

The Cultural Politics of Childcare Provision in the Era of a Shrinking Japan

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ABSTRACT: The shortage of public childcare in Japan — called the “waitlisted children problem” (*taiki jidō mondai*) — has assumed increasing visibility and salience over the last several decades. In this essay, I analyze how this “waitlisted children problem” has been conceived, narrated, and addressed within the specific political, economic, and historical context that is contemporary Japanese society. Going beyond discussions of gender inequality in the workplace and home, I interrogate the cultural logics underpinning the recent urgency of debates over public childcare provision in Japan. Key to understanding these developments is recognizing how Japanese women’s reproductive desires have become objectified within official and popular discussions as “obstructed” and requiring emancipation. Correspondingly, promoting gender equality by expanding childcare provision has in this context become a tool of bio-political intervention, a means to remove a statistically calculated inhibition of women’s reproductive desire. This is a logic that implicates childcare in the fate of Japanese national survival, and thus helps to explain how both official and popular debates have converged in seeing the issue as significant and pressing.

Keywords: childcare, motherhood, welfare, fertility rate, Japan

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Introduction: The “Go to Hell Japan!”¹ Controversy in 2016

“My child’s nursery application was declined. Go to hell Japan!!! What the hell Japan? What happened to promoting the dynamic engagement of one hundred million citizens? Yesterday, we failed to receive any spot at a day nursery. What am I going to do? I cannot engage in ‘dynamic engagement,’ can I? Despite my giving birth, raising a child, going out into society, and working and paying taxes, what is Japan not happy about? So what is up with the declining birthrate? Shit! It is ok to give birth, but wanting to place [my children] in childcare is virtually impossible...”²

The above is an anonymous blog entry written in the early spring of 2016. Spring in Japan is the time when local councils notify parents of the outcome of their applications to state-authorized nurseries. This blog entry rapidly attracted the attention of many other parents—particularly mothers—who had similar experiences.³ At first it was only a topic of discussion within select online communities. All that changed on February 29, 2016, when a parliamentarian cited it in a question to Prime Minister Shinzō Abe during a House of Representatives Budget Committee session. Abe’s initial response was that since the post was anonymous, he could not confirm the veracity of the author’s claims. This generated a furious backlash on social media. Numerous mothers (and even some fathers) angrily posted that the

¹ The original Japanese was “*Nihon shine!*” which literally translated means “Japan die!”; in this author’s view, “Go to Hell!” is a more accurate English equivalent of the sentiment and meaning the phrase is expressing.

² Hatelabo: AnonymousDiary. Accessed September 15, 2019: <https://anond.hatelabo.jp/20160215171759>.

³ In this essay, public childcare refers to day nurseries which run 8-10 hours per day for 5-6 days a week as opposed kindergartens which only run half-day sessions.

blog entry captured their experiences exactly. The backlash did not stop there; various parents began participating in petitioning efforts and demonstrations in front of the National Diet. With this uproar, the debate over childcare provision gained traction in the popular media and broader public discussions. The government soon changed its stance and held an emergency meeting with parent-activists in early March. By late March, the Abe administration announced they would make an urgent effort to solve this issue. While various parental groups had advocated for expanded childcare provision before 2016, the “Go to Hell” incident thrust the issue into the national spotlight. In the words of an editorial column in the *Mainichi Shimbun*, “The anger of parents moved politics.”⁴

Indeed, in contradiction to the image often conveyed by national and international media that Japan is suffering from a low fertility rate and shrinking population, the demand in Japan for childcare for preschool-aged children in urban areas exceeds supply. For instance, in 2017, 26,081 children were reported as waitlisted for day nurseries, including approximately 8,500 in Tokyo. This shortage has taken on increasing political and social prominence over the past few years and has come to be known as the “waitlisted children problem” (*taiki jidō mondai*).⁵

In this paper I examine the ways in which this “waitlisted children problem” has been conceived, narrated, and addressed in the specific political, economic, and historical context

⁴ “*Hoikuen ochita, oyano ikari seijiwo ugokasu.*” *Mainichi Shimbun*. March 12, 2016: Moreover, the phrase “My child’s day nursery application was declined. Go to hell Japan!!!” was also nominated as one of the trendy phrases of the year for 2016.

⁵ This “waitlisted children problem” is not distributed uniformly across the country. It is most acute in Tokyo, followed by Okinawa, Chiba, Osaka, and Kanagawa. Conversely, prefectures with a longer history of working mothers such as Toyama, Fukui, or Ishikawa have few or even no waitlisted children. The year 1995 marked the first time the state reported statistics for waitlisted children (at that time the number was 28,481). The definition of what counts as a “waitlisted child” has changed several times since then, in 2001, 2015, and 2017 respectively. These changes to the definition reduced the reported numbers, as the newer definitions did not include children at non-authorized day nurseries supported by local districts whose application for authorized day nurseries was unsuccessful. Thus, some argue that actual numbers exceed reported statistics. Currently, as of 2018, waitlisted children are defined as those children who city councils have recognized as “lacking care at home” but not having received a day nursery spot (*Asahi Shimbun*, “*Taikijido Mieruka Purojekuto.*” Accessed Jan 2020: <http://www.asahi.com/special/taikijido/>)

that is contemporary Japanese society. More specifically, I discuss how and in what ways day nurseries have become the object of intense political debate, the justifications that have been given for proposals to expand public childcare, and the purposes expanding childcare provision is expected to serve in Japanese society. I do not intend to explore all possible reasons for supporting expanded childcare provision (of which there are many), nor do I propose that the problems of childcare provision per se are unique to Japan. Rather, my interest is in the particular reasons being given in the Japanese context for expanding childcare provision and what these reveal about broader beliefs, understandings, and changes within Japanese society.

To these ends, I aim to go beyond standard discussions of gender inequality in the workplace and home to interrogate the specific cultural logics that underpin the recent urgency of debates over public childcare provision within contemporary Japanese social discussions as well as the expectations and hopes these entail. In other words, while gender inequalities do indeed supply a general justification for demanding expanded public childcare provision, I demonstrate that the empowerment of women (and in particular mothers) is not the sole—or even primary—reason offered in current state and social discussions on the topic. Conceptions of progress, loss, and recovery within Japanese society ambivalently operate within a set of debates that place much hope in expanded public childcare provision as a means of mitigating the country's perceived decline.

My argument is twofold. First, I argue that contemporary debates on expanding public childcare provision constitute a site of biopolitical discourses⁶ where the “truth” of reproductive desire is produced.⁷ The ultimate aim of further expanding public childcare is to generate forces that “serv[e] as the basis of the biological processes,”⁸ or in other words, to

⁶ Foucault 1978

⁷ Foucault 1988

⁸ Foucault 1978, 139

regulate the population. While the ostensibly pragmatic rationale for providing public childcare is to enable mothers to work and reduce the excessive burdens of childrearing at home, the policy is also presumed to mitigate Japan's demographic and economic maladies by boosting women's desires to have *more* children, desires that are presently viewed as "obstructed." Such obstructed desires are juxtaposed with a putative "true," innate desire, one which is mathematically and statistically projected by the state in the form of the "ideal fertility rate" (*kibō shusseki ritsu*).

Accordingly, the expected effect of public childcare is not limited to reducing gender inequalities, nor is it simply aimed at making families happy or satisfied in their current circumstances; it is also expected to stimulate increased reproduction for the health of the Japanese economy and nation. These discourses thus have a bio-political logic.⁹

Second, I argue that such biopolitical reasoning operates within specific cultural logics of loss and efforts to recover such losses. This logic of loss and recovery is one that has long been noted by scholars of Japan, and denotes both a perception that capitalist modernity has led to a increasing loss of so-called "traditional" practices, cultural configurations, and social structures as well as efforts to counter this with attempts at preservation, recovery, or mitigation.¹⁰

I explore how this rhetoric of loss and recovery has been extended and reconfigured in the form of biopolitical discourses in contemporary Japan. Public childcare supposedly works to restore, either through substitution or emancipation, seeming casualties of modernity within Japanese society. Precisely, the current childcare crisis is narrated as a product of a loss of family and community support, the collapse of lifetime employment with

⁹ This was elucidated by Foucault as "an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes." Foucault 1978, 140-141

¹⁰ Ivy 1995

a stable income, the disintegration of parental networks, and a general decline in parents' confidence in childrearing and joy in parenting. In contrast to such a present a putative past is juxtaposed in which children were happily cared for by neighbours, and multiple non-parental adults shared the responsibility of childrearing. And it is this latter environment that is in part assumed to have contributed to the higher fertility rate of earlier eras. The excessive burdens, stresses, and difficulties of childrearing today are seen as a function of such losses, and at the same time the reason why many women now choose not to have more children.

The contemporary period is thus one marked not just by the loss of the financial affluence and vitality of Japan's growth years, but also a loss of family, community support, and more. That said, reproductive desires have not been similarly diagnosed as lost to the past. Japanese women's reproductive desires are not suspended in absencing per se, but rather are viewed as "obstructed." Hence, reproductive desire itself is, according to state and public debates, still present, yet requiring emancipation.

Expanding childcare provision in Japan would indeed be an important means of reducing gendered inequality through lessening the childrearing burden women disproportionately bear and enabling them to participate in the workforce. But that said, many of the justifications given for expanding public childcare provision in Japan do not treat gender equality as an ends in itself. There is another logic at work, particularly within official and mainstream discussions of the issue, for which the ultimate aim of expanding childcare is to remedy the demographic woes of the nation. According to this logic, demographic decline is in no small part a product of the changes wrought by losses in Japanese society that have worked against women's innate desires to have children. Correspondingly, reducing women's burdens through expanded public childcare serves the greater goal of emancipating women's reproductive desires from that which obstructs them, thereby reversing one set of causes for the declining fertility rate. Consequently, my aim in this essay is not to offer solutions for

policy problems, but to highlight the logics at work in contemporary Japanese childcare debates.

Of particular interest are the ways in which these debates are underpinned by a certain understanding of female reproductive desires. Reproductive desires are here understood not only to be natural, but also something for which there can be no substitute, for which there is no outsourcing. One can outsource maternal care and attention to childcare workers. One can substitute informal neighbourly relations with paid help. One can even outsource the womb (although currently this is not legally permitted in Japan). The desire to have children and thus replenish the population with Japanese, however, is understood as something that can and should only come from within Japanese women themselves.

In what follows, I first outline the politics and policies pertaining to childcare provision in Japan. After this, I discuss how reproductive desires in Japan are conceptualized, in particular by examining the term, “ideal fertility rate.” Next, I explore the key themes that repeatedly appear in current discussions as a means to explain the urgency infusing contemporary debates over public childcare. Finally, I discuss how expanded public childcare has come to be imagined as a remedy for the problems facing the putative Japanese nation. The source material I use in this paper is drawn from parliamentary minutes, as well as a large variety of newspapers, magazines, and journals.¹¹

The politics of childcare provision in Japan

¹¹ At Oya-Soichi Library and the National Diet Library in Japan, I collected 755 magazine articles and 383 newspaper articles, ranging from the 1960s to present. In addition, for the purposes of this essay, I also draw upon a variety of parliamentary documents (including official minutes), statements, documents, media interviews and more than a dozen books written for both academic and general audiences. While the actual citations in this essay may appear limited, they are intended to capture repeated key themes in these texts and offer examples representative of prominent social and state debates.

The scarcity of childcare provision for preschool children in Japan is not a new problem. Parent groups, often composed of working mothers, advocated for expanded childcare provision in Japan already in the early post-war period (post-1945), and this grew into a nationwide movement in the 1960s.¹² While this subsided in the 1980s, concerns and frustrations over childcare have since increasingly re-emerged as a national political issue, especially after the so-called “1.57 shock” in 1990, when the government announced that the country’s fertility rate had fallen to its lowest level since 1966.¹³ The state views expanding affordable public childcare provision to be one potential solution for the declining fertility rate. And indeed, a number of childcare-related policies have been implemented since the 1990s, with several new policies and policy revisions appearing in recent years.¹⁴

Recently, the Abe administration has stated that creating a “society where all the women shine” (*kagayaku*) is at the top of its agenda.¹⁵ Moreover, the administration has targeted increased female participation in the labor force as a means to reinvigorate the national economy. In a 2015 white paper, the Gender Equality Bureau stated, “The Abe administration considers women’s power as ‘Japan’s most hidden potential,’ and it is inevitable to utilize such power for sustainable economic development.”¹⁶ Revitalizing the national economy and increasing the fertility rate constitute a paired set of goals combating the effects of a shrinking and aging Japanese population. Thus, in the administration’s view,

¹² Hashimoto 2006; Uno 1999. The phrase “make as many nurseries as mailboxes” (*posuto no kazu hodo hoikushowu*) was used to endorse the expansion of childcare services.

¹³ While the fertility rate had been declining since the 1950s, when it fell to 1.57 in 1989, below the previously lowest rate of 1966, this resulted in many public expressions of concern within Japanese society.

¹⁴ In 1994, the government issued what was called the “Angel Plan” in order to address the low-fertility rate. This included a five-year-plan for expanding childcare services (The Urgent Five Year Plan for Childcare 1994), which involved building more nurseries, offering extended sessions, expanding childcare access to children under the age of two, building a childcare center, and so forth. Since then, the expansion of public childcare services has constituted one of the major stated goals of state policy. In 1999, the “New Angel Plan” was issued. Under this “New Angel Plan”, in order to reduce the burden of childrearing at home, measures to improve work-life balance were also included (Matsuki 2013, 28-29).

¹⁵ The Headquarters for Making A Society Where All the Women Shine, October 10, 2014.

¹⁶ Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2015.

women need to both work more and have more children. Yet, if mothers increase the amount of time they work outside the home, who will look after their small children? Accordingly, childcare provision is considered an integral part of dealing with the country's economic woes.

However, this vision and its related policies are based on several implicit assumptions about relations between cause and effect. First of all, how exactly is the expansion of public childcare supposed to aid in increasing the fertility rate? In other words, how is the non-parental care of children—care that enables mothers to engage in paid work—related to women's reproductive desires and decisions? What is more, in previous decades the Japanese state promoted and idealized an image of the full-time stay-at-home mother.¹⁷ Is the perceived urgency of the current demographic crisis creating new values and norms concerning what it means to be a mother?

To analyze childcare provision policies is to shed light on critical intersections between gender relations, the economy and labor market, welfare, early education, and demographic issues.¹⁸ The care crisis is not unique to Japanese society. Neither is Japan exceptional when it comes to the shortage of affordable childcare.¹⁹ However, how such goals are legitimated and achieved is not uniform. For instance, facing similar demographic concerns, the government of South Korea has drastically expanded public childcare provisions since the mid-2000s.²⁰

There has, in fact, already been a marked improvement in childcare provision in Japan over the past several years, with the number of day nurseries in Japan increasing from 24,425

¹⁷ Allison 1991; Goldstein-Gidoni 2012; Yoda 2001.

¹⁸ Hagemann, Jarausch, and Allemann-Ghionda 2011.

¹⁹ Employing comparative analysis of early childhood care and education in Anglo-American, Western European, and Japanese contexts, Rianne Mahon has argued that, "the erosion of the male breadwinner/female homemaker family form constitutes one of the critical challenges confronting contemporary welfare states" (Mahon 2002, 1).

²⁰ Estévez-Abe 2016; Sung-Hee Lee 2016; Estévez-Abe and Naldini 2016; Doyan Lee 2017.

in 2014 to 36,345 in 2019.²¹ The number of children who attend day nurseries in Japan increased from 2,266,813 in 2014 to 2,679,651 in 2019. As of 2019, approximately 1,096,250 children aged two and below had places at day nurseries; this constituted 37.8% of those aged two and under in Japan.²² With these increases, the percentage of children who attend day nurseries in Japan, in particular under the age of two, is on par with if not better than many other OECD countries. On average in the OECD, thirty-two percent of children aged two or younger are enrolled in preschool care.²³

While these numbers alone do not explicate the lived experiences of parents and national gender politics, it is puzzling that, regardless of the increase in the number of nurseries and comparably high levels of enrolment, an alleged lack of nurseries has become such an urgent political issue within contemporary Japan. Hence, the important question is not why there are so few nurseries in Japan (which is not necessarily true when compared to OECD averages, at least), but rather, within what context and according to what logics childcare provision has become so highly politicized and problematized.

Granted, there also have been local political controversies concerning the construction of new nurseries; in several cases, plans to build new nurseries were suspended or cancelled due to opposition from the local community. But even here, it is important to note that the local opponents did not disagree with the fundamental goal of expanding public childcare provision. Instead, in these cases opposition often centered on the suitability of a proposed

²¹ Press Release. Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare. accessed July 23, 2019: <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/content/11907000/000544879.pdf>.

²² Press Release. Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. accessed November 22 2019: <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/content/11907000/000544879.pdf>. The total enrolment rate of nurseries constitutes 45.8 percent (0-5); 48.1 percent (1-2); 16.2 percent (0).

²³ Preschool children in Japan also spend more hours per day at nurseries than those in many other comparable countries; for instance, Japanese preschool children average 11.7 hours per day, 58.5 hours/week, while in 2017 Finnish children averaged only 31 hours per week. The OECD average is just under 30 hours per week. *Zenkokuhoikukyogikai Kaiinno Jittaichosa Houkokusho* 2016 (the Report on Survey of Actual Conditions of Day Nurseries 2016); OECD Family Database, accessed July 15 2019: <http://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>; OECD - Social Policy Division - Directorate of Employment, Labour and Social Affairs. accessed November 22, 2019: https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF3_2_Enrolment_childcare_preschool.pdf.

location, the quality of the planned institution, the safety of children, fears of noise and nuisance, or concerns over public space being taken away from other children in the community.²⁴ Local opposition to specific nursery sites does not contradict the fact that the broad push to expand nursery provision within Japanese society has assumed significant political urgency and saliency.

Japan is often categorized as a “hybrid welfare regime”²⁵ or a unique East Asian-type welfare regime²⁶ Regardless of the exact label applied, the shared understanding is that the Japanese welfare state puts “a strong emphasis on the family and the importance of corporate or occupational welfare.”²⁷ The burden of social welfare is shared among families, communities, and companies rather than being borne by the state. It is a model in which welfare benefits are viewed as investments, not a safety net.²⁸

In the 1980s and into the early 1990s, childrearing was viewed as the (willingly accepted) responsibility of families, in particular mothers.²⁹ Many state documents endorsed the notion that “essentially, childrearing is one of the most important functions of the family (*katei*).”³⁰ However, since the mid-1990s, policy planning has shifted toward the idea that childrearing is a partnership between families and society, which the government has labeled the “socialization of childcare” (*kosodate no shakaika*).³¹ The goal of expanding childcare services was given further impetus by former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi’s 2001 “Plan for Zero Waitlisted Children,” which sought to cater to the diverse working circumstances of

²⁴ “*Shirokanedai no koenni hoikushitsu kaisetsu enki*.” Tokyo Newspaper, November 12, 2018; “*Minami Aoyamani Jiso kensetsu keikaku, hantaino riyuwa*.” Asahi Shimbun October 30, 2018; also see the website created to protest the construction of the new childcare/protection institution in Aoyama, *Aoyama no mirai wo kangaeru kai*. accessed 6 Dec 2019: <https://aoyama-mirai.info/reasons/>

²⁵ Esping-Andersen 1997. The hybrid is composed of his three categories of welfare states: the social democratic model, the conservative, corporative welfare state, and the liberal welfare state.

²⁶ Goodman and Peng 1996, 216

²⁷ Peng 2002a, 33

²⁸ Goodman 2002, 24

²⁹ Allison 2000, Borovoy 2005, Uno 1993, Goldstein-Gidoni 2012

³⁰ Okabe 1996, 18

³¹ White Paper on the National Lifestyles 2005

parents. This plan included expanded childcare services for children below the age of one as well as increased daily hours of care. Moreover, the plan expanded weekend and over-night childcare services, care for ill children, and after-school sessions for school-age children, so that mothers could return to work sooner. In Koizumi's policy speech in front of the 2001 Diet Session, when he announced the plan, he stated, "in order for both men and women to contribute to and stimulate society, striking a balance (*ryōritsu*) between work and childrearing is necessary."³² In short, the "Plan for Zero Waitlisted Children" was promoted with the aim of assisting mothers in contributing to society.

In 2008, the administration of then-Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda implemented its own plan, the "New Zero Waitlisted Children Plan." It aimed to increase the available nursery places by more than one million by 2017. The prime minister described his plan as moving "beyond either or." When describing an encounter he had had with a mother who used to believe that she had to choose between working and having children, Fukuda wrote that there must be more couples out there who were debating whether or not to have a child due to the same worries. The New Zero Plan, Fukuda explained, would increase not only the quantity of day nurseries, but also their quality, in order to cater to the various needs of working mothers and fathers. He quoted a mother who continued working while sending her first child to a nursery as saying, "I have made the decision to have a second child." Fukuda interpreted this as evidence of "her confidence and sense of fulfillment in accomplishing both work and childrearing." He continued, "instead of forcing women to sacrifice something, [I want to] create a society where work and family is not either or."³³ Yet, the subtext of his story was not simply that his plan would eliminate the need for mothers to feel as if they are choosing "either or," but also that the decision by parents to have a second child was a

³² "Koizumi Shusho no shoshinhyoumei enzetsu" [the Prime Minister Koizumi's General Policy Speech], Mainichi Shimbun. May 7, 2001

³³ Fukuda Administration Mail Magazine. accessed July 13, 2019: <http://www.mmz.kantei.go.jp/jp/m-magazine/backnumber/2008/0228/0228.html>.

desired goal of the New Zero Plan.

The Abe administration, in particular since 2012, has further expanded the provision of childcare. Abe's public childcare policies are integrated within other overarching projects, such as the "Society in which all 100 Million People Can Thrive" initiative launched in 2015.³⁴ Also in 2015, the administration announced a policy titled, "Childcare Support which Nurtures Dreams," with the aim of working towards a fertility rate of 1.8 as one of the three new objectives of Abenomics.³⁵

The desire for children: lost or obstructed?

The policies described above all assume a link between increased public childcare provision and an increased fertility rate. But how, precisely, are the two related? What are the sociocultural assumptions that underpin these policies? How does not having to choose either/or result in mothers wanting *more* children? ³⁶

A national "ideal fertility rate" (*kibō shusseki ritsu*) of 1.8 was announced by the Abe administration in 2015 as a part of its "Society in which all 100 million people can thrive." The administration has defined this rate as the "expected fertility rate when younger generations' desires for marriage and the [ideal] number of children they would like to have are realized."³⁷

³⁴ The Prime Minister Abe announcement September 25, 2015: accessed on March 19, 2019: <https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/singi/kyouikusaiei/dai32/sankou1.pdf>

³⁵ Declining Birthrate White Paper 2016; Abenomics is the name given the core set of policies articulated by the Abe administration for the purposes of improving the Japanese economy. Initially, these were aimed at monetary, fiscal, and structural reforms.

³⁶ Leonard Schoppa (2020) critically discusses the ways in which social science, in particular the model of "economic opportunity costs," shaped public policies in modern demographic societies, including Japan. More precisely, he demonstrates that many academics and policy makers in Japan have recognized that women's choices to have fewer children are analyzed by such economic model.

³⁷ Declining Birthrate White Paper 2016. The administration arrived at a figure of 1.8 by using the following formula: [Percentage of married couples × planned number of children of married couples + percentage of singles × percentage of singles who wish to marry in the future × number of children

Drawing on Borovoy and Zhang, I find Foucault's theory of power useful in understanding the biopolitical logic at work here, in particular in engaging the fine lines between social control and social care and support.³⁸ The term "ideal fertility rate" is a textbook example of the creation of biopolitical knowledge to enable state intervention and regulation; it shows how reproductive desire at the individual and general populace levels can be objectified and analyzed as a means to justify, target, and support intervention by state policies and social institutions.

But how exactly are people's reproductive desires conceptualized here? Instead of simply interpreting the declining fertility rate as a product of contemporary Japanese being less interested in marrying or having children, this formula renders the decline as a result of the *obstruction* of people's desires.³⁹ In other words, the desires of the Japanese people for marriage and more than one child have not been irrevocably lost, but rather are awaiting liberation. Indeed, the discourse of the "ideal fertility rate" speaks to "a form of truth discourse about living beings."⁴⁰ While admittedly hypothetical, it renders a form of statistical knowledge based upon the purported innate desires of citizens who could and would make use of their biological capacities if they faced fewer obstacles. The current fertility rate (as of 2017, 1.43) is constituted as the product of citizens' desires to marry and have children going unfulfilled. Childcare provision is thus supposed to be an intervention to emancipate these innate reproductive wishes.

singles desire to have] \times likelihood of divorce and separation by death. This formula calculates the statistical gap between, on the one hand, the number of children which married couples desire to have (2.07) and the number of children that single people desire to have (2.12), and, on the other, the actual birthrate, which in 2017 was 1.43. For the state, this gap (0.4) represents unrealized reproductive desires whose actualization requires intervention by the state and other social institutions.

³⁸ Borovoy and Zhang 2017, 3

³⁹ Indeed, such pronatalism as an intervention to help individuals realize their innate desires can also be observed in Italy as well. In words of the Minister for Social Affairs, Livia Turco: "This is not a natalist policy, but, in a country that is not having children, we want to make sure that all the women and men who desire to have children will be, as much as possible, in the condition to follow their desires" cited in Krause and Marchesi 2007, 355, originally from Masci 1999).

⁴⁰ Rabinow and Rose 2006, 203-204

In a September 2015 speech, the prime minister stated, “the goal is [creating] a *society in which all 100 million people can thrive* in order to stop the low-fertility and aging society and in fifty years to still keep the population at 100 million.”⁴¹ One of the main pillars of this project is a program called “Childcare Support which Nurtures Dreams” (*yume wo tsumugu kosodate sien*). Expanding public childcare provision—or more precisely, reducing the number of waitlisted children to zero—is key to altering that reality.

The Abe administration’s efforts are not the first time the Japanese state has sought to cultivate and nurture citizens’ desires to marry and have children. Since the late 1990s in particular, at both the national and local levels, a number of initiatives and events have sought to reinvigorate within Japanese dreams of having family and children.⁴² If for Foucault the family is viewed by the state as a “privileged instrument,” in Japan it is also a virtually compulsory instrument, as extramarital childbirth is not socially accepted.⁴³ The policy statements cited above recognize the changes occurring within Japanese society, including shifting attitudes towards gender roles. But at the same time, there is a presumed continuity with the past: Japanese citizens may not be fully realizing their dreams for family and children, but the dreams themselves and the associated value of having children are presumed to be enduring.

It is also important to note that whereas the ideal fertility rate is calculated based on both men and women’s expressed reproductive desires, the critical site for intervention is women’s desires. Granted, men’s participation in childrearing has been promoted by

⁴¹ The Prime Minister Abe announcement September 24, 2015, accessed March 29, 2019: <https://www.jimin.jp/news/press/president/130574.html>

⁴² In 1998, under the Obuchi administration, an Expert Committee wrote that society should not force its citizens to marry and have children, clarifying their stance that official policies promoting an increase in the fertility rate were not intended to force certain values or expectations upon citizens. It also stated that it was unrealistic to say that women needed to go back to the “home.” Rather, they proposed that it was important to create a society where it is possible to dream about creating a family and raise children (“*Yumega aru kosodate ga dekiru shakaiwo kizuku tameni.*” (Mainichi Shimbun, December 22, 1998).

⁴³ Hertog 2009

government-supported initiatives such as the Ikumen Project.⁴⁴ But such initiatives are seen as significant in that they have an effect on women's ways of life. As the official website of the Ikumen Project states, "when couples share childcare and housework, which currently tends to be put on women's shoulders, it can lead to promoting women's reproductive awareness and women's will to continue working."⁴⁵ In other words, the underlying implication is that women's reproductive desires are liberated when men participate more in childcare.

In this way, the women who hesitate to have children are treated simultaneously as victims of their environment and as potential saviors of the nation, so long as their reproductive desires have remained intact. Gender equality is to be embraced if it serves national demographic goals. In contrast, the conservative anti-feminist backlash that occurred in the late 1990s in response to the term "gender free" was in no small part due to concerns that it challenged and destabilized traditional notions of marriage and family.⁴⁶ Such a form of gender equality was viewed as dangerously undermining women's (family-based) reproductive desire.

Certainly, discussion of state intervention in the domain of reproduction can be a sensitive topic in Japan, particularly considering the history of wartime propaganda that urged women to reproduce for the nation under the slogan of "give birth and multiply."⁴⁷ In contemporary state documents, government officials are careful to clarify that the state is not pushing those who do not want to marry or have children to do so.⁴⁸ But childcare is prescribed as a means to mitigate current economic and social obstacles that have worked to

⁴⁴ Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher, and Schimkowsky 2016.

⁴⁵ Ikumen Project. accessed October 1, 2019:<https://ikumen-project.mhlw.go.jp/employee/concept/>

⁴⁶ Yamaguchi 2014

⁴⁷ Uno 1993, 300

⁴⁸ For instance, in The Cabinet Decision June 2, 2016. *Nippon Ichioku Soukatsuyaku Puran* ("Plans for One Millions Japanese Nationals to Thrive"), it states, "...reaching the fertility rate 1.8 is an aim...it is not that for those who do not want to marry or do not want to give birth, the state is urging them to do so."

impede women's desires to have more children; by alleviating those hindrances through expanded public childcare provision and support, it is presumed that women will naturally want to have more children. Thus, the framing is not one of controlling so much as helping or assisting (*shien*) women in rediscovering their allegedly innate reproductive desire.

Wither the *Showa* model: progress, collapse, or the reversion of Japanese society?

The following statement appeared in the popular magazine targeted at parents (and mothers in particular), *AERA with Baby*: “The era of the gendered division of labor—‘men work outside [the home] and women stay at home’—has ended and we have entered an era where dual-income families are the norm (*touzen*).”⁴⁹ A similar piece in *Nikkei Business* also used the term “ordinary” (*futsū*) to describe the prevalence of dual-income families: “lifestyles have changed and the dual-income family has become ordinary (*futsū*).”⁵⁰ Indeed, the sentiment that “times have changed” has become prevalent in Japanese society as a “structure of feeling.”⁵¹ Yet, the perceived implications of such changes are not uniform. “The past” (*katsute, mukashi, izen*) referred to in these discussions is not consistent. Contemporary Japanese society is haunted by two pasts: a time before engagement with the West and an era when Japan was a global economic power.⁵² Even in the case of the more recent era of Japan as “Number One” during Japan’s economic boom period, these pasts are more often than not the products of nostalgic imaginings.⁵³ Below, I will demonstrate how three meanings of

⁴⁹ Ishida, Kaoru. “*Tomobataraki kibo 9wari, kobamu 15no kabe.*” *AERA with Baby*. November 15, 2016, p29

⁵⁰ “*Ikuji shien e kigyo henshin.*” *Nikkei Business*. February 15, 2010, p30

⁵¹ “What is defensible as a procedure, in conscious history, where on certain assumptions many actions can be definitively taken as having ended, is habitually projected, not only into the always moving substance of the past, but into contemporary life, in which relationships, institutions and formations in which we are still actively involved are converted, by this procedural mode, into formed wholes rather than forming and formative processes” (Williams 1977, 128).

⁵² Vogel 1981

⁵³ Cf. Robertson 1988

“with the *showa* model?” circulate within public discussions. I explore several key themes that repeatedly appear in parliamentary meetings, books written for the popular market, newspapers, magazines, on-line sources, and media reports on the problems surrounding working mothers in Japan. These can be divided into narratives of progress, collapse, and reversion.

Progress?

Some media reports cite increased educational and employment opportunities for women as responsible for women’s roles no longer being limited to the gendered domain of the home. When stay at home mothers were ideologically dominant in the 1970s and 1980s, many women felt that it was natural for them to take on such a role.⁵⁴ Today, however, marrying and becoming a professional stay-at-home mother is not a goal held by many women.⁵⁵ Indeed, a public opinion poll in 2016 indicated that more than half of the respondents (54.3%) disagreed with the statement that “men [should] work while women stay home”.⁵⁶ The phrase often used to describe this phenomenon of increased female labor force participation is “the entry of women into society” [*jyosei no shakai shinshutsu*].

“The entry of women into society” is often juxtaposed against purportedly obsolete strains of Japanese gender ideology described as *showa-teki*. Literally, the term *showa-teki* means “Showa-era-esque,” and constitutes a grammatical transformation of the Showa era moniker into an adjective, akin to the way certain styles of thought and fashion from the era of the British Queen Victoria I are described with the adjective “Victorian.” The Showa era (1926-1989) is a period in the Japanese imagination that is simultaneously characterized by war and high post-war economic growth. In the latter period, gender politics and a gendered

⁵⁴ Goldstein-Gidoni 2012.

⁵⁵ Kingston 2011; Hashimoto and Traphagan 2002, 2.

⁵⁶ *Yoron Chosa* (Cabinet Office Public Opinion Poll). accessed 13 June, 2019: <https://survey.gov-online.go.jp/h28/h28-danjo/2-2.html>

division of labor were an integral part of Japan's post-war capitalist model.⁵⁷ Today, however, when used to describe the ideal-type family composed of a sole breadwinner and professional housewife, *showa-teki* as an adjective often is meant to denote backward and outdated views.⁵⁸ The negative connotations of the term are shown in statements such as, "conceptions in Japanese society have not broken away from *showa*"⁵⁹ or, "if promotions are only decided from a male perspective, we may be at risk of returning to *showa*."⁶⁰ In short, encouraging women to engage in paid work, and thus send their children to day nurseries, is envisaged as breaking away from and progressing beyond a past when a strict, gendered division of labor underpinned Japanese economic growth. As women have now assumed a more prominent role in the economy, a corresponding expansion in public childcare is considered to be a mark of progress for Japanese society.

Yet as the following section shows, at the same time, the collapse of such a gendered division of labor during the period of high economic growth has also been lamented, for with it was lost the ability of a sole (male) breadwinner to financially support a family, creating pressures for mothers to work outside the home.

Collapse?

Women's empowerment and social progress are not the only reasons supplied in Japanese narratives that seek to explain women's increased labor force participation. The

⁵⁷ Yoda 2000, 867; also Ochiai 1997; Borovoy 2005, 74.

⁵⁸ For instance, Japanese sociologists, Furuichi and Tanaka (April 10, 2017) claim that Japanese people, including Japanese women, have not been able to break away from the values of the Showa era (accessed on March 1, 2019: <https://woman-type.jp/wt/feature/6759>); A journalist, Shirakawa and Koza discuss the "Showa-model couples" (*showa-gata fufu*) that are still a dominant image in Japan, but also state that we cannot return to the "good old Showa days", and need to break away from that model today ("*Showa no ishiki!? Otoko wa shigoto, onna wa katei karano dakkyakuwo.*" accessed on 1 March 2019: https://www.jtuc-rengo.or.jp/digestnews/kouzu_rikio/3204)

⁵⁹ Manabe, Hiroki. "*Fueru sengyoshufuganbo jyosei no tikaraga mottainai.*" Asahi Shimbun, December 2, 2010

⁶⁰ "*Jibun rashiku hatarako, sinpojiumu atarashi nihon wo tsukuru hatarakikata.*" Asahi Shimbun November 24, 2011.

contemporary increase in the number of working mothers has also been described as the inevitable outcome of changing economic conditions in Japan.⁶¹ One of the prevailing reasons cited for why mothers (re)enter the workforce is Japanese economic stagnation, which has exerted negative pressures on individual family finances. Since the 2000s, and especially following the 2008 financial crisis, popular media in Japan has increasingly described the sending of children to day nurseries as an economic survival strategy. Growing numbers of male workers are contract workers, at risk of being laid off, or simply cannot earn enough to support their families. Given these developments, women also need to bring home an income for their family to be able to survive. According to a journalist Hiroko Inokuma, “Not everyone works for self-realization or materializing one’s dream. There is a reality where if we don’t work, we cannot eat, and in order to do that, sending children to a day nursery is necessary.”⁶²

More specifically, Inokuma elaborates:

It is not “selfish” at all for mothers to work while sending their children to a day nursery. Mothers who can say that their husbands earn enough but still wish to work to further their own career or for self-fulfillment are in the minority today. Educational expenses are becoming higher and higher while the employment situation is increasingly unstable [...] Unconventional forms of employment have expanded; both parents might be irregular workers, so even if a beloved child is born, there are many households where both parents desperately need to work to survive.⁶³

⁶¹ Additionally, see, “*Hahaoya tachino taikiji ikki.*” Asahi Shimbun Weekly AERA March 18, 2013, p64; Ken Mori. “*hoikuen hantai wo sakebu hitotachi.*” Bungeishunju November 2010, p322; Seike Ai 2017, pp10-11.

⁶² Inokuma, Hiroko. “*Taji so ron.*” AERA with Baby, April 2011, Asahi Shimbun Shupansha. p114.

⁶³ Inokuma, 2014, 12-13

Such a sentiment is also reflected in the following in Fukoin:

...while I have said that it is each family's choice, in reality, it is not really a matter of choice. In recent years, society has changed drastically. Among the readers of this book, some might choose to be a dual-income family (*tomobataraki*) thinking that, 'it does not make sense that just because we are women, we have to give up our career we love and devote our life to childrearing,' or 'since I became a stay-home mother, my life is missing something. I want to live for myself.' On the other hand, there is no small number of people who would for practical reasons choose to be working parents in order to ensure their family income. The latter group is increasing more and more ... more people have to choose to be working parents, not as an issue of women's lifestyle choices, but rather as a 'survival strategy,' that is, women working (wives or mothers) has become a necessity. From now on, like it or not, if many families have to depend on having dual incomes, it is not really the time to ask what is good or bad about working while childrearing (*tomobataraki kosodate*).⁶⁴

Others even more directly link the waitlisted children problem to Japan's economic malaise. Asahi Shimbun Weekly AERA also reports, "The increasing number of waitlisted children was described as a result of the economic crisis, especially after the "Lehman shock" that not only affected contract workers, but also conventional workers. Previously full-time housewives now seek work and admission to day nurseries in spring has become extremely competitive..."⁶⁵ An article in the Japanese edition of the *Economist* explained that the

⁶⁴ Fukouin 2003, 10-11

⁶⁵ "gosai to issai de rusuban, taikijido ga gekizou." Asahi Shimbun Weekly AERA. April 13, 2009, p70

reasons why women want to work after marrying and having children are not simply a function of expanded opportunities for women, but also increasingly are due to the instability of men's incomes. To avoid threats to family finances women also need to provide a stable source of income.⁶⁶

Within the contemporary childcare debate, many readily admit that the waitlisted children problem is a greater problem for women, or more precisely, that it is a gender issue, in that it is almost always mothers whose employment prospects are affected should childcare be unavailable. Nevertheless, this recognition is overshadowed by an emphasis on the ways in which dual-income families are the product of an economic survival strategy. The focus is not on how women are urged to renounce their desires for self-realization or empowerment through work. Rather, by stressing the collapse of the male, sole-breadwinner model which was ideologically dominant in post-war Japan, these discussions highlight the urgency and precarious nature of everyday life in Japanese society today.⁶⁷

Indeed, in the 1990s, the percentage of dual-income families surpassed that of families composed of a sole male breadwinner and a professional housewife.⁶⁸ While progressive actors in Japan have criticized the gendered division of labor in postwar Japan,⁶⁹ its collapse has also been a source of lament among others. In this latter view, one that often is framed in more pessimistic tones, it is because men are no longer able to financially support their families as sole breadwinners that more and more mothers with small children have to work. In such accounts, greater female empowerment is not a key cause of that system's demise; rather, its collapse is seen as deeply interlinked with economic stagnation at both national and familial levels, and thus connected more broadly to Japan's fall from the

⁶⁶ Nagase, Nobuko. "*Taiki jidono hachiwari ga toshibuni shuchu, yochien no akishiruwo yukoriyo seyo.*" *Economist* [ekonomisuto] October 20, 2009, p28

⁶⁷ Cf. Allison 2013

⁶⁸ The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training; accessed on 1 March, 2019:

<https://www.jil.go.jp/kokunai/statistics/timeseries/html/g0212.html>

⁶⁹ Ochiai 1997

heights of its boom years. Although in most cases it is likely impossible to draw clear boundaries between those who need to work and those who want to work, the discourses of survival after loss downplay or deny the role of work as a source of female empowerment.

Reversion?

There is a further alternative argument that views dual-income families—or more precisely working mothers—as a reversion to what had existed in the past. For instance, speaking in an interview with Weekly Toyo Keizai, Noda Seiko, a renowned female Japanese politician, stated, “Rather than saying that it is meaningful to increase dual-income families, Japan is originally a country where both men and women work. During the Edo era, it was *atarimae* (standard, expected, and commonplace) for both parents to engage in paid work and contribute to family finances. Afterwards, changes in [state] policies rendered women unable to work.”⁷⁰

In making this claim, her reasoning draws upon a conception of the original state of Japan (in her case, the Edo period). Other commentators similarly replicate this notion of returning an alleged original state. Yashiro Naohiro of Showa Women’s University has claimed that is a “natural consequence” for women to keep working after having children, arguing that “women in many families were working before the war. The life of professional stay at home mothers belongs to the world of dreams, (the current situation) is just reverting to the original state.”⁷¹ Although he does not specify the exact period to which he is referring, Yashiro contrasts the current situation to a pre-war Japanese original state. The above statements challenge the idea that a gendered division of labor is a traditional element of Japanese culture by pointing out that it was a relatively recent product of the postwar

⁷⁰ Tomita, Shoko. Interview with Seiko Noda. Weekly Toyo Keizai June 9, 2018, P22

⁷¹ Tomita, Shoko. “*tomobatarakiwo kobamu nihongata koyo.*” Weekly Toyo Keizai, June 9, 2018, p46

Japanese economic model.

In short, the increasing participation of women in the Japanese workforce is simultaneously infused with conflicting connotations—as a function of increasing opportunities for women, as the unfortunate consequence of the economic difficulties facing families today, and as a natural reversion to the original state of Japanese society. Each of these is associated with the idea that dual-income families are now becoming the norm, the standard model. Although motivated by very different normative agendas, all share in framing both the past emergence and more recent collapse of the post-war gendered division of labor as producing the contemporary phenomenon of working mothers as the new normal, a view reflected in their use of the term “*atarimae*,” which suggests that something is common and even commonsensical.

Solitary mothers and the decline in childrearing skills

In parallel with the above debate concerning working mothers is an emerging narrative that casts parenting today as lonely and isolated.⁷² Many mothers who are the primary care givers for their children (particularly in urban areas) are raising their children at home without any family or community support. This phenomenon has been labeled *misshitsu-ikuji* (“sealed room childrearing”),⁷³ or *ko-sodate* (“isolated childrearing”).⁷⁴ Such women frequently have husbands who work from early in the morning to late in the evening.⁷⁵ This not only places an excessive burden on such mothers, generating much stress, it also is seen as increasing the risk of child abuse. Consequently, public childcare is described as urgently needed for these

⁷² Maeda 2017, Kawano 2014a, 2014b

⁷³ Ueno et al, (2010) note that the phenomenon of children in a sealed room has been seen as a social problem since the 1990s. The term “sealed-room childrearing” (*misshitsu ikuji*) was also used in a document from The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare Research Report 2005.

⁷⁴ Ohinata 2005, 5: The term “*ko-sodate*” (isolated childrearing) plays upon the original term, *ko* (children) *sodate* (rearing).

⁷⁵ See for example Fujita 2017

mothers and children, because such pressures can have terrible consequences.

This issue has generated much scholarly attention. Emiko Ochiai writes that there was no previous era in which nuclear families raised children on their own.⁷⁶ Instead, children used to grow up within multiple networks consisting of neighbors, relatives, friends, and school staff. Satsuki Kawano notes that the term “child-rearing neurosis” (*ikuji noirōze*) first appeared as a social problem in the early 1970s and child-rearing anxiety (*ikuji fuan*) first became a recognized phenomenon in the 1980s.⁷⁷ Masami Ohinata echoes Ochiai’s analysis and claims that the mother-centric model of raising children first appeared in the late 1950s.⁷⁸ As community relations became weaker and families with small children more and more isolated, the loneliness of full-time stay-at-home mothers became a serious social issue.

Recently, the term *wan ope ikuji* (“one-operation child-rearing”) has become a popular meme meant to capture the solitary nature of childrearing today.⁷⁹ Other commentators have suggested that the burdens and stress mothers experience when caring for children are not simply a consequence of diminished familial or community support, but additionally are due to a general lack of parenting skills, confidence, and even the ability to experience the joys of child rearing. Those raised in a nuclear family are also depicted as having little knowledge of how actually to engage in childrearing.⁸⁰

The general deterioration in Japanese parenting skills is something that frequently has been highlighted in state documents since the early 2000s. For instance, the Declining Birthrate White Paper 2004 notes:

Family/home (*katei*) is an important place where children establish bonding based on affection from parents and family members and learn basic trust,

⁷⁶ Ochiai 2000[1994]

⁷⁷ Kawano 2014

⁷⁸ Ohinata 2017.

⁷⁹ Fujita 2017.

⁸⁰ Maeda 2017, 172.

morals, and independence. However, as compared with the era when there were many three-generation households, multiple siblings, and larger numbers of children in the surrounding community, in the modern society where family size has shrunk, the nuclear family is dominant, and people in big cities do not know who lives in their neighborhood, it is considered that the childrearing ability (*kosodate ryoku*) of families and communities has been on the decline (*teika*). The lack of parents' childrearing abilities has become noticeable; the will of communities to raise children is also declining.⁸¹

Government documents repeatedly emphasize a deterioration in the ability or skills of families (particularly mothers) and communities for raising children. Frequently using the term *katsute* ("previously"), they point out that childrearing in the past was much easier, as children grew up in multigenerational families in which they interacted with various family members, relatives, and neighbors. From this perspective, the loss of such an environment is the reason contemporary mothers who do stay at home suffer anxiety and stress, and is linked to the decline in their aptitude, knowledge, confidence, and joy when it comes to childrearing.

This is said to further harm children's development, as they no longer have a chance to learn from their extended family and community.⁸² In answer, these narratives suggest that day nurseries are a solution to these problems. Maeda Masako, a former mayor of Yokohama who worked to reduce the numbers of waitlisted children there, has described day nurseries as the "last outpost" (*saigono toride*) in the era of low-fertility Japan.⁸³ Parents can learn childrearing skills by looking at how children are cared for by nurseries. And children can

⁸¹ Declining Birthrate White Paper 2006.

⁸² See for example, Kondo 2014, 138-140; Maeda 2017, 170.

⁸³ Maeda 2017, 170.

learn basic social skills through interaction with staff and their peers.

What stands out in the above is the repeated emphasis on loss, decline, and repression coupled with a belief that public childcare can remedy such losses and even restore joy, hope, and a desire to have more children. While the Abe administration has also sought to promote three-generation households, the full recovery of such lost familial environments is seen both by the state and the general public as unrealistic, for society has irrevocably changed. Consequently, that which is lost or has vanished needs to be replaced by other means, and here expanded childcare provision is seen as key. For many participants in these debates, Japanese desires for marriage, family, and even multiple children still exist, it is just that their expression is obstructed by external hindrances.

Outsourcing childcare, emancipating reproductive desires

There is an assumption here that the societal conditions present during the “good old days”—when the community and extended family were involved in childcare and men were able to support their entire families—allowed and encouraged women to realize their desires to have more children. And yet, at the same time, such a world is seen as obsolete, part of a past unlikely to return, and saturated with outdated views concerning gender roles. My aim is not to judge whether the existing explanations for the low-fertility rate are empirically valid, or to evaluate these cross-temporal comparisons. My focus is on what these assumptions reveal about implicit understandings of the relationship between Japanese society, childrearing, and the fertility rate, and more precisely why it is that public childcare is treated as a remedy to the losses Japan has experienced and now require intervention within Japan’s biopolitical regime.

There are crucial differences between that which is lost and that which is simply obstructed. The multi-generational families and thick community ties that previously

provided support for childrearing are indeed gone or in irrevocable decline; going back to that past is generally seen as unrealistic. But the assumption that mothers should now fully bear the burden of childrearing without such support also is seen as anachronistic. And it does not appear that the continuing economic recession will end anytime soon. These are the perceived parameters of the situation. So how can women be reproductive and productive for the nation at the same time?

As noted above, public childcare is expected not only to free women to work, but also be a source of parenting knowledge, skills, and confidence, even to restore the joy of parenting. In other words, expanded childcare hypothetically permits parents to outsource the burden of rearing children and compensate for the loss of community and family support even if, in practice, many mothers still suffer from the burden of the “second shift” of housework in the home.⁸⁴

However, while there are many things within contemporary society that can be outsourced elsewhere (from cooking, cleaning and childcare even to women’s wombs⁸⁵) a desire to have more children cannot be substituted or outsourced. Without such a desire on the part of Japanese women, it is not seen as possible to increase the Japanese fertility rate. But, in the view of the state and popular debates, reproductive desires do not need to be outsourced, since these still exist, albeit in obstructed form. In framing reproductive desire as obstructed, as falling short of the ideal fertility rate for reason of external circumstance, these debates also reconfirm it as natural and stable. And correspondingly, women suffering from obstructed reproductive desires cannot be blamed for their selfishness, for they are victims of outside forces. The policy implication is that those with obstructed desires must be the targets of assistance, intervention, and salvation. At the same time, by focusing on liberating women’s reproductive desire through childcare-based assistance, such forms of pronatalism

⁸⁴ Hochschild 1989, 2012.

⁸⁵ Deomampo 2016.

avoid critiques that they are forcing women to have more children or imposing pro-natal values upon those who are not interested.

Importantly, on an ideological level, these policies and debates neither challenge nor significantly transform the ideal of motherhood. For one, working mothers or would-be working mothers are not blamed for stunting the national fertility rate by prioritizing their careers and self-empowerment over childrearing; the demographic situation is simply an inevitable consequence of social changes and pressures, and if anything, many of these women are cast as victims thereof. Furthermore, womanhood is still linked with motherhood: women are simply in need of assistance in transforming their womanhood into motherhood.

From a historical perspective, it is certainly the case that in the past the community and extended family were more involved in childrearing. Nonetheless, this alone does not explain the higher fertility rates of the past. Nor can these be explained as a function of women's unconstrained reproductive desires. There is no denying that some Japanese parents today may be hesitant when it comes to having a second or a third child due to the financial burden it entails or a broader lack of childcare support. But desire may also shift with experience. Some who originally desired a larger family might stop with the first or second child after finding the physical and mental burden of dealing with children to be more than they had expected. Others might come to find that they do not actually enjoy childrearing.⁸⁶

Instead of investigating why many Japanese women are refraining from having more children, I have highlighted the ways in which such choices have become socially, mathematically, and politically constituted as obstructed desires. By reducing the burden of childrearing and enabling women to work, expanded childcare provision is assumed to be a remedy, for it removes the obstacles to women face in realizing obstructed innate desires. It offers hope; not all is lost, there is also that which is just obstructed.

⁸⁶ See for example, Orna Donath, *Regretting Motherhood* 2017

The roles attributed to public childcare are thus twofold: by outsourcing care and the provision of a supporting environment to public nurseries, a substitute can be found for that which Japanese society has lost; by reducing the excessive burden of childrearing, innate reproductive desires can find their emancipation, and the “ideal fertility rate” will become a reality. Of course, this policy assumes that reproductive desires are consistent and stable. Should individuals revise their ideal family size downward with time and experience, the bio-political formula would simply treat this as further evidence of obstructed desire.

Conclusion

In this essay I have analyzed the roles public childcare is expected to play within contemporary Japanese society by exploring recent debates over the “waitlisted children problem.” I have shown how public childcare is conceptualized within such debates as promising and supplying much more than women’s empowerment or the care of children. For the Japanese state, the problem of waitlisted children also stands in a vital causal relationship with the low fertility rate.

Crucially, gender equality in this context has become a tool of bio-political intervention, a means to remove a statistically calculated inhibition of women’s reproductive desire. This is a logic that implicates childcare in the fate of Japan’s national survival, and thus helps to explain how both official and popular debates have converged in seeing the issue as urgent and salient. To wit, the blog post I cited at the beginning of this essay is both personal and inseparable from the larger bio-political discourses motivating Japanese policy. The broken promise that spurred the poster’s outrage (“So what is up with the declining birthrate? Shit!”) was one made not only to her but to the future Japanese nation.

How then to explain the current low Japanese fertility rate? Are Japanese women’s

reproductive desires actually obstructed or truly lost? Such questions assume that there is a knowable truth to desire, one which is static and consistent, and that the boundaries between desires lost and obstructed are rigid. I have sought to illuminate the ways in which contemporary Japanese debates about childcare—and in particular policies about expanding public childcare provision—operate on certain bio-political assumptions about the truth of desire, namely that reproductive desire persists and only requires emancipation.

I also have demonstrated that the operations of biopolitical discourses are inextricable from the sociocultural logics of their context. Today's low fertility rate is viewed by the current administration and many Japanese as a result of what Japanese society has lost. The biological existence of the nation and the reproductive functions this requires are not being appealed to here with an aggressive pro-natalist approach, as was the case in wartime propaganda. Rather, contemporary Japanese pro-natalism draws upon constructions of lost nostalgic pasts, when raising multiple children was purportedly easier and happier. All the same, this new form of welfare bio-politics is still an expression of nationalism. The Abe administration's attempts to maintain a population of one hundred million for the next fifty years reflect a desire to avoid being forced to rely on immigrants to bolster the workforce and population. The reproduction of the Japanese nation cannot be outsourced to non-Japanese, and thus the desires of Japanese women remain critical. Therefore, while biopower "is situated and exercised as at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of population,"⁸⁷ the forms of its expression are inseparable from the socio-cultural context of its exercise.

Acknowledgements

⁸⁷ Foucault 1979, 136

I would like to thank Takehiko Kariya, Ian Neary, Len Schoppa and other attendees at the University of Oxford's Nissan Institute Research Seminar for excellent comments that assisted me in refining this essay. My special thanks also go to Roger Goodman and Todd Hall, who read the entire manuscript and provided me with both critical and encouraging feedback. I would also like to thank the editor of Critical Asian Studies and two reviewers for their critical and helpful feedback. This work was supported by the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation under Grant 5451 and the Wolfson College Academic Fund.

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