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The Orange Ribbon and the Pitiful Child: Investigating Child Abuse, Family Normativity and the Welfare State in Japan

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社会的養護 | エスノグラフィー | 児童虐待 | 子ども権利 | 社会学

ABSTRACT

For over 15 years the Japanese government has promoted a national campaign on child abuse awareness and tasked authorities with addressing rising child abuse reports. With an orange ribbon as its symbol, a key aspect of this campaign, alongside case-work, is the creation and circulation of visual-discursive representations of abused children. Drawing on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork on child protection practice, this paper contextualises the social construction of child abuse by critiquing the cultural and technical logics of abuse and protection discourse. Appeals to vulnerability, rights and duty bridge public and expert fields and position an image of pity as a call to action that drives child abuse prevalence as well as enduring dispositions by the state towards intrafamily normativity and a minimalist welfare state.

概要日本政府は、増加し続ける児童虐待の対応のために、15年以上にわたって児童虐待防止のための国民的キャンペーンを推進してきた。「オレンジリボン運動」をシンボルとするこのキャンペーンは、「虐待を受けた子ども」という存在を視覚的・言説的に表象させた重要な側面をもつ。本稿では、児童相談領域における1年半のエスノグラフィックなフィールドワークをもとに、虐待と保護の言説の文化的・技術的論理を批判することによって、児童虐待の社会的構築の文脈を明らかにする。家族の規範性や最小福祉国家によって強く根付いてきた「かわいそうな子ども」というイメージに対して、脆弱性、子ども権利、義務を強調することで、公的領域と専門的領域を通じたアクションを喚起させたい。

1 | Introduction

In Japan, an orange ribbon is well known as the symbol of child protection, and the national government positions it as the symbol of a public awareness campaign aimed at reducing child abuse (Figure 1). Yet, the number of child abuse incidents has been increasing since the mid-1990s due to revisions in how child abuse was classified and reported by authorities. Every year so far, child abuse incidents have hit a new, all-time high. In 2023 the national government reported 219000 cases of child abuse—the highest

yet (Mainichi Japan 2023). Along with the increasing employment rate of child protection caseworkers, these numbers suggest a complicated relationship between child abuse awareness and prevention. The 'discovery' of child abuse has had lasting impacts on the politics of child protection in Japan as well as on public imagination (Chapman 2024, 16–22). In this paper, I explore how the child protection system creates and sustains visual-discursive caricatures of abused children as a means of abuse prevention and protection, but also as a space that complicates normative views on childhood and the ethos of social welfare.

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FIGURE 1 | Poster shows a portrait of a Japanese girl looking down, bordered by evocative text regarding child abuse and state protection services. Image created by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2019.

State-produced representations of children play a key part in Japan's efforts to prevent and respond to child abuse (Hacking 2001; Yamagata-Montoya 2016). Stigmatised views of abused children and residential care institutions pervade public imagination, and people think group homes are, as I heard firsthand, 'places where orphans go to live' (see also Ambrose 2014). The Orange Ribbon Campaign, similarly, circulates pictures and caricatures of abused or neglected children, images and nebulous stories that have been truncated from their origin. Abuse and neglect investigations by caseworkers, the bulk of their duties, also make heavy use of visual-material imagery, ranging from photography and genograms to health metrics and behavioural assessments that frame children's bodies in a technical language. This paper aims to contextualise discourses of abuse and vulnerability that have been mapped onto children of unknown or mysterious backgrounds. I centre this visual-discursive construction and social life of the 'pitiful child' (*kawaisōna kodomo*) as a process of inquiry. This approach does not focus exclusively on the visual media's style and content but on their social dynamics. Elizabeth Edwards (Odo 2015, xi) writes that:

the social practices of photography, archives, and museums have become the focus of ethnographic studies [which] locate the meaning of photographs not only in content and style but also in patterns of consumption, dissemination, ownership, archiving, and reproduction within a complex network.

Anthropological and sociological perspectives frame children and childhood as socially and culturally constructed (Hacking 2003; Korbin 1977; LeVine 2007; Prout and James 1997). Children and childhood, situated categories and statuses, are not static nor homogenous but heterogeneous processes that vary across political, historical and geographical contexts, indexing social values and institutional structures (James and James, 2001; Montgomery 2003; Montgomery 2009; Silver 2020). In Japan, the media and commodification of social life through hyperconsumerism and neo-liberal shifts in the economy have greatly impacted childhood (Allison 2006; Creighton 1994; Papp 2013, 75). Looking at child protection in Japan, this paper addresses a methodological and theoretical gap in understanding how social workers perform social work, including how their labour relates to the social construction of children and associated categories like child abuse (Berrick, 2017; Eisenbruch 2019; Ferguson et al. 2019; Korbin 1991; Collins and Mead 2021). As Roets et al. (2015, 205) note, 'As a practice of truth-telling, social work is in search of the correct way to represent so-called objective realities in reports'. The dynamic representations of children vis-à-vis child protection and society, consequently, stand out as an important area for understanding how child protection interventions work and their social consequences (see also Featherstone, Gupta, Morris et al. 2018).

Looking at Japan's system, the Orange Ribbon and investigative casework signify creative arenas that have long produced visual and descriptive representations of abused children. Odo's (2015, 109) critical approach is useful in critiquing visual-material data, asking how we know what we are looking at, or why we see (interpret) the image the way we do. The acts of viewing and interacting with public awareness media and children's case records bring these economies to life, and the process of orientation, recognition and comprehension reflects a socially situated act (Street 2011). This paper includes examples of this visual material to also bring the reader into the evocative nexus of child protection. This reflexive dynamic is important because it helps convey the affective potential of child abuse discourse and how, as will be discussed, the child protection system may sustain the problems it tries to correct. A critical lens on visual-discursive representations of abused children in the context of child protection also invites a critical analysis of the technical-scientific veneers and logics indexed through abuse investigations and prevention measures (Hacking 1986; Latour 1999). Child abuse is commonly perceived as a technical or scientific matter best addressed by experts, but, as Hacking (1995, 359) suggests, its general concept is well-diffused among and understood by the public. My focus on specialised casework and public awareness media reflects this connection between technical and public domains. Intersecting childhood, visual and science studies, this paper explores the abused child construction as a multisited, dynamic assemblage of labour and affective engagement, and as culturally mediated references to a child's lived experience (Latour 1999, 24–79).

This paper begins with details on the research methods, followed by background information on the Orange Ribbon Campaign and child protection in Japan. The paper then proceeds into a discussion of how child abuse investigations shape value-laden representations of children and their implications for the child abuse crisis. Looking at two seemingly disparate discursive fields within the child protection system is productive because public

project was a success and attracted national attention. The year after, a nationwide nonprofit group, the National Network for the Prevention of Child Abuse, took over managerial duties for the project, transitioning it from a community initiative to a national-scale movement. A child protection expert explained in an interview that the message of the Orange Ribbon changed from promoting ‘awareness of how one’s feelings [as a parent] may lead to child abuse’ to encouraging ‘community vigilance of children’s well-being’. In 2007, the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare took over the Orange Ribbon Campaign and officially established it as a national project.

A key component of the Orange Ribbon Campaign is the circulation of informational posters in public areas like train stations, libraries, city halls and community bulletin boards. They are also circulated digitally. Every November, orange ribbons are distributed as a symbol of child abuse prevention. Politicians and advocates wear orange ribbon badges to signify that they are aware of and participating in trying to prevent child abuse, and the buildings of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government and Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare are often decorated with orange ribbons. When I visited the annual meeting of the Japanese Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, the leading conference for child welfare researchers and practitioners, many people wore these badges, and I received one myself.

The Orange Ribbon did not catalyse public concern for child abuse because it was already a growing social issue. Yet, the Orange Ribbon quickly filled a niche because the government’s attempts to resolve the child abuse crisis did not have a strong visual brand. In 1988, the Japanese government revised the definition of and criteria for identifying child abuse in survey data it collected (Goodman 2000, 163–174). As a result, the definition of abuse was broadened to include the current categories of physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse and neglect. A revised survey in the 90s then suggested a sudden 450% increase in child abuse reports. Previously, the reported number of child abuse incidents in Japan was low in comparison to other high-income countries, a fact that outside commentators considered unusual and attributed to the strength of the Japanese family (Goodman 2001, 176–193). Goodman’s writing here points to an exoticising perspective on invented traditions in Asia as Japan’s welfare system was seen by outsiders throughout the 80s and 90s as a success case alongside other aspects of Japanese society that were taken up by scholars and media as distinct and innovative (i.e., Japanese management practices, Japanese culture and Japanese family). A key point here is that Japan’s approach to child protection drew from a minimalist approach that downplayed state responsibility in favour of family, community and business (Aspalter 2006). The postwar Japanese family ideal followed the nuclear family model with husband as an office worker, wife as a homemaker and one or two children as disciplined students (Allison 2013; Daniels and Andrews 2010; Nakamura 2013). Throughout the 1990s, however, the government and media reported exponential growth in the number of abuse reports (Goodman 2000, 168). This ‘discovery’ of child abuse caused panic among policymakers, resulting in new management measures such as budget increases and the integration of psychological medical services (Chapman 2024). The number of caseworkers in child protective services has been

increasing annually since the early 2000s as well. A contrasting point is that Japan does not utilise a specialised workforce of social workers like the United Kingdom or the United States. Caseworkers tasked with child abuse investigations are prefectural or municipal civil servants who may rotate posts every 3–5 years, sometimes to departments unrelated to social services (King 2020). Child abuse and its professional response continue to be widely debated topics among government officials and researchers (Ministry of Health 2022).

4 | The Social Construction of the Pitiful Child

The poster above (Figure 3) says, ‘If you think something *may* be child abuse, call 189 [the national consultation hotline]’. It also says that child abuse cannot be seen and that ‘only you’ can notice when a child needs saving. In discussions about abuse prevention, care professionals suggested that the call to individual duty is an essential locus of engagement between the viewer and the image, one that influences how people may relate to children. In addition to photography, the Orange Ribbon is often featured in creative artwork, such as the image (Figure 4) below, which invokes a romantic, embellished childhood. The national



FIGURE 3 | Poster shows a photographic image of a crumpled piece of paper depicts a messy crayon drawing of a girl’s smiling face, bordered by evocative text regarding child abuse and state protection services. Image created by Hiroaki Suzuki and the National Network for the Prevention of Child Abuse, 2021.



子ども虐待防止オレンジリボン運動
 出産・子育てに関するご相談は、お住まいの市区町村窓口、または児童相談所へ
 いちほやく おなやみを
 児童相談所
 相談専用ダイヤル **0120-189-783**
認定NPO法人 児童虐待防止全国ネットワーク オレンジリボン運動事務局
 後援 ことば原産庁 文部科学省 一般社団法人日本子ども虐待防止学会 公益財団法人SBI子ども希望財団 読売新聞社

FIGURE 4 | Poster of artwork depicting an orange ribbon surrounding the likeness of a child and their mother looking happy. Image created by Hikaru Satō and the National Network for the Prevention of Child Abuse, 2023.

government manages an annual design contest for people to submit new promotional imagery.

Trains, bus stops, community notice boards and other public commuting spaces in urban areas are saturated with visual media including the Orange Ribbon. Caseworkers agreed that the average person in Japan is aware of child abuse due to the Orange Ribbon Campaign and widespread news coverage of tragic events like deaths of children due to parental abuse or neglect, including sensational stories of unwanted newborns abandoned in coin lockers. Careworkers and volunteers at group homes for separated children stated that they joined because they wanted to ‘save the children’ because of television documentaries and other media, including the Orange Ribbon, that painted a grim image of child abuse and the protection system.

Caseworker Haruka first introduced me to the Orange Ribbon during a chat about the role of child protective services in Japan. She said, ‘I see [child abuse prevention posters] every day on my commute to work’. She explained how the campaign’s messaging has changed in the last decade from shock narratives to rights-based, matter-of-fact appeals. The above image (Figure 5) proclaims Child Abuse Prevention Awareness Month with text on the right saying, ‘Oh? I wonder what is wrong with that girl?’ This caption is clever because the ‘oh?’ (oya) may also be read as a ‘family?’ (oya), insinuating



FIGURE 5 | Poster shows a photographic image of a Japanese girl looking sad or distressed, bordered by evocative text regarding child abuse and state protection services. Image created by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2007.

the girl’s natal family as a source of distress. The poster also says that anyone can save children from abuse with just a little ‘watchfulness’ and ‘consideration’, and proceeds to list a variety of behaviours and demeanours that should be taken as suspect. Moreover, the voice of this imagined onlooker is intimated to be feminine, hinting at a connection between motherhood and abuse vigilance. The poster contains a picture of a child, taken to represent distress, which the viewer should take to be a sign of possible abuse or neglect by a parent. Yet only suggestions are offered as to what is happening and who the subject is. Another caseworker guessed that the girl ‘is probably just an actor ... that’s all it is, just something evocative to pull the heartstrings’. Discussion on these images reflects a broader trend I noticed in my encounters with welfare authorities: the absence of children’s voices. The state’s encouragement through awareness messaging was not to ask a child about what was wrong, but instead to file a report with the child protection services.

By way of contrast, the normal, unmarked assumption is that children’s public-facing demeanours should be of happiness, or that the appearance of happiness means that a child’s home or family is without issue. The intact nuclear family is important as caseworkers suggested that a ‘normal’ family consists of a working husband and a homemaker wife. The agency director, Mr. Nobuyuki said, ‘A good standard [for a normal family] is the

absence of any risks'. However, Dr. Matsumoto, a social welfare researcher I spoke with, added that Orange Ribbon might reduce people's sense of community by making neighbours wary of each other. Abuse awareness discourse may also complicate the cultural boundaries between the public face (*tatemaie*) and the private home (*honne*) by encouraging a concern for a child's home life by strangers.

Like the Orange Ribbon, casework practice produces distinct representations of children that impact the delivery of services. People ranging from concerned citizens to the police call the Juniper City Child Guidance Center for expert advice or to file reports of possible child abuse. Most cases result in consultations on parenting advice and local services like daycares and job agencies. When child abuse is confirmed by investigations, materials such as photographs that clarify physical growth, intelligence and emotional disposition may be included in the child's case record along with behavioural assessments and other technical metrics of interest like genograms (Figure 6). Photographs showing the child's daily life at home, including objects like toys and laundry, are also sometimes gathered to better evaluate the child's home environment. Photographs are used in adoptions too, such as to document birth parents or provide a record of an adoptee's early life trajectory. In addition to recording a child's living situation and other contextual factors of abuse, caseworker Ami said that 'photography is effective' in documenting that on-site inspections and investigations were

conducted appropriately. Caseworkers may use photographs, videos or sketches to make an evidence trail in the case of a trial or other legal matter.

Mid-week in late summer, I sat with Asahi, Haruka and Ami in a consultation room at the Juniper City Child Guidance Center. A young, unmarried mother had just talked with the caseworkers. She has two young boys with intellectual disabilities, and she had questions about how to properly care for them. The biological father stopped financially supporting the family and was no longer involved in their day-to-day activities. The mother was seeking new work and having trouble adjusting. Asahi was concerned about child neglect. Haruka looked over the documents and slid them over to me. She said, 'Look at these flow charts and forms... there is a lot of information, right?' The bundle of documents contained information ranging from family histories and health assessments to educational records and family finances. It also included pictures of the family's apartment. I asked how these materials impact casework decision-making. Haruka said, 'The record gave me an image of who the children and mother were'. Asahi and Ami agreed. Haruka said, 'Based on their health evaluations, I assumed we might consider taking the children into temporary custody or at least asking the mother if she wanted to consider separation'. Ami offered her perspective, saying, 'Disability and trauma can be tricky situations for a single parent to manage, so we want to ensure that the children are being looked after appropriately'. Asahi said, 'When I learned that the children had special needs, I increased the case's urgency rank'. Ami added, 'This is standard protocol according to policy'. After some more discussion, Haruka added, 'I met them for the first time today; I sometimes forget its importance [of meeting face-to-face] ... The mother was attentive and genuinely concerned for her children ... The two children were happy and playful'. The casework team advised the mother to contact daycare services and provided her with a list of contacts. I often heard about assumptions of child abuse and neglect like this encounter from caseworkers.

Later during the chilly winter months, I sat in a case review meeting and listened as the team decided on a case involving a young girl with an intellectual disability and her mother. The mother reportedly had trouble keeping up with domestic duties due to depression. The team decided that there was a clear risk of harm to the daughter because of the mother's condition, and the caseworkers brought the daughter into temporary custody as a preliminary measure. In the discussion, the caseworkers reviewed the child's case profile like a medical chart, referencing behavioural traits, diagnoses, graphs and family histories as evidence points. Like Haruka's statement that the record shapes perceptions of children, I found myself forming an image too despite having never met the person. Caseworkers rarely meet the children they make decisions about. Moreover, caseworkers do not seek children's perspectives during investigations. This is intentional as, per policy, caseworkers need to be neutral and objective in their work. Caseworkers deal with heavy caseloads and tight reporting deadlines; there is often no time to give clients nuanced attention and long-term follow-up. In a separate conversation, Ami said that veteran caseworkers learn to quickly assess cases, even before a review meeting, because of the client's 'personality characteristics' and 'living situation'.

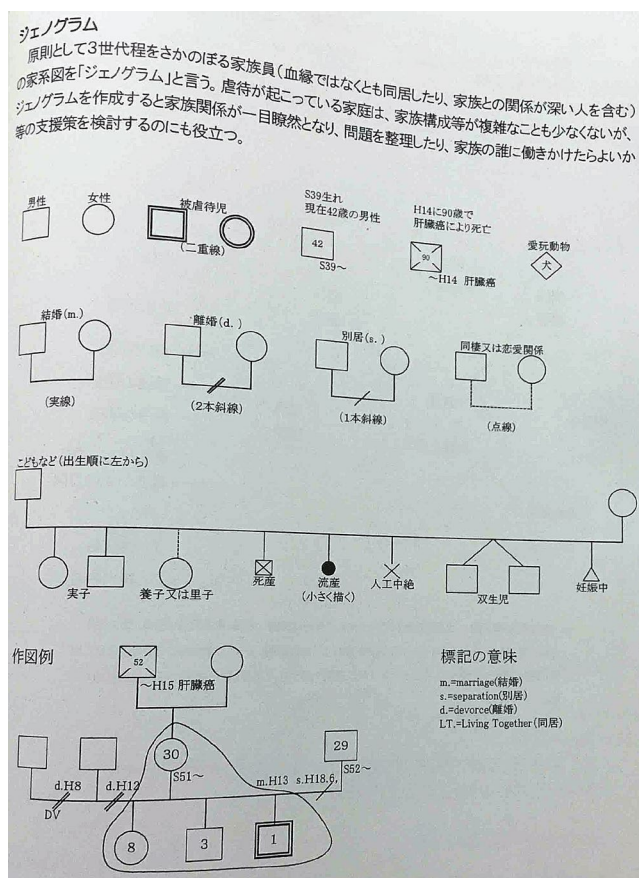


FIGURE 6 | Photograph of a mock kinship diagram used in child abuse investigations and child protection casework. Picture taken by author, 2022.

As illustrated with these ethnographic vignettes, learning about children and their home lives through records and investigations, rather than direct interaction, impacted how authorities perceived and cared for children. For caseworkers, the case record formed the representation of the child they were responsible for. Details like a child's IQ, behavioural quirks or the incident that led to their separation created a direct and intimate, yet one-sided, representation of a child. Caseworkers and other care professionals said that they think of abused and traumatised children as objects of 'pity' (*kawaisō*) and in need of 'lifelong support' (*chōkikan no shien*). The classification of child abuse and mental health, intellectual or emotional problems ossify. These labels stick even when they are no longer representative of reality because the case record's information is often permanent. Old assessments, notes and evaluations are not discarded until long after the child leaves care. Ami explained that the child guidance centre can act like a 'museum' because it stores the profiles of its clients. Children in care, caseworkers said, are not allowed to see their own records due to privacy concerns. Teenager Yusuke, a 14-year-old boy in care, said that he had never seen his case record, and he mused, 'I don't know what it says about me'. The case record uses metrics, graphs, charts and sometimes photography to create a distinct, bureaucratic representation of the child. This representation may not map onto a child's lived experience, but it nonetheless is used to make care decisions about them.

5 | The Pitiful Child as a Tool for a Welfare Society

Children in Japan are traditionally perceived as cultural treasures and the future of the nation (*kodakara*) (Platt 2005, 979) (Figure 7). I often heard this sentiment wrapped in a moral appeal: 'For the sake of the children... (*kodomo no tameni*)'. Yet, the awareness imagery curated by the national government and technical portraits of children created by casework strike a different chord with culturally valued ideas of children and childhood. There are everyday differences between the normative childhood and the exceptional category of child in care. Much of the representations associated with child protection activities centre on children as hurt, vulnerable, numb or otherwise distressed, a representation that I call the 'pitiful child'. Comparatively, for example, Allison James (1998, 45-64) notes how children in Japan are exposed to and taught to manage, at an early age, what could be considered by Western observers to be severe and difficult social risks, such as children commuting to and from school on their own. In this section, I discuss the referential dynamics of child abuse representations and how they index enduring ideologies of family and social welfare.

A key assumption shared between the Orange Ribbon's and casework profile's representation of the abused child is the stable form of its reference to the child. The referent is an imagined, possibly real, child that may have been harmed by a parent or guardian. This harm and vulnerability are visceral because they are visual through photography, artwork and metrics. It is this affective engagement, including notice, concern, pity and hope that drives authoritative interventions. Child protection, then, rests on an augmented version of what DelVecchio Good (2007, 366-67) calls the 'biotechnical embrace of hope', referring to how the hope of betterment between patients and physicians is the core link that makes the medical system flourish. In child



FIGURE 7 | Poster shows an artistic, cartoon-style image of Japanese people, young and old, and a family encircled by an orange ribbon. Image created by Riko Mukuta and the National Network for the Prevention of Child Abuse, 2023.

protection, this embrace is a mix of pity and hope as Orange Ribbon imagery and casework reporting channel innate developmental vulnerability, a moral appeal to safeguard and the possibility of resolution. The stability of this reference to the child is constant across social contexts and its perception and interpretation by people in different social roles. There is an in-betweenness as the reference speaks to the child but is simultaneously not the child, a point that draws on Latour's (1999, 58) circulating reference, which refers to how scientific things can remain consistent and legible despite repeated transformations and movements. Caseworkers utilise institutionalised procedures and assessments to create texts and visual imagery from a child client and ideas of a normative childhood. Artists and welfare authorities do the same when creating Orange Ribbon media, albeit without the technical assessment side. By aligning public and specialised audiences yet remaining a stable representation across train station tunnels and conference room meetings, the pitiful child acts as a boundary object (Star and Griesemer 1989; Star 2010). Importantly, the referential aspect of the pitiful child is also a constant, and it is this appeal to kinship normativity, I suggest, that elucidates the social-cultural context of the technical casework practice and the moral and children's rights-driven Orange Ribbon Campaign.

An embellished, nostalgic notion of childhood has strong roots in contemporary Japan, as do critical, othering or accusatory

narratives of children, going so far as to blame children for socioeconomic downturn and other societal woes as in Andrea Arai's (2016) analysis of how media and policymakers turned academically unsuccessful children into scapegoats for broader structural issues. Stereotypes of children oscillate between living charmed educational lives to being deprived of a normal childhood (Field 1996; Holloway 2000, 9–13). Nostalgia for an idealised, lost childhood is often intertwined with capitalist consumerism, such as toys, television and games that portray reclaimed and cathartic quests of introspection (Allison 2006; Benson 2018). Consequently, a would-be 'normative' childhood differs across multiple spaces of visual-discursive construction. Aurore Yamagata-Montoya (2016) critiqued how photographic images promote normative representations of childhood. The national government, she (2016, 53–56) suggests, uses photography and civil records to construct discursive 'truths' about childhood and an imagined community containing the idealised middle-class nuclear family. Reynolds (2015, xx–xxi), relatedly, points out that photography is thought to have 'evidentiary force', but also suggests how images may be useful as allegories. I extend these points here to consider how the Japanese state crafts truisms about child abuse and social welfare through the 'pitiful child' construction.

The Orange Ribbon is not a unique phenomenon; other state-administered visual media initiatives in Japan centre on the child as the foundation of the 'traditional' (nuclear) family, contributing to a particularly situated imagined postwar society. Yamagata-Montoya (2016, 93–99) also discusses poster campaigns and advertisements for Family Day, a recent creation by the state to answer the fertility crisis. Depicted through artwork, imagery creates a 'softened world' through green grass, smiling people, plenty of children and blue skies. Japan as an imagined construct, she suggests, becomes a welcoming place for its citizens and makes the family-with-children seem 'natural'. This 'naturalness', she explains, exists on three levels: the nuclear family as a natural and aspirational goal, a woman's role as a caring mother, and the child-like style of artwork as a reflection of a child's inner desire for the family bond. The ideal child construct emerges as healthy, born to a young married couple, with a father who works and a mother who cares. The child has time to play, and gradually becomes a devout and earnest student, intending to enter university, embark on a career and start a family of their own. Evocative photography and artistic or technical amplification within child protection also index an idealised Japanese family and community, but one that is underscored by an invisible, subtle threat.

Child abuse is a normalised problem. It is not a hidden issue because the Orange Ribbon is a national movement that has been active for nearly 2 decades. The fact that child abuse cases have been rising every year, long before the Orange Ribbon was established, parallels broader transformations in Japanese society. The pitiful child and romantic notions of the Japanese family are recent products of Japan's postwar industrialisation and modernity. The Japanese postwar economy peaked in 1991, turning into a prolonged period of stagnation following the 'burst' of a bubble economy tied to inflated asset prices (Allison, 2013; Kawano, Roberts, and Long 2014). The years following the bubble burst are commonly referred to as the 'Lost Decade'. Child abuse and its institutional response exist alongside other

post-1991 economic bubble burst discourses about economic stagnation and other youth issues like social withdrawal (*hikikomori*), young people who are unemployed or not receiving an education (NEET), and suicide. The pitiful child derives from and furthers a decades-long domestic discourse on modern childhood which highlights a tragic relationship between urbanisation, the weakening ties in the family and the loss of an idyllic childhood (Holloway 2000, 10–12; Ozawa-de Silva 2021). A child welfare expert said in an interview that the current socioeconomic state of Japan does not support the ideal of a 'family-dependent society' (*kazoku izon shakai*) because 'parents must work and may not be at home, and children need to spend more time studying in school'. These pressures suggest that the normative childhood in Japan may be better framed in terms of precarity as inequities in education, labour, family and demography undermine idealised social expectations.

Within a context of precarity, the message of child abuse awareness encroaches on everyday lived spaces by redefining what it should mean to be at home and to be a part of a community. Child abuse prevention entails a social perceptiveness that encourages people to police each other's behaviour through children, to become detectives in search of why a child might be distressed. This burden of vigilance lies with the individual and by extension the community, less the government. This placement of welfare responsibility is important to note. Personal and community vigilance results in caseworkers engaging with the public more through consultations and abuse investigations. The Orange Ribbon results also in the displacement of children from home into the protection system. The Orange Ribbon, then, reimagines the public as a proxy for casework.

Child protection in Japan rests heavily on inner-home dynamics and relationships as matters of concern; dangers like strangers, online harassment, school bullying and paedophiles comprise external and peripheral issues. This orientation draws, in part, on the system's continued use of social diagnosis, a social work framework that centres the family unit as a site of social pathology (Chapman 2024). Child abuse is anathema to the normative family ideal, and representations of the pitiful child are what caseworkers and their proxies are on the lookout for. Caseworker Haruka said that the Orange Ribbon is evocative because it makes a sensitive and dutiful appeal to the public and that it makes 'thinking about what your neighbors are doing to their children' a morally just course of action. Neighbours and strangers in turn act as agents of state strategy and control. A person, for example, should take a child's distress to intimate that there is a problem at home or with the relationship between the child and their parents and that the state needs to be informed of this intrafamilial deviance.

The discipline of the self and community through child abuse awareness invokes the enduring policy machinations of the Japanese state to minimise its role in child protection responsibility in favour of the family and community, a 'welfare society' opposite to a strong welfare state (Chapman 2024; Goodman 2000, 24–27). In line with Moore's (2020, 715–16) observations on memoirs of childhood in wartime Japan, child protection authorities use representations of children to shape public sentiment and evaluate families to achieve state-centred goals framed as community and professional calls to action. In

this way, the state lessens its presence as the public contributes to its own self-monitoring. By redefining neighbours and communities as proxy caseworkers and blending abuse awareness between public and expert fields, the child protection system has widened the reach of the state while simultaneously lessening the burden of welfare responsibility on the state. The child protection system is oriented more towards the decentralised, community regulation of family non-normativity than preserving families or promoting children's well-being.

The effects of the 'discovery' of child abuse two decades prior are ingrained in the material culture of the child protection system through casework practices and policy guidelines, yet it is notable how longstanding policy dispositions to a weak welfare state remain vibrant in Japan (Chapman 2024, 141–44). This is noteworthy because the national government has taken proactive steps in enhancing the professional response of child protective services by instituting new training protocols, employing more caseworkers and encouraging foster family placements, yet also minimises their responsibility by shifting implementation tasks to local authorities and promoting narratives of 'self-responsibility' among children in care (Chapman 2024; Goldfarb 2016). The pitiful child speaks to the enduring spectre of the nuclear family and the Japanese-style welfare society. The child in child protection, I suggest, is the idealised construction of the pitiful child, while protection is a construction that speaks to a lost but enduring ideal of a happy, intact family dynamic that supports a minimalist approach to state intervention. This orientation of protection is made poignant because the state aims to protect children from their natal families more so than outside and upstream or distal factors of abuse, including structural inequalities, demographic changes and insecure labour opportunities (Silver 2015).

The pitiful child is an effective means of shaping public sentiment and raising awareness of social services, but it is complicit as a political tool of a reluctant welfare state. Casework and proxy casework reflect this passive state, one that would act only following an initiative-taking citizen. The Orange Ribbon, relatedly, signifies a failure of the state's attempts to resolve the child abuse crisis. Director Nobuyuki said, 'We cannot stop [the hyperfocus on child abuse] because every year the cases increase and we as a society have to respond... it cannot be helped (*shō ga nai*)'. The pitiful child complicates and contradicts normative ideas surrounding childhood and the family. It may also reinforce the prominence of child abuse as a social issue because of the reference to a romanticised, vulnerable image of children. This frame aligns with the earlier mention of Hacking's (1995, 359) observation that child abuse is unusually common in the public field while also often thought of as a technical-scientific matter for specialists. The construction of the pitiful child shapes initiative and dutiful action on the part of both the public and authorities, concomitantly contributing to child abuse reports and consultations. Goodman (2000, 168) suggests that official figures on child abuse may not represent actual surges in child abuse, but that awareness of particular types of abuse has diffused into Japanese society, such as the typology forwarded by the World Health Organization: physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse and neglect. Most child abuse reports in Japan are classified as psychological abuse, a vaguely defined category (Chapman 2024). The Orange Ribbon is a project aimed

at the domestic populace, but the categories of abuse and criticism against institutional care largely come from Euroamerican standards of value, particularly the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Saruta, Doi, and Sheppard 2014). The 'discovery' of child abuse demonstrates how Japan is a nation-state not so dissimilar to its global peers, especially its high-resource neighbours in East and Southeast Asia who also face high numbers of child abuse reports and criticism over their professional response (Madihi and Brubeck 2018).

Orange ribbon media and old case records may appear static, but their underlying contexts are not (Moore 2020, 715). Children grow up and their life trajectories may diverge in unexpected ways. Children I saw in passing at the child guidance centre are older now. The children in the posters in this paper are older too. The portrait of the girl in Figure 5, for example, was taken in 2007. Children's participation and role in their representations is central but also peripheral as these representations take on social lives of their own, created from but untethered, yet still referential, to the child, suggesting agency as more of a set of relational assemblages (Spyrou, Rosen, and Cook 2018, 4–8). The state messaging on child abuse overrides children's voices and posters, and case profiles are designed with a specific style, aesthetic and social life in mind. But in their respective ontological spaces, these representations speckle the reality and diversity of childhoods in Japan. Whether it is a stranger seeing Orange Ribbon artwork in the corridor of a subway station or a group of children in care looking at a picture their peers took, both of which I observed, each instance is a culmination of past and ongoing social encounters that not only make childhood multiple, but simultaneously elicit, retell and erase the plurality of voices indexed in those childhoods.

6 | Conclusion

This paper explored how visual-material representations of child abuse reflect on the sociohistorical nuances of the child abuse crisis and divergent imaginings of child well-being. With ever-growing child abuse reports and ongoing youth issues, the national government, prefectural caseworkers and the public have co-constructed an image of childhood that references vulnerability and non-normativity. Representations of the 'pitiful child,' especially their moral appeal to community and professional action, complicate normative values surrounding childhood because they invoke forms of kinship that are no longer ubiquitous or readily attainable. The Orange Ribbon media and abuse investigations, two seemingly unrelated discursive fields, render visible these representations yet also make childhood multiple by transubstantiating children's lived experiences into visual imagery and bureaucratic case profiles. The consistency and circulation of the pitiful child support enduring conservative views of kinship and social welfare, each of which represents multilayered domains of bounded agency. The pitiful child embarks on a social life through public and private networks and is a dynamic creation of children and adults, whether intentional or not. Drawing on this dialogue, I argued how the pitiful child acts as a tool for the national government to shape how people think about and relate to children, neighbours and social services, a process that may feed back into child abuse reporting and reinforce a weak welfare state. Overall, the social

construction of child abuse and protection offers a compelling space for understanding the multilayered processes of acknowledgment, circulation and erasure of children's and the state's voices. Engaging these processes and their implications helped to recontextualise the decades-long discourse of child abuse in Japan and the enduring press towards a welfare society.

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Ethics Statement

Rigorous ethics protocols were approved by the University of Oxford.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The ethnographic data this paper are based on contain sensitive and identifiable information and consequently are not available or viable for public circulation. More information on the Orange Ribbon in Japan, including visual media, may be found online at: <https://www.orangerebbon.jp/>.

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