this monetary value cannot be denied by society. However, Isono also emphasizes the significance of housewives to the family. She believes that the greatest value of women lies not in working outside the home but in raising children at home. (Isono, 1960) From this point of view, although Isono affirmed the economic value of family work, she did not find a way out of a good wife and mother. Therefore, Isono's remarks also aroused different objections. Marxist feminist theorists believe that women being required to undertake housework is a manifestation of the unequal status of women in society. A representative figure in the second debate was the Marxist feminist Watanabe Taeko. Watanabe believes the development of capitalism has broken down the social economy of Japan's previous feudal period, so the previous form of being a housewife is no longer applicable. Watanabe Taeko actually has very similar ideas to American Marxist Feminist Silvia Federici. Both advocate that housewives have become cheap labor under the control of capital, and this labor supports their husbands to better serve capital (Watanabe, 1960). According to the feminist theorist Silvia Federici, the essence of women doing housework or even becoming full-time housewives is the allocation of capital to social labor to achieve a greater degree of exploitation of human labor (Federici, 1975). Housewives, like workers, are objects of labor in capitalist society but do not receive social recognition of value. Similarly, housewives contribute labor value to the family, but they cannot get economic rewards. However, due to social pressures, many women in Japan have to become housewives. They cannot make choices on their own, but the choices are given by the society. Ueno Chizuko is currently one of the most famous feminist political theorists in Japan, and many of her views are very relevant to the actual situation in Japan. She can also be regarded as a Marxist feminist, so many of her ideas are very similar to those of Federici. In her book *Patriarchy and Capitalism*, she argues that housework is the primary political issue for feminism.

Housework is often associated with women, motherhood, and love. In this case, women are forced by society to associate their future with housework. (Ueno, 2020) Hence, value affirmation is especially important for women in society. As a result of social disruption, women have become the easier party to compromise with housework. Under such conditions, women naturally choose to become housewives, and this choice is definitely not a necessary nor an independent one.

Therefore, on the family level, Japanese women are expected to be good wives and mothers. From a social level, it is difficult for Japanese women to achieve true economic independence, and their value is definitely tied to housework. The formation of these kinds of values has truly blocked Japanese women's right to freely choose to become housewives.

Methodology

“Can I just simply find a permanent job called ‘marriage’ and be freed from this bottomless pit of job hunting? But it doesn’t seem to be quite like that.” (2016) This quote comes from a TV show called *The Full-Time Wife Escapist*, where the female protagonist makes her exclamation in the first episode. What she expresses is the real family situation of many Japanese women.

According to data provided by the Statistics Bureau of Japan in September 2023, the number of male employees is 37.22 million, while the number of female employees is 30.65 million.

(Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2023) Analyzing data from Japan's Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet

Office, as of 2021, the employment rate of Japanese women still has an M-shaped curve trend. According to this trend, the employment rate of women aged 25 to 29 can be as high as 86.9%, but the employment rate of women aged 30 to 34 is only 79.4%. (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2021) According to another set of data from Japan's Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office in 2020, the average age of marriage for Japanese women is between 27 and 28 years old, and basically 70% of Japanese women will complete their first marriage before the age of 30. The comparison between this set of data and the previous one shows that Japanese women are around 30 years old when they get married and the age when they become unemployed; thus, women who quit their jobs "choosing" to become housewives.

The research will specifically focus on the group of Japanese housewives and using Marxist and Liberal Feminist theories on how women choose to be housewives. As one of the most economically developed countries in the world, Japan has a completely different cultural development and historical process from the Western world. Moreover, Japan also has social structures and problems that are different from other countries in East Asia. Japan's contemporary ideology has accepted more Western influences than other Asian countries. At the same time, Japan has retained many unique cultural characteristics of East Asia. Among them, Japanese housewives, as a very prominent social group in Japan, showcase the true portrayal of women in both Eastern and Western societies and their real plight in the society.

As such a common social situation for Japan's society, the reasons for the emergence of Japanese housewives and why Japanese women being housewives are worthy of being noted. Are Japanese women being housewives acting from their own free will or are they forced to make

choices under pressure from other aspects? This thesis will focus on the questions above and discuss the issue of Japanese housewives.

Speaking of methodological philosophy and approach, this thesis will use world and Japanese political theories to interpret the issue of free choice among Japanese housewives. Both world and Japanese political theories will be divided into Liberalist Feminism and Marxist Feminism; moreover, the thesis will fill the gaps in the explanation of liberal feminism through the further interpretations of Marxist feminism. Therefore, this thesis will adopt a qualitative analysis research method and mostly accomplish it by using the Interpretivism way of researching. This thesis mainly uses secondary sources, such as perspective articles on feminist theory and some famous television works, to interpret the current situation of Japanese feminism and the underlying reasons why women become housewives.

There are two variables in this thesis, and each of them will be valued separately in Chapter I and Chapter II. The first variable called cultural commonsense or ideological consensus will be used in Chapter I. Cultural commonsense in this thesis could be understood as the broad recognition of the social roles played by Japanese women in the cultural context of Japanese society. The ideological consensus could be defined as the recognition of Japanese women's social identity under the long-term influence of the Japanese political situation. Therefore, the second chapter will mainly focus on explaining the social gender roles for Japanese women via the concept of Neo-Confucianism. Neo-Confucianism is the development and interpretation of the Confucian school established by Confucius and Mencius. What Japan inherits is usually Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism. As a type of Neo-Confucian school, it is usually known as a rigid and dogmatic

image. Under the trends of Neo-Confucianism, Japan's society has formed a serious patriarchy and primogeniture social structure. Indeed, the concept from Neo-Confucianism is developed under the political influence and forms the ideology of the Japanese style of family structure which is called "Ie" in Japanese. The role of women in "Ie" could be described as "Ryosai Kenbo" which means good wife and wise mother. In this part, other East Asian countries, especially those that are also influenced by Neo-Confucius will be compared and discussed with Japan's situation and use the comparison to introduce the second variable for Chapter III. Furthermore, in Chapter III, another variable is social welfare. Social welfare in this thesis could be defined as the lack of social care in Japan's society, and women are affected as main domestic laborers for Japanese "Ie". Under the historical background of changing Japan's "iron triangle", as the relations among politicians, bureaucrats, and business leaders, after the 1990s, the social welfare system was created by relying on family for childcare care and older care, and the further possible solutions will be discussed.

In this thesis, there are two main kinds of analyzing methods. The first methodological approach is textual analysis by using popular TV shows to analyze the reasons for Japanese women ending up being housewives to challenge the liberal feminist's views about housewives choosing to be housewives under their free wills. TV show will be analyzed is called *The Full-Time Wife Escapist*, the same one quoted above, which talks about a woman holding a master's degree of psychology but ending up being a housewife, and she chooses to be housewife is because she cannot find a full-time job except cleaning the house, which is related to the scenario in the research question about Japanese women did not choose to be housewife under their free wills. Also, the show can be considered as the typical case for portraying Japanese society. This TV

series is adapted from a Japanese “Josei manga”, as Japanese girl’s anime, and the story is totally fictional and not based on reality. However, the audiences for Josei manga are usually women, and they can reflect the aspirations of Japanese women and contrast them with reality. This drama was broadcast in 2016 and has been influential around the world, especially in Japan, and the explosive phenomenon of this show expressing voices for young women in Japan about their current social situations. Moreover, the second methodological approach using in the third chapter will be legal analysis. In order to analyze the women’s social situation under Japan’s laws and regulations, the specific legal provisions will be analyzed and discussed. As a result, Japan’s unequal law articles towards women will be measured; thus, the pressure turns to privatized social cares and influences women’s free choices.

However, the methodology of this thesis also has many limitations. There is a problem with the data collection for case study in the research method. The sample to be studied is only one TV show. Even though this TV show is recognized by many viewers, the main target group of viewers is young women. There may be a certain degree of bias in a specific research subject group. TV shows are fictional works of art with artistic processing, including exaggerated descriptions of some factual situations. In addition, interpretivism in qualitative research methods has a strong subjective bias. Therefore, the author’s interpretation of different schools of thought might be biased. Similarly, the author’s background understanding of Japanese society is based more on the omniscient perspective. Although the author has half a year of study experience in Japan, the author cannot go deep into the fundamental social issues and cannot interpret the situation they face as local Japanese women to interpret the social and political dynamics in Japan.

In conclusion, in order to figure out whether Japanese women choosing to be housewives under their free wills or Japanese women being housewives under oppressions from cultural perspective and social system, this thesis will use qualitative research methods by interpreting Marxist Feminist perspectives to criticize Liberal Feminist perspectives from Japan and the whole world. Although there are some limitations among the ranges and the amount of sample, pure interpretivism for researching, and lack of author's personal experiences of the studied region, this thesis still could have a profound impact on reflecting the major problems faced by Japanese women from social and political perspectives.

Chapter I: Study on Cultural Factors Shaping Japanese Women being Housewives

1.1 Japanese Cultural Background on Gender Roles of Women

Japanese society, like many other societies under patriarchal systems, expects women to shoulder more family responsibilities. Perhaps Japanese men face certain expectations for their future careers from birth but, by comparison, Japanese women are definitely expected to provide more of the care for their families. Women in Japanese universities enjoy the same rights to education as do men, unlike after they get married. Japanese women can also, like men, learn the knowledge they are interested in and envision their future careers. According to data from the Japan's Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, as of 2019, the enrollment rates in higher education for Japanese men and Japanese women were 96% and 95% respectively. (Japan's Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2019) Although there are differences in school choice, both men and women have the same opportunities to enter higher education. However, once Japanese women get married, gender equalities are lost.

The first thing Japanese women lose is their last name. Unlike Western society, surnames are particularly important to Japanese people. In Japanese culture, people usually refer to each other by their surnames. According to Japan's current civil law, when people get married, one of the spouses must change their surname. As of 2021, the vast majority of people who change their surnames after marriage are women, accounting for about 95% of the total number of marriages. (Japan's Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2021) Most women have their fathers' surnames before they get married and switching women's surnames could be hard if they change after they enter the society and have their careers, because they are recognized by the society from the original surnames. After using their maiden names for decades, many women

reluctantly change their surnames to their husbands' since it is a complicated process. Not only does this require a lot of time commitment, but it also requires changing the public's social recognition of Japanese women. Therefore, from the moment they change their surname, Japanese women are no longer themselves, but they are regarded by society as part of their husband's family.

The second loss is their employment status. After getting married, Japanese women no longer need to go to the workplace, or they will never be taken seriously in the workplace. However, marriage and family may make the working situation of Japanese women even worse. There are different job regulations in the Japanese workplace. For instance, there are two positions for job hunting, which are divided into general positions, as "Ippan-shoku" in Japanese, and management positions, as "Sōgō-shoku" in Japanese. Management positions usually require employees to be transferred to different countries or places at any time as dispatched employees according to company requirements. Japanese women are often excluded from recruitment for management positions because they are considered a key part of the family. The underlying logic behind this is that men are allowed to put work first, while women need to prioritize their families, and as a result, Japanese women usually have to make a strict choice between working and having children, and many Japanese women have to quit their jobs after getting married. According to data from Japan's Gender Equality Bureau in 2014, 46.9% of women quit their jobs after giving birth to their first child (Japan's Cabinet, 2014), so there is still a large number of women being housewives even though they used to have a job.

The Japanese society's emphasis on the role of women as caretaker in the family is worth scrutinizing. This relationship manipulates and oppresses women to a certain extent and prompts them to become housewives. Therefore, the second chapter focuses on the significance of cultural and ideological consensus in Japanese society in promoting Japanese women to become housewives.

1.1.1 Introduction to Neo-Confucianism in Japan

Modern Japanese culture is still under the influence of general East Asian cultural, in which Confucianism plays a big role. Modern Japanese culture inherits the ideas of the Tokugawa Shogunate, who was the general ruling Japan during the Edo period (1603-1868), according to Professor R. Dore (1984). The Tokugawa Shogunate adopted Neo-Confucianism and other concepts, such as Shintoism and Buddhism, to Japan and made Neo-Confucianism ideology. (China Cultural Institute, 2021) Confucius developed Confucianism during the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period (475-221 bce) in China. A thousand years later, Zhu Xi of China's Song Dynasty further interpreted and developed Confucius' thoughts, which are now known as Zhu Xixue. Zhu Xixue was brought to Japan by Zen monks, then in Japan, Zhu Xixue developed into Japanese Shushi-Gaku. (China Cultural Institute, 2021) Since it was developed from Zhu Xi's thoughts, it is particularly important to first understand Zhu Xi's thoughts. Zhu Xi is one of the representatives of Neo-Confucianism in the Confucian school. He advocates metaphysics which focuses on the nature of abstraction, essence, existence, and entities and their relationships. He believes that all things have reason before they exist (Feng, 1948), referred to as objective idealism, which states that human actions cannot violate the laws of nature, because the rules are already predetermined by heaven. This idea was a good excuse

for the feudal ruling class, including Tokugawa Shogunate, who used this ideology in deciding their law making. Furthermore, from the perspective of Japanese Shintoism, the Japanese emperor, different from Tokugawa Shogunate, is the representative of God and the divine sovereignty of heaven. Although the emperor was not actually ruling the country, he was the imperative spiritual leader of the country. Most significantly, the rules of heaven come first, and humans can only obey the rules of heaven. This complete set of logical closed loops has formed many of Japan's social views. Since these principles of God's existence cannot be defied, they must be followed.

1.1.2 Analysis on how Japanese women under influences of Neo-Confucianism: The Formation of Japanese-style Housewife “ryōsai kenbo”

Since the rules of heaven cannot be violated, then what are the rules of heaven for Japanese women? First of all, we need to mention a common concept among Confucians, which is the “three cardinal principles and five constant principles”. This point can be regarded as a fundamental principle in Zhu Xi's studies. The three cardinal principles refer to the three types of human relationships, namely husband and wife, father and son, and monarch and minister. This chapter mainly analyzes these three principles. Among these three relationships, Zhu Xixue believes that the husband, father, and monarch have restricted the wife, son, and minister, which are subordinate to the previous parties respectively. According to the trend of this hierarchy, the wife can always be interpreted as the subordinate of the husband. Therefore, under Zhu Xi's teaching, the wife is subordinate to the husband, just like a son is subordinate to his father, and a minister is subordinate to the king, which is the structure of a typical patriarchal society. According to the interpretation of the article by Jūji Azuma, a professor at the Institute of East

Asian Culture at Kansai University, Japan, Zhu Xi's requirements for the Three Cardinal Principles are what he considers necessary for a good society, and Azuma also mentions the view that "men and women are different." (Azuma, 2020) The understanding of "different" leads to various interpretations. However, unfortunately, it was understood by the Japanese ruling class as labor differences which require women to work at home as housewives and men work outside for earning money.

Quoted from Zhu Xi, the family is considered the core of society. According to Jūji Azuma's interpretation, Zhu Xi believed that the husband and wife came first, then the father and son, and finally the king and his ministers were created. The family created by husband and wife bears the obligation to maintain social labor and take care of family members. (Azuma, 2020) The obligation of women here can specifically refer to housework, including supporting the elderly and educating children. Therefore, the social division of labor between men and women emerged under Zhu Xi's studies. Since the wife is subordinate to the husband, the wife should assist her husband in his career. Correspondingly, the wife should handle everything in the family at home. It is worth noting that the wife is not treated as an individual here, but she is an indispensable factor in completing the transmission of family powers from the husband to his son. As a result, the social role that women play under the social division of labor in the family can only be that of the wife. Women need men to fulfill their social achievements, so women have to get married, and women's social achievements after marriage are actually to become good mothers and wise wives, which is referred as "ryōsai kenbo", by doing housework. In the Meiji period (1868-1912), Japan is in a period of transformation to modernization, and both the government and society need to promote the development of the country through the stability of the family

(Shizuko, 2012). Therefore, women are regarded as important pillars of the family and the country, and their behavior as good wives and wise mothers is considered to be their contribution and dedication to the country, just like men need to contribute to the country by joining the army. Women's social gender roles under Neo-Confucianism further developed during the Meiji period, which also contributed to the social status of Japanese women in modern Japan today.

Hence, these patriarchal Confucian ideas from thousands of years ago are still relevant today. Through various forms of media, such as movies, TV shows, and Manga, gender roles and expectations for women are still perpetuating stereotypes of women as housewives. Josei Manga is a genre of manga that caters to women and reflects real life issues of women.

1.2 Analysis of the representations of housewives in popular TV shows

The Full-Time Wife Escapist, a TV series adapted from Josei Manga, is a famous Japanese TV series which shows the different choices and situations of contemporary Japanese women. Although this TV series revolves around the main female character Moriyama Mikuri who cannot find a job after earning her master's degree from a graduate school, the existence of three other female characters also plays a large role. They are Moriyama Mikuri's best friend, Mikuri's aunt, and her mother. These three characters represent different possibilities to the main character Mikuri, because the four of them chose four different lives after graduation. Each of them is a different social microcosm of Japanese women, and these three female characters can also be regarded as potential choices for Moriyama Mikuri. Even if Mikuri really chooses another path, just like her best friend, aunt, or mother, will her life really be different? In Part

2.2, each life choice of these four people will be analyzed in detail, and finally they will be summarized and analyzed.

1.2.1 Analysis of the main female character Moriyama Mikuri

In the TV show, Moriyama Mikuri apparently faced two choices before getting married. The first choice was when she graduated from university. She wanted to find a business job in planning and development, but she could not find any related job. At this time, she firmly chose to continue her graduate studies, and she hoped that after completing her studies, there were better options after graduate school. Her first choice to continue studying was in sharp contrast to her second choice.

During her graduate studies, she chose a clinical psychology course and obtained the qualification certificate of a clinical psychologist after graduation. However, after she graduated from graduate school, she faced a second choice. In the second choice, she had to start entering the workplace. She hoped to find some social value in the workplace. However, the highly competitive nature of the workplace in Japanese society means that even though she has a graduate degree and a clinical psychology qualification, she still cannot find a job. Because she chose to work, and since she could not find a job in a related field, she could only register with a dispatch company which provides her temporary jobs.

According to the definition given by the Japan's Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, employees can be divided into three main types based on the contracts they sign. The first type is regular labor, "*seishain*" which refers to employees who have no fixed employment period and

work full-time during the service period set by the company. *Seishain* has a long-term contract that works until retirement. The company has the personnel right to transfer positions of regular members. The second type is contract labor, “*Keiyaku shain*”. Although contract laborers have a fixed employment period, usually up to three years, professionals with highly specialized knowledge and skills can obtain contracts of up to five years, this contract can also be the same as that of regular laborers. Alternatively, employees could sign *seishain* contracts and *keiyaku shain* contracts separately. The third type is dispatched employees, “*haken*”, which is the contract type of Moriyama Mikuri. The dispatched employees sign a contract with the employee’s dispatch company, and then the dispatch company where the employee works contacts the employer to transport the employee to the company. Generally speaking, employees will be dispatched to work in the company only when the company is extremely short of labor forces or needs to save costs for paying workers. (Japan’s Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2023) Obviously, there is no fixed salary guaranteed for dispatched employees, so Moriyama Mikuri’s job is very unstable. *haken shain* is not what Moriyama Mikuri wants to do, but even though she has more education than is required for this job, if she chooses to work in society, she can only be a dispatched employee. In this choice, Moriyama Mikuri chose to work rather than continue studying, but what Moriyama Mikuri cannot choose is what kind of work she can do.

Looking specifically at this dispatch job, Moriyama Mikuri was often asked by her male boss to clean cups. The request to clean the cups was not in Moriyama Mikuri’s contract, but because it was a hard-earned job, Moriyama Mikuri did not refuse, which is a perfect demonstration of the socially assigned roles of females in Japan. Moriyama Mikuri is a woman with a clinical

psychology certificate, but in the eyes of her boss, the only value she could provide to the company is washing cups. Cleaning tasks like washing cups are often associated with motherhood or women, and the fundamental reason lies in the association between women and housework. As Mikuri explained in the show, “Although cleaning things is not stipulated in the contract, I am too lazy to argue about it.” Marxist feminist Federici pointed out in her article “Wages against Housework” that even in social services, much of the social work done by women is an extension of family roles. Therefore, from a social perspective, even women who work in society play the role of “housewives in society” (Federici, 1975). Even though Moriyama Mikuri was doing the job of dispatching employees, she was still expected to do cleaning-related work by her male boss. Moriyama Mikuri can be regarded as a “housewife” in the workplace. Even if work such as cleaning cups is not covered by the employment contract, the practice of a male boss asking a female subordinate to clean cups can be considered gender-based exploitation of labor surplus value. Ueno Chizuko’s book *Patriarchy and Capitalism* mentioned that not classifying housework as labor is an exploitation of women’s labor. Labor can be divided into “paid work” and “unpaid work” and the corresponding gender division of labor between men and women. Housework is “unpaid work”, which means it is “unpaid labor” that is unfairly exploited. It is the market and the men in the market who profit from this “unpaid labor”. (Ueno, 2014) Moriyama Mikuri’s role in social companies is also like that of a housewife. Mikuri’s failure to stand up to her boss was out of desperation to keep her job, as her job was currently her only way to be recognized by society.

Due to the overstaffing and Mikuri holding a master’s degree was overqualified for a dispatch company, she was fired from the dispatch company and tried working in a job as a domestic

worker that her father had found for her, she faced her third choice in life. This time, she chose to stay in the home of her employer, who is the main male character Tsuzaki Hiramasa, and become a full-time domestic worker. This choice is not so much the choice of the female main character, but rather the handover of patriarchy. In the first episode of the show, Mikuri's father mentions the part-time job of cleaning house for Hiramasa while the family is eating dinner. Before mentioning this job, Mikuri told her parents about her part-time job at her aunt's house, where she helped her clean the house. After that, her father suddenly said something seemingly unrelated, "I also like my house to be clean, so sometimes I think it's great that Sakura (referring to Mikuri's mother) is good at cleaning." (*The Full-Time Escapist*, 2016) This sentence from her father may seem strange, but in fact it is a perfect representation of the traditional Japanese family, and it is a true embodiment of the male working outside of the house and the female being inside and doing housework. Since the father likes the house to be clean, what does it have to do with mom? This logic also emphasizes from the side that in the father's subconscious mind, housework is a mother's business, or a woman's business, and whether the house is cleaned or not totally depends on his wife. This is a husband in a traditional Japanese family under the influence of Neo-Confucianism ideology. Under the influence of tradition, a husband does not need to do housework at all; moreover, he can command his wife to do housework under his free wills, in contrast, his wife does not have the choice to do the family's housework or not. After all, this is the rule from heaven, according to Zhu Xi, so husbands and wives are following this ideology which is deeply inside their minds. Immediately afterwards, the father mentioned Tsuzaki as an acquaintance he knows and needs someone to clean the house once a week, and the father decided to send Mikuri as the woman to clean Tsuzaki's house. Mikuri was shocked because she never heard of this acquaintance of her father and had no plans to take up

cleaning as her future job for a long time. However, here her father did not give Mikuri any options to choose, but he directly “notified” her to start cleaning next Friday. At the same time, Mikuri did not try to refuse but followed her father’s willingness. Mikuri’s behavior actually alludes to how her story ends, in which she became to a housewife. It seems like a coincidence for Mikuri to have an ending without being a psychologist, but every choice she made is deeply influenced by the underlying Neo-Confucianism ideology, which includes patriarchy and gender roles for women doing chores.

In conclusion, Moriyama Mikuri’s three choices were all based on the affirmation of finding social value. Japanese feminist Ueno Chizuko argues in her other book *Disgust against Women (The Feeling of Disgust against Females in Japan)* that women have two kinds of value, the value she obtains by herself, and the value given by others, specifically men (Ueno, 2015). Here others or men can be understood as the value given to women in patriarchal society, or more specifically, the requirements of Japan’s Edo Neo-Confucianism for women’s social gender roles. The ending of this TV series seems to be a happy ending, but the so-called value advocated by Moriyama Mikuri was not achieved at all, because Moriyama Mikuri eventually became a housewife. Looking back on her two choices before getting married, Moriyama Mikuri originally wanted to do work related to corporate development and planning, but because the social market did not accept her, she had to continue her graduate studies. When she was in graduate school, the female protagonist not only obtained a graduate degree, but also obtained a clinical psychologist qualification. However, Moriyama Mikuri still could not earn a full-time position. Being a dispatched employee is a job that Moriyama Mikuri clearly expresses she does not like, but in order to realize the so-called social value, she chooses to work hard without complaint.

The third so-called “choice” was even more ridiculous. In order to prove that she was still needed, or that she was still valuable, Moriyama Mikuri finally turned directly into a full-time domestic worker, and she even later became a full-time housewife. It can be considered that the third so-called “choice” directly changed the value that seemed to be given to her by the patriarchal society into the value given to her by her husband. It can be said that Moriyama Mikuri has fallen into the trap arranged by Japanese society step by step, and from beginning to end she has never realized the value she gave herself, and she has not even thought about the value she can give her own life.

1.2.2 Analysis of Mikuri’s Mother -- Moriyama Sakura

Most Japanese women change their last names as soon as they marry. This is how Moriyama Sakura became a member of the Moriyama family. Therefore, I will call her Sakura by following her first name, because except being the wife and mother of the Moriyama family, Sakura, her first name, is the only thing left that belongs to her. Her portrayal in the TV series was minimal, and she was always seen alongside her husband. She seemed to do everything with her husband. They moved out of the city together to retire in the countryside. The one thing that did not change was that Sakura still had to do her housework.

As a different alternative to Mikuri, Sakura is a character that can be interpreted in many ways. She may have struggled in society for a long time before choosing to get married, return to the family, and become a housewife. Or she might have just graduated and married into the Moriyama family and became a housewife. In short, her life in the TV series is as average or stereotypical as her name. Most housewives are like this, and she is no different. She does not

seem to have tried to rebel against the status quo because she smiles every time she appears and is always by her husband's side. She is very similar to Mikuri in that they are both "good" at cleaning and being housewives. Being good at cleaning is like a title given to them by people around them, allowing them to become housewives with peace of mind and fulfill the value that society requires of them as women.

In addition to criticizing the oppression of women by men in a patriarchal society, the relationship between women is also particularly important. Among all relationships between women, the mother-daughter relationship most directly influences and shapes who the daughter will grow up to be. In the relationship between Mikuri and Sakura, Mikuri is like Sakura's successor. She continues her mother's habit of doing housework. Like her mother, she eventually becomes a housewife and a mother. A daughter is her mother's fiercest critic and most fervent advocate. (Ueno, Suzuki, 2022) Mikuri once tried to rebel against social situations. Mikuri wanted to become a clinical psychologist, but she failed. She eventually became her mother in the way of being a traditional Japanese housewife.

2.2.3 Analysis of Mikuri's Best Friend – Tanaka Yasue

Yasue's appearance was like a portrayal of Mikuri's alternative. Yasue did not choose to continue studying. Instead, she got married and had children after graduating from high school and became a housewife, but she did not mean to follow the social common trend for women. She had her own choice, and she chose not to continue studying. Although her life seemed to be a failure and embarrassing, she was decisive every time she made a choice. When she thought she was not suitable for studying, she decisively chose to graduate and get married. When she

found out her husband was cheating on her, she decisively chose to divorce and raise the children by herself.

However, her strong character did not give her positive social feedback. During the three years that Yasue was a housewife, she showed the disadvantages of being a housewife. After the divorce, she was completely unable to find a social job because she had no work experience. She gained no financial value from her time as a housewife, and her husband could not even afford alimony after the divorce. During their period as housewives, housewives had no substantial economic income, and their gradually disappearing social working experience forced them to be connected to their husbands. Yasue's experience also made Mikuri realize that housework should not be unpaid work, but that it should produce economic value. This recognition of the value of housework can also be seen as the most important part of the housewife's awakening of women's rights. (Ueno, 2014) Therefore, Yasue can be interpreted as the epitome of Japanese housewives' resistance to society. Although she became a housewife and suffered from the society after divorce, she did not abandon her rights to make choices for her life.

1.2.4 Analysis of Mikuri's Anut – Tsuchiya Yuri

Yuri is Sakura's sister, but her choices are completely different from Sakura's. Yuri has not chosen to get married or even fall in love once since graduation. Compared with Mikuri, Yuri is very lucky. Yuri found a job as soon as he graduated and worked in a cosmetics company all her life. At the same time, Yuri had no choice. Yuri could not get married and have children not because she did not want to, she mentioned this repeatedly when she appeared. She longs for a partner and companionship, but in order to keep her job, Yuri has to stay single. Yuri struggled

in her working place and never became a senior executive of the company after working all her life. It is very ironic that in this cosmetics company, the leadership is all traditional Japanese male figures who hardly wear any makeup.

The discrimination against Yuri in the workplace and the gender-based requirements reflect Japanese society's strict requirements for women. They seem to have to choose between family and work, while men can naturally get both. This gender division of labor – men are responsible for outside work and women are responsible for domestic work – is actually completely untrue. Therefore, working women like Yuri usually suffer from two aspects of discrimination. At work, they are ostracized by the company because they are women, as there is no room for promotion, even though they are already better than other male counterparts. At home, they are also criticized by society because they are too busy working and unable to complete housework. At one scene, the Mikuri and her parents at dinner discuss the aunt's inability to complete the housework due to work, and meanwhile Mikuri's father immediately praise Mikuri's mother for doing a good job as for housework. These potential discriminations make the situation of women in the workplace even worse.

Chapter II: Study on Social System Factors Shaping Japanese Women being Housewives

2.1 Introduction on Japanese Legislation Works for being Japanese Wives (Part I)

The Japanese family (*Ie*) system is mentioned in Chapter II. In the *Ie* system, the family head, *koshu*, leads other members and ensures the continuation and maintains absolute authority within the family. It is believed that family members should be united under the leadership of *koshu*. At the same time, along with the primogeniture system in Japanese society, *koshu* is always male – inherited from the father to the eldest son. This type of family inheritance and bloodline continuation highlights surnames, which are at the core of Japanese identity. (Unlike other developed societies like those in the West, Japanese people primarily tend to address others by their last names, not their given names. Therefore, one's surname is closely related to the person and their identity in the society

According to Article 750 of Japan's Civil Code, the obligation for "husband and wife to have the same surname" is stipulated. In addition to international marriages where the husband and wife have different surnames, in order to become a legal couple, one of the spouses must change their surname and join the same Family Register, "koseki" in Japanese. (Civil Code) This is a regulation that seems to better unite families, allowing couples to stick together to run a family. However, this law unfortunately fits the principles of Japan's conservative ruling party and patriarchy and primogeniture in Japanese *Ie* systems. As women are in a subordinate position in the family, they usually are not allowed to become the *koshu* of the family. According to data provided by Japan's Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, during 2022, a total of 94.7% of couples chose their husband's surname as their family surname, while only **5.3%** of families chose their wife's surname as their family surname. (2022) As a symbol of a person becoming a

member of a family, the surname represents the family to which a Japanese woman belongs. The patronymic surname before marriage means that Japanese women are subordinate to their father, while the husband's surname after marriage means that Japanese women are subordinate to their husbands.

This trend can also be seen in the Japanese royal family. The Japanese royal family has performed “representative actions” to the Japanese people. (Ueno, 2015) The Japanese royal family does not have a surname, so once a princess gets married, if the marriage partner is not a member of the royal family, the princess needs to automatically give up her royal title and change her surname to her husband's surname. However, if a prince gets married, his wife can share the royal title and status with him. Instead, if a prince gets married, his wife must not hold her own surname anymore, but she can share the royal title and status with him. No matter the social status of a Japanese woman, she does not have the autonomy of determining her own surnames. Japanese wives once belonged to their father and now belong to their husband, but they seem to have never belonged to themselves!

2.1.1 Further Explanation on Article 750 of Civil Code from the TV show

So, why would women agree to change into their husband's surname? Obviously, Japanese couples seem to have a choice to change to the wife's surname or to join the wife's family, but the unbalanced ratio of almost 95% to 5% demonstrates social compression to Japanese women from Japanese society.

In the TV show “*The Full-Time Wife Escapist*”, the female protagonist Moriyama Mikuri changes her surname to her husband’s surname Tsuzaki. In the show, two main characters discuss the changing surname issue seriously. Mikuri then decides to change hers, because she has an older brother in her family, but Hiramasa is the only child in his family. If the male protagonist changes his surname, then the family will have no one to inherit the surname Tsuzaki. It can be seen that Japanese society is very obsessed with the inheritance of surnames. The behavior of Japanese women giving up their surnames can also be regarded as representative of social minorities or so called “the second sex” in the society. Women’s feelings could be ignored by society and subsequently exploited at home. Just like Simone de Beauvoir mentioned in *The Second Sex*, “now, woman has always been man’s dependant, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality (Beauvoir, 1956).” Mikuri now is under Tsuzaki in the way of changing her surname.

Moreover, Mikuri gives her second reason for her willingness to change her surname, which is about Hiramasa’s jobs. Hiramasa was laid off from his original company, so he found a new job. This new job is a contract job. Like the different types of jobs in Japan mentioned in Chapter II, contract work is usually unstable because it is not permanent. Mikuri believes that changing his surname will be difficult to handle in this kind of contract work. However, the reasons given by the TV show are not enough to convince audiences. Mikuri is doing a part-time job in her community, so she also has a paid job like Hiramasa. In order to change her surname, Mikuri also needs to change to all her IDs and documents, which is a sophisticated process. This society has become accustomed to women’s sacrifice, so Mikuri, like most Japanese women, sacrifices her own interests to fulfill the interests of her husband or family. At this time, Mikuri has

forgotten her original intention in life. She is a psychologist with a master's degree, but now she has completely become a typical Japanese housewife, following the social traditions. Through the whole TV show, Mikuri has been working hard to find the meaning of her existence in society. Whereas the harsh reality is her "society" is the family dwelling, including her husband. Mikuri feels happy whenever her husband praises her for doing housework. She also takes pride in being a housewife to fit in the societal illusionary definition of a good female. Nevertheless, her dreams, self-fulfillment, and values are deprioritized.

2.1.2 Further Explanation on Article 733 of Civil Code

According to the above, it is not easy for Japanese women to get married. Women usually need to change their surname and get registered under their husband's household, yet divorce is more complicated for Japanese women. According to the Article 733 of Japanese Civil Code, starting from June 1, 2016, a law amending the Article 733 of Japanese Civil Code was enacted, shortening 300 days to which women are prohibited from remarriage to 100 days starting from the date termination of their previous marriage, but within the period of 100 days after divorce, remarriage is prohibited. Although women can get remarried within 100 days through a complicated process of proving they are not pregnant during the divorce, it is still difficult and takes time to set women free from their previous marriage. (Ministry of Justice) This legal provision reflects the Japanese system's extreme favoritism for men and extreme oppression to women. According to this legal provision, Japanese women cannot obtain the same legal rights and interests as men in marriage, because the law only restricts women and not men.

The explanation of this article is absolutely absurd. The only reason for women having to wait is because they might be pregnant with their ex-husband's child. In order to protect the husband's

rights to be aware of the situation, women have to waste their time waiting. Changing the original 300 days to the current 100 days is not a progress of social consensus but a method of maintaining tradition, because after the shortening of days, it still benefits the husband that it does not take 300 days, but the husband can determine whether the wife is pregnant within 100 days. This law seems to be established to promote equality between men and women, but in fact it maintains the original fact that husbands have greater power than wives in marriage. Japanese women do not immediately have the right to remarry after divorce, and this law is to protect the husband's rights to claim ownership of this child. Therefore, the husband's power in Japanese civil law is based on the exploitation of his wife's rights to get remarried.

The main reason for establishing this law can be traced back to Japan's Ie family system. As mentioned above, the Ie system is the embodiment of patriarchy and primogeniture. A child born within a marriage is a legitimate son; and a legitimate son belongs to the father, as the father is the koshu and the owner of the Ie family. This phenomenon is not only reflected in sons. Even if the child is a daughter, she is owned by the father. Therefore, even modern Japanese women need to commit themselves to the Ie system, and under current laws of remarriage, the wife might give up her independent freedom or profits in exchange for the husband's ownership of family members and his dominant family status.

In the TV show, the main heroine's friend Tanaka Yasue, a woman choosing to get married right after graduating from high school, gets a divorce after she catches her husband cheating behind her back. She is not depicted too much in the show, but her struggles during the divorce can also be seen. She quits her job and then becomes a full-time housewife after getting married.

However, she becomes a single mom with her child after divorcing her husband, who does not have a stable job and cheats on her. Through the whole drama, it clearly can be seen that Yasue always brings her daughter everywhere she goes, and her husband never appears. Yasue describes her husband as “a man who can’t even afford alimony”, and he does leave lots of problems for her to deal with. The reason why this husband has never appeared is not only because of his machismo, irresponsibility, and gender differences reflected in society, but also because of the sole custody implemented in Japanese marriage law.

According to a report from NHK, on February 16, 2024, Japan changed sole custody to joint legal custody. Fortunately, after three years of discussion, this resolution was finally passed on January 30, 2024, symbolizing that Japan may start a new era of joint custody of children by husband and wife together after divorce. (NHK) The practice of this law could alleviate the economic and social pressure of single-parent life among Japanese women after divorce, although conservatives believe that this may acknowledge the continuation of possible domestic violence. Especially for traditional housewives like Yasue, it is difficult for them to find a job after divorce, because they have become disconnected. Therefore, even if the husband is unfaithful or other ways of cheating or lying to his wife during marriage, it is still difficult for housewives to make the decision to divorce. However, the legal provisions of joint parenting will, to some extent, help alleviate the burden from the shoulders of their ex-wives in raising the kids, and the women may also have time for a job in modern society.

2.1.3 Further Explanation on Article 212 of Penal Code about Abortion and Women’s Reproductive Rights

“Pregnant women who use medication or other methods to obtain abortions shall be sentenced to fixed-term imprisonment under one year.” (Japan’s Penal Code) The Article 212 of Japan’s Penal Code is short but dreadful. This law does not allow abortion at the women’s own will as only authorized medical institutions can practice abortion procedures and they will need males physically present to approve such operations.

According to Article 14 of Japan’s Maternal Health Act, “Doctors designated by the public interest incorporated medical associations established in each prefecture may perform abortions with the consent of the partner.” (Maternal Health Act) Even though this provision was initially made in the name of protecting women’s safety, it still violates women’s right to their bodily autonomy. For unmarried women, according to research, 62% of doctors will not seek the signature of an unmarried woman’s partner for abortion, but there are still 33% of doctors who force the female partner to sign the paper for abortion because these doctors do not want to get into troubles with their female patient’s partner. (Yu Shundo, 2023) Under the implementation of this regulation, women, especially married women, no longer have control over their own bodies. Before she can have an abortion, it still needs to be approved by her husband, even though her uterus grows in her body and not in her husband’s. This kind of behavior of partners signing informed consent for abortion is not the protection of the female mother’s body. On the contrary, it is the protection of the rights of the male partner and the exploitation of Japanese women’s rights. For a married Japanese woman, her husband can decide whether the fetus should be born or aborted, which can be controlled by him simply by signing the abortion documents. If a woman attempts to resist her husband’s decision, such as by having an abortion by taking her own medicine or by any other methods, she will be sentenced under the penal code.

Historically, the Japanese government's intervention in abortion was not only reflected in Article 212 of Penal Code and Maternal Health Act. From the Meiji period (1868-1912) to the end of World War II (1945), the ideology of *Fukoku-kyohei*, translating as “to maintain and increase productivity and military power for national prosperity” (Kato, 2009), was implied in the society. In order to achieve the final manifestation of *Fukoku-kyohei*, Japanese men were required to join the military and serve for the country, while Japanese women were required to give birth to increase the population. Therefore, having children has risen to a state related issue, and the Japanese government connects national prosperity with the birth rate closely for ideological reasons. To achieve the goal of regulating women for giving birth to healthy newborns, the Eugenic Protection Law was enacted.

Under the restriction of the Japanese government, the Eugenic Protection Law was established for the purpose of “preventing the birth of defective offspring and protecting the life and health of the mother” (Japan's House of Representatives). Under the Eugenic Protection Law, “eugenic surgery sterilization” is forcibly performed to people with genetic disorders, intellectual disabilities, mental disorders, etc. in order to improve the national genetic quality (Kato, 2009). The action of forcing sterilization can also be considered as a racial selection. In Japan, racial discrimination always exists. Majority of Japanese people are usually referred to as Yamato people, and there is a hierarchy among non-Yamato people. For instance, “the Caucasian man could be a naturalized Japanese citizen” (Arudō, 2015), while people from other parts of Asia cannot. Even within the ethnic group of Yamato people, part of them are considered to be Yamato people, while other parts of them are considered not deserving to be Japanese, so their

genes do not deserve to be passed through generations. Through the Eugenic Protection Law enforcement, the Japanese government makes the assigned group of people lose their rights of giving birth, which violates basic human rights. On the other hand, the Eugenic Protection Law introduces and confirms the movement of abortion. Prior to the implementation of the Eugenic Protection Law in 1948, which established conditions for legal abortion, abortion was strictly prohibited under all circumstances according to the Meiji Constitution (Kato, 2009). Although the existence of the Eugenic Protection Law was intended to protect women, it actually violated basic human rights and particularly birth rights. In 1952, four years after its enactment, the law was amended to allow for sterilization without the consent of the person, even in cases of non-hereditary mental illness or intellectual disability (NHK, 2024). A large group of people were persecuted. According to a national survey of NHK news, approximately 16,500 victims were forced to undergo “forced sterilization” under the old Eugenic Protection Law. Moreover, approximately 8,500 people have undergone sterilization with their consent, but in reality, they had no choice but to consent due to the weak position of disabled people, and it was said that it was essentially coercion (NHK, 2024). Although the Eugenic Protection Law has ceased since 1996, the discussions about women’s reproductive rights are not diminishing.

It is believed that “uterus of women belongs to men, or more precisely speaking, the uterus of women belongs to the state” (Ueno, 2022) to maintain patriarchal society, and “the fact that women are punished by the state for abortion without permission serves as the strongest evidence” (Ueno, 2022). Article 212 of Japan’s Penal Code demonstrates Ueno’s point well in terms of restricting women’s freedom to have abortions themselves. The female uterus is the “tool” used by the country to create a population. When the country needs population, then

abortion led by women's free will is contrary to the needs of the country. Also, according to the Maternal Health Act, abortions require men's approval, and it helps men be involved in the way of women using the uterus. Men participating in making decisions of whether the fetus should be aborted or not represents men's dominant position in sex and "male dominance is sexual" (Mackinnon, 1989). Without abortion rights for women, women's sexual rights are also restricted. Therefore, a woman's uterus barely seems to belong to her under this legal environment; and therefore, taking back the rights of her own uterus is particularly important, as a key part of her body.

2.2.1 Maternity leave and Parental leave in company

In the new special episode of TV show *The Full-time Wife Escapist*, the main character Mikuri and her husband Tsuzaki move into a new apartment in another district, and Mikuri finds a new job in a furniture company. At the beginning of this episode, three female colleagues and Mikuri discuss the issue of their willingness for giving birth. They raise concerns about one of their female colleagues taking maternity and parental leave. "What used to be three people's work now needs to be done by two, so I cannot plan to have my second child during the future year and half while you are on leave," this complaint comes from one of the female colleagues to the character who is pregnant and planning on maternity leave. Even though Mikuri is not in the same department as her three other female colleagues, and Mikuri is the only female in her department, she still faces the same problem when she is pregnant. When she applies for maternity leave to the department leader, the male administrator in the same department is sarcastic to her for doing the extra work which she is supposed to do during her maternity leave and parental leave. Both plots in the show reflect the reproductive discrimination against women in the working environment of Japanese society. These colleagues all believe that a fixed

workload is what these women should complete when giving birth, and her work during maternity and parental leave needs to be completed by her colleagues, so the act of her taking leaves violates the interests of her colleagues in the way of doing extra work. However, the issue is more complicated than blaming a female colleague for giving birth.

According to Japan's Labor Standards Act, maternity leave for women can range from six months before giving birth to eight months after giving birth (Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare). Besides maternity leave, Japan's government also stipulates parental leave to provide more time for couples to take care of their children before the child enters kindergarten or nursery school. Although parental leave applies to both men and women, data from the Japanese Cabinet Office in 2021 shows that the proportion of women taking parental leave is 80.2%, but only 17.13% of men do so (Japan's Cabinet Office, 2021). It is obvious from the data that the vast majority of mothers still bear the main responsibility for taking care of their children, while the majority of fathers still go to work normally and are not affected by their newborns. Gender differences in parental leave make women suffer more unequal treatment in the workplace. Just like Mikuri and her female colleagues, they are discriminated against by male colleagues or other female colleagues in the workplace simply because they take maternity leave and parental leave. Such a workplace environment makes it difficult for husbands to take parental leave. In the show, Tsuzaki wants to take parental leave to accompany Mikuri, but his manager does not allow him to take parental leave. The manager believes that giving birth is still a woman's business, so there is no need for a husband to take parental leave. Although in the TV show, Tsuzaki successfully persuades his manager with the help of other colleagues, the discrimination against men taking parental leave in the workplace is vividly demonstrated in the show. Japan's famous

news agency NHK analyzes the reasons why most men do not take parental leave. Among them, 39.9% of men do not want their income to be reduced during the leave, and 22.5% of men are worried that their company and bosses would not agree or understand parental leave for men (NHK, 2023), just like Tsuzaki in the show. Society's prejudice against men taking parental leave contributes to the two main reasons for men not taking parental leave. Husband supporting the family financially and a wife staying at home is the pattern of running a traditional Japanese home. Thus, if the husband is taking parental leave, the main incomes of the family will be deducted, and it is also considered if the husband is taking parental leave, then he is doing the work that should be done by his wife. Despite taking parental leave, these husbands also express that the leave was too short, and they are not able to devote enough time to caring for their children (NHK, 2023), so the parental leave is not actually helping the family for taking care of children by the husband. Moreover, the reason of discrimination contrasts with Mikuri's situation at the beginning of the show. The job market is highly competitive, but there is a shortage of labor within the company, because even a small number of female employees taking maternity leave may affect the normal work of the entire department. Thus, the company should take the major responsibility of not recruiting enough labor forces. The working environment under capitalist society requires employees to be valuable in generating economic values, but humanity's needs are ignored.

Conclusion

Japanese housewives face tremendous pressure from society and the government to become housewives. Societal culture and tradition expect women to play a primary role in the family, taking care of children and elders. Government policies and laws have also failed to effectively support women in obtaining equal status and opportunities in the workplace. The lack of flexible work arrangements, guaranteed maternity leave, and parental leave have left many women facing difficult choices between career and family.

As a result, many women are forced to give up their careers and become housewives. Although they may have excellent education and professional skills, they are forced to stay within their families due to a lack of support from their families and professional opportunities in the society. This situation not only limits women's development and self-realization, but also results in the vulnerability of housewives in terms of social status and economic independence.

Therefore, solving this problem requires the joint efforts of society and the government to provide more support and opportunities to women by formulating more equal and inclusive policies, so that they can independently choose their own life path and balance career and family responsibilities. This will not only help promote gender equality, but also stimulate social creativity and vitality.

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